

Forum on Rahul Rao's *Out of Time*, Part II: Rethinking Homonationalisms

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Abstract: In this Forum, six scholars reflect on Rahul Rao's recent book *Out of Time: The Queer Politics of Postcoloniality* from other geographies, themes and radical possibilities. Part II explores the analytic of homonationalism in dialogue with Rao's *Out of Time*. Jasbir Puar, who coined the term in an earlier path-breaking work, thinks with and against Rao's book on the relations between homonationalism and what Rao called homocapitalism. Puar also explores how the caste-gender politics of Radical Sikhi during the Farmers' Protests in India (2020-2021) can serve as an alternative source of inspiration, companion to the queer and trans Dalits of Rao's book. Shirin Deylami reflects on Rao's work by exploring the disoriented grammars of the Iranian Islamic state. Specifically, Deylami analyses the way in which the discourse of westoxification has influenced and challenged the divergent state responses to transgender claims for care versus gay and lesbian rights claims.

Keywords: homonationalism; homocapitalism; caste; gender, queer postcolonial; Iran; Westoxification.

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Rethinking Homonationalism, Redux

Jasbir Puar

What is homonationalism in the context of the global proliferation of authoritarian regimes? The concept of homonationalism has primarily been theorised in relation to liberal democratic states to mark the incorporation of mostly white/cis/elite gays and lesbians into the folds of national recognition through ‘civil’ rights and ‘human’ rights. Given this genealogy, there is often an assumption by commentators that homonationalism cannot exist under authoritarian regimes. While we should not dismiss the capacity for authoritarian regimes to weaponise queerness — for example in the Philippines, when Duterte’s campaign in 2016 instrumentalised queer issues—this assumption is one that is often borne out at a surface level. If homonationalism is an analytic that flags the alliances between LGBTQ populations and national ideologies, contemporary confluences render somewhat imperceptible these alignments. Authoritarian governments in Brazil, India, Turkey, and Hungary are not only antithetical to but increasingly assaultive towards queer, transgender, and women’s rights. France’s reactionary stance towards ‘American’ gender and race studies deepens and accompanies Islamophobic policies towards Muslims especially regards to head coverings. In the USA there are or have been more than 117 anti-trans bills in numerous state legislatures, often directed at programs for transgender youth, medical care, bathroom access, and inclusion in sports; replicas of Florida’s ‘Don’t Say Gay’ legislation are being proposed in numerous states. In June 2021, after years of attacks on Gender Studies programs and queer organisations, Hungary passed a law banning the promotion of LGBTQ content to minors. Brazil has endured Bolsonaro’s crusade against ‘gender ideology’ which targets feminism and LGBTQ rights. Anti-feminist movements against gender ideology—‘anti-gender movements’ that have emerged globally and transnationally—seek to pathologise and criminalise gender and sexual fluidity and not always in the name of conservative values or right-wing authoritarian politics. The rise of TERFs (trans-exclusionary radical feminists) and other versions of ‘gender critical’ anti-trans feminists claim the space of the ‘radical’ and thus dilute distinctions between progressive and right-wing ideologies and foster unseemly political alliances that are para-national in scope and converge at transphobic politics.

These are just some examples of the increasing criminalisation of LGBTQ populations, much of it in places where decriminalisation was incrementally solidified in past decades. How do we think about the shift to all-out war on LGBTQ populations? It is hard not to index these trajectories as the decline of ‘homonationalist’ states concomitant with the rise of illiberal right-wing governments. But it might be more apt to situate homonationalism in the context of liberal rights platforms that are increasingly emptied of their meaning and efficacy. Despite these anti-gender conservative political agendas within and across nation-states, major military organisations and global financial governance structures persist with proclamations of LGBTQ inclusion. I tend to reiterate often that, in my original conceptualisation, homonationalism is not a descriptor, not

an adjective, rather a hermeneutic that asks how and why ‘how well do you treat your homosexuals?’ emerges as an arbiter of the capacity for national sovereignty, for governance and self-determination. I therefore have never thought of homonationalism as an attribute of any one state or states; rather it is the field within which, from the vantage of the USA, demarcations of nation-states as ‘progressive,’ ‘gay-friendly,’ ‘tolerant,’ and conversely, ‘homophobic,’ ‘backwards,’ and ‘barbaric’ have salience in the first place. The thorny conundrum is not then ‘how homonationalist’ a state is, but rather asking what is at stake for ‘liberal democratic’ states-gone-authoritarian to attack LGBTQ rights at this political juncture. Who or what do these ‘rollbacks’ benefit, and how? Given the endless contradictions of liberalism, I suggest we think about authoritarian states as laboratories for the perverse machinations of gender, sexual, and racial regulation and repression. Despite these regimes, there continues to be a co-constituted existence of liberal progressive ideals of queer rights, tolerance, and freedom alongside and working through homophobia, violent repression, and ostracisation. These two supposedly opposite poles are used to alternately laud and demonise different populations. In fact, we might think of homonationalism and authoritarianism as often operating in a tandem formation that is only seemingly contradictory. And as with the examples of the Philippines and Israel, the presumption that authoritarianism and extreme right regimes are antithetical to homonationalism must be carefully interrogated.

In the United States, the weaponisation of queer identities in the service of this oscillation affords a flexible whiteness that can be rehabilitated into liberal positions (think Pete Buttigieg) as well as white supremacist formations (think Milo Yiannopoulos). In the wake of 9/11, the enfolding of queer complicity with the War on Terror transited through the propagation of Islamophobic tropes of perverse Muslim homo and hetero sexuality. While crucial gains in the US LGBTQ rights movement appear to be leaking away, it is also the case that the civilisational discourses of Islamophobia that subtends homonationalism—illiberal, terrorist, uncivil, viral brown bodies threatening the ‘safe space’ of white American soil—are tenaciously intact, often so embedded in the quotidian discourse of security as to dissolve into nonrecognition. Islamophobic tropes are however easily animated. The narration of the current pandemic, for example, is deeply embedded in terrorist discourses, a lexicon of epidemiology that fuses terrorism to the plague, illness, contagion, and the uncontained virus as refractions of a body politic that is ever vulnerable.¹ And in the last twenty years, the changing racial landscape of the USA has centered anti-blackness through a forceful critique of liberal multiculturalism and the coalitional limits of the term ‘people of color.’ Thus, it warrants attention that Black Lives Matter has been referred to as a ‘domestic terrorist’ organisation propagating ‘single-issue extremist ideologies.’ LGBTQ rights may be deteriorating, but the racial elasticity of terrorism and the bodies that reference it has only become more emboldened.

That is to say that the civilisational alibis of homonationalism—‘our’ investments in liberal codes of progress, acceptance, and inclusion—are no less salient now, especially as they are increasingly discarded if not destroyed by conservatives. Insofar as Trump inverted American exceptionalism and demonstrated that civility is an empty value deployed primarily to racialise bodies as unruly, these liberal codes might be both more

pertinent than ever—we need to hang on to some belief in them—yet evermore ineffective or relevant. While anti-gender movements rage in so many parts of the world, glorified commitments to LGBTQ inclusion are still claimed by imperial governance structures such as NATO and the US marines.

Homonationalism as I initially schematised in *Terrorist Assemblages* is thus foremost a theory of US racial formation, a disciplining of US subjects in relation to US empire: a dual movement of incorporation and abjection that instrumentalises the discourses and affects of American exceptionalism. Its most efficacious employment, and its most important effect, is to excuse, minimise, and deflect from trans and queerphobia in the USA and to normalise Islamophobia—in other words, to create docile American subjects of US empire. The vocabulary of homonationalism has been helpful to illuminate the subtle complicities of (queer) (feminist) liberal rights discourses with Islamophobia. It has targeted the pervasive developmentalist discourse subtending ‘the west and the rest’ and the ‘woman question to the homosexual question.’ And I think most importantly, it has situated the civilisational discourses animating the US-led War on Terror that solicit and disavow various genders and sexualities. The original framing of homonationalism arises in the context of Islamophobia and its imbrication with the US security state. These civilisational narratives continue to contribute to the US imperial geopolitical relations with the Middle East. Further, a shared global Islamophobia, the likes of which, as Ghassan Hage (2017) argues, has national inflections but a pan-national coherence, makes homonationalism intelligible from the USA to Israel, India, France, the UK, among so many sites. The seduction at work in homonationalism remains a powerful one, which is the cathecting to Islamophobia as a rite of passage to national belonging.

But the invocation of homonationalism has become performative: it produces what it names. Insofar as the dilemmas subtending how theory is received, negotiated, refuted or refused are irresolvable, the distinction between an analytic and its deployment is a false one. In this regard, homonationalism only remains useful as an analytic if we acknowledge that its own theoretical force transits through the very circuits of empire, settler colonialism, neoliberal multiculturalism, developmentalism, and indeed, uneven academic privileges,² that it seeks to upend, insofar as homonationalism has become a soundbite far afield from the context of its production. When presumed to be and/or applied as a statist theory, the limits of homonationalism are readily apparent, making homonationalism seem like a portable construct, when indeed, as so much scholarship has shown, it is not. When an analytic becomes a descriptor, when something that once allowed us to perceive something now keeps us from perceiving something else, we are able to mark both what was missing and a historical shift in consciousness and perspective, and this is a welcome and necessary acknowledgement of the fact of historical change.

Out of time, out of place

One of the most meaningful interventions in the hegemonic travels of the analytic of homonationalism is found in Rahul Rao’s terrific book *Out of Time: The Queer Politics of*

Postcoloniality. At the virtual launch of the book in May 2020 Rao stated: ‘Now that we have understood homonationalism, we have overcorrected for it.’ This overcorrection is precisely the performativity I speak of, an ‘applied’ use of homonationalism as a statist theory or theory of the state, resulting in the designation of a state as ‘homonationalist’ as well as an evaluation of how homonationalism works in X country, as opposed to an evaluation of the relevance of the frame from the start. This statist application is often accompanied by a subsuming Orientalising of ‘local’ nation-state actors that might have far more important things to deal with than tarrying with discourses of the west. Rao convincingly intervenes not through staging a reversal of actors—the rest to the west—or arguing for a subaltern sexuality of the global south. Rather he emphasises the plethora of global, regional, and sub and para-national entities populating the movements for LGBTQ rights in Uganda and India: the solicitous transit of international actors such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), NGOs, (western) governmental aid, and other networks which impel acquiescence by illiberal states to LGBTQ rights platforms, promising economic growth and productivity in exchange for partaking in complex transactional networks devoid of consistent political alignments. Marked by ‘collaboration and transaction across the North/South divide’ (Rao 2020: 219), what Rao (2020: 25) calls homocapitalism is

an ideology forged in interaction between elite LGBT activists and technocrats in international financial institutions (IFIs)...Denied belonging within the nation, some activists have turned to making the case for inclusion, not in a language of justice or human rights, but through a refiguration of the queer as model capitalist subject whose inclusion promises a future of growth and economic dynamism. This argument has been embraced by IFIs eager to rehabilitate themselves in a time of capitalist crisis by brandishing an image of progressiveness.

Rao (2020: 163) notes that by ‘inveigh[ing] against ‘homophobia’ in the global South’ ‘global homocapitalism...operates through the stick of capital withdrawal as punishment for homophobia, and the carrot of economic growth promised by the business case for LGBT rights.’

Homonationalism as I understood and elaborated it was never not driven by negotiations of capitalist reward, and there is sustained attention in *Terrorist Assemblages* to how neoliberal multiculturalism produces economic vectors of racial difference and containment through sexual regulation. The discussion of the parallels (and divergences) between Lisa Duggan’s (2003) discussion of homonormativity and homonationalism also draws on necessary critique of the political and economic governmentality of contemporary capitalism. But it is true that the argument itself is not anti-capitalist, and here I appreciate Rao’s (2020: 146) repeatedly stated desire for a ‘specifically queer investment in anti-capitalist critique.’ If homonationalism, as a ‘grammar of the state’ that ‘sets the terms of recognition’ (Rao 2020: 215), works in the service of foiling the question of capitalism and politics of redistribution, it does so via the mirage of the recognition versus

redistribution binary. Paraphrasing Duggan, Rao (2020: 153) notes that ‘the distinction between recognition and redistribution is a ruse through which neoliberal capitalism pretends to become more inclusive by seizing on a low-cost way of projecting a new queer friendliness.’

One example of this queer friendliness discussed in *Terrorist Assemblages* is the LGBTQ tourism industry post-9/11, which exhorted consumers to spend money, be a good patriotic queer, travel as queer. The convergence of market and state interests for queer subjects is remarkable precisely because there was no such prior alignment—for decades this industry, and more generally the production of LGBTQ populations as a profligate market and ideal consumers available for what Rao calls ‘full market citizenship’ narrated itself as a compensatory strata that ameliorated the denial of state recognition through its self-proclaimed status as a supra-national formation, one that was determined to produce the conditions of gay-friendliness through pink dollars wherever it sought to do so. Queer mobility equaled economic mobility and vice versa, and the industry was as interested in the disciplining of homophobia through capital as it was in maintaining a sexually lascivious Orientalist project of danger elsewhere. Is this and other related discourses of ‘pink dollars’ that emerged in the 1990s a kind of proto-homocapitalism, one that foregrounded the queer as consumer-citizen and a quasi-figure of developmentalism akin to current day imbrications of developmentalism and queer mobility? And when we talk about homocapitalism, are we looking at three scales, the state, queer global South movements that are infused with capital from global North sources, and the queer liberal subject conditioned through capitalist rewards and the promise of upward mobility?

Shifting the discussion from the oft-regarded ‘clash of civilisations’ discourse of homonationalism with its focus on the cultures of nations and religions, rights and recognition, Rao’s analysis foregrounds the materiality of geopolitical orderings of the global theater of nation-state alliances and disaffiliations. Yet Rao explicates that homonationalism and homocapitalism are not necessarily oppositional, rather are juxtaposed through a series of supplementary relations that shift in proportionality, foregrounding, and backgrounding depending on place, scale, and the construction of location: the ‘civilisationalist’ logic of homonationalism must be supplemented with the political economy logic of ‘homocapitalism.’ Focusing on places where homosexuality remains or is being criminalised, and where ‘LGBT movements owe their very origins to the dynamism and reach of neoliberal capitalism’ (Rao 2020: 166), Rao writes that

The promise of futurity inherent in homocapitalism may prove to be more seductive where the chastisement of homonationalism has not “yet” succeeded in drawing recalcitrant states into its embrace or, worse, has raised their anti-imperialist shackles. Indeed, precisely as a result of the intellectual, even if not political, success of the *critique* of homonationalism, homocapitalism may be emerging as the weapon of choice wielded by a global queer liberalism. (2020: 11-12)

This sentence intrigues me because it suggests that the overcorrection that Rao speaks of is indicative of a pharmakon: poison, cure, and scapegoat at once. I am reminded of something South Asian Studies and queer theory scholar Anjali Arondekar said to me long ago, in 1998, that resistance to queer theory in South Asia was not, at that time, driven by homophobia so much as an annoyance with the imperious orientations and indeed imperial transits of the US academy. In this remark Arondekar is marking the exceptionalism of US-based theory. And yet, Rao (2020: 114) also insists, in a slight departure from this earlier pronouncement of homocapitalism as resistance to the shaming/liberal outrage mechanisms of homonationalism, that postcolonial populations, in particular for him postcolonial elite, cannot be excused from ‘queerphobia’ and a tendency towards ‘homoromanticism—an affective stance in which the queer predicaments of the postcolonial world are attributed entirely to its colonial experience, with the agency of postcolonial elites in co-producing those predicaments being obscured.’ Homoromanticism is also posited as a ‘kneejerk’ response to the critiques of homonationalism, suggesting that homonationalism is both a diagnosis of the state and may provoke an anti-imperialist response by the state.

Rao (2020: 151, 13) also points to two distinct technologies of power being exercised, coercion/dominance and complicity/consent, arguing that because homocapitalism promises ‘a rosy future of growth and productivity,’ it ‘draw[s] on the hegemonic logic of neoliberal reason...offer[ing] an apparently more consensual strategy of persuasion than homonationalism with its coercive tropes of civilisation and barbarism.’ Rao (2020: 151) quickly goes on to clarify that

This is not to suggest that homocapitalism lacks a coercive dimension...[rather] to suggest that the balance of coercion and consent in homonationalism and homocapitalism is different. Deploying Guha’s Gramscian understanding of these terms, we might say that where the former tends toward dominance, the latter tends toward hegemony.

I appreciate this distinction very much, and/but I am wondering, given that both are mapping out relations of incorporation and abjection, albeit differently abjected, whether ‘disciplining’ as a modality of power runs across homonationalism/homocapitalism, making them contiguous. I am putting pressure on this point because Rao’s foregrounding of homonationalism as predominantly an anxiety-inducing shaming mechanism to chastise wayward states for their homophobia cannot, in my mind, account for how it is also, in actuality, a reward structure for the propagation of Islamophobia, as is for example the case with Hindutva in India.

In any case this balance has a particular impact on regions most directly impacted by the War on Terror, the Middle East extending to West Asia, where the material effects of civilisational disciplining have been deleterious to say the least. In the aftermath of 9/11, friends who worked in the region at Human Rights Watch, Helem, al-qaws, and other human rights and LGBTQ non-profits noted the onslaught of humanitarian, NGO, and even state-driven funding cashing in on the marketisation of the purported

novelty of Muslim queers. A friend quipped, as the money started drying out in 2010s, that Africa had become the new Middle East for these efforts. While this example is anecdotal, this affective registering that capital might ‘move on,’ as it were, also reflects the interplay between homonationalism and homocapitalism. Rao argues that since the discursive weight of homonationalism can be—and is sometimes—opposed by counternationalisms, homocapitalism can be meaningfully resisted only in an anti-capitalist register. Given the material punishments and rewards that homonationalism is tied to, generates and impels, I am not so quick to parse out the discursive, as if homonationalism is merely discursive. But *Out of Time* marks an important historical shift from the focus on justice, human rights, and equality, to a wholesale uptake, even by queer and other progressive entities, of economic growth and the ‘cost’ of homophobia to corporations and nation-state apparatuses. As such I share the concern about how the critique of homonationalism might contribute to a sidestepping of the specifically queer investment in anti-capitalism that Rao so tenaciously holds forth.

Radical Sikhi

I was reading *Out of Time* during the height of the Farmers’ Protests in India in spring 2021 and began thinking through the connections between caste and sexuality that Rao articulates in this book. In a beautiful chapter on the tactical use of the caste category of ‘backwardness’ by queer and trans Dalit activists in India to lobby for state recognition, Rao (2020: 15) illuminates the Mobius strip quality of caste and gender relations, stating that ‘caste is the regulation of gender, which is caste.’ Rao (2020: 172) writes that ‘In a neoliberal India dominated by a caste Hindu Right, collective Dalit assertion in the terms advocated by Ambedkar is queerer than a same-sex kiss.’ I love this sentence for so many reasons, but especially for how it shifts the register of what constitutes ‘a radically anti-assimilationist project queer politics’ (Rao 2020: 195). He continues, ‘For Ambedkar the ‘annihilation of caste’...from simply enabling Dalits to become like caste Hindus...entailed the production of a new Dalit subjectivity marked by a revolutionary consciousness’ (2020: 195). For Rao (2020: 198) the subjectivities of queer and trans Dalits foreground ‘the manner in which the destruction of caste becomes imbricated with gender transition.’

With this imbrication of caste and gender in mind, I turn now to the gendered, sexual, and caste specifics of the epic year-long Farmers’ Protests, which began in November 2020 with hundreds of thousands of farmers and laborers from across India, and especially from Punjab and Haryana, on their tractors driving to the outskirts of New Delhi. Numerous writers and activists have analysed everything from the global networks of agrarian crises to the rise of Hindutva to the resistance of neoliberalism to the dynamics of on-the-ground activist organising to the proliferation of diasporic solidarity protests: Ravinder Kaur, Navyug Gill, Bikrum Gill, Harsha Walia, Amardeep Dhillon, Navkiran Natt, Nodeep Kaur, and the Panth Punjab lecture series.³ What follows here is not a contribution to these incisive analyses but rather a probing into the ideological and theological orientations that inform the protests principle here and throughout.

These protests have been hailed the largest in all of human history, but outside of South Asia-specific forums they have merited little attention to their emergent radical politics and solidarity formations, ones that might challenge western leftist sensibilities. While the three farm laws announced by Modi government in November 2020 are about Indian agricultural labor writ large, Bikrum Gill has recently argued in a 2021 talk titled ‘Siege of Delhi’ there is a specific existentialist crisis in Punjab that is animating these protests; it has been long in the making due to decades of land grabs in Punjab, the liberalisation of the Indian economy beginning in the 1990s, the brutal repression of the Khalistani movement in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, and the current crackdown by the authoritarian Hindutva anti-Muslim government of manifold forms of dissent.

Gill (2021) also argues that Sikhs are ‘rethinking [our] internalized religious practices’ in this political organising context such that ‘nothing will be the same again.’ There has been both a lauding of but also re-politicisation of ‘Sikhi,’ the tenants of Sikhism, as fundamentally informing the organisation and conduct of the protestors. This hailing has been especially moving in the Sikh diasporas, where the connection to the protests is deeply familial, religious, and spiritual, entangled with the traumas of partition and migration, and marked by the question ‘How do we support from a distance?’ Because of the strong presence of Sikhism, one might ask, is this a secular protest? It is not exactly a non-secular protest, and indeed a rigid secular/religious binary opens the way for vilification of the protests as a revival of the Khalistani separatist movement from the 1970s and 1980s. There are thin lines to navigate: whether and how to protest as a Sikh without being dismissed as a terrorist; how to respond to myriad forms of Indian state violence, including murders, disappearances, incarceration, and sexual assaults of female leaders, without being stereotyped as ‘warriors’; how to resist the neoliberalism of the Indian nation-state without being vilified as traitorous/seditious.

There has been much lauding in Sikh forums about the praxis of Langar at the protests, the communal cooking, feeding, and eating that is part of a broader philosophy of Seva, or service to others. From the advent of Sikhism, Langar was envisioned as an anti-caste practice, including the caste of women. In practice the commitment to these ideals varies and does not mitigate the fact that caste differences are sutured through land to the violence of the owner-laborer relationship. Nor does it minimise the effects of Sikh patriarchy, and the sheer fact that women own less than one percent of the land they had been fighting for. At the protests female leaders, union organisers, and activists were lauded, highlighting how women are central to agrarian economies. Simultaneously there was the denouncing of any self-declared feminist approaches that point out the patriarchal violence against women in Punjab. Claims abounded about the flourishing gender equality evidenced by private toilets, free menstrual products, and women-specific health care services even as sexual assaults amongst the protestors took place. As one prominent example, *Trolley Times*, the independent newspaper spontaneously launched by the protestors in order to challenge mainstream Indian reporting, announced that a member of their team, Varun Chouhan, had been multiply accused of sexual harassment and would be departing from their collective.

Navyug Gill (2021) and other commentators have situated Langar as a form of conviviality that challenges hierarchical caste congregations. But the kinds of reorientations of gender that Langar poses have been far less commented upon. Langar is part of the sustainability of protest spaces, feeding not only thousands of protestors daily, but also neighboring communities. It is also what might otherwise be seen as mutual aid: it is not charity, a form of pooling resources, nor crisis intervention. Rather Langar is a mode of envisioning more egalitarian forms of communalising on the affective, corporeal, and ecological levels: a venerable Sikh institution, a theological philosophy, a conceptual space, and a horizon of becoming rooted in the ongoing work of relationality.⁴

During the winter 2020 and the spring and summer of 2021, Sikh twitter was abuzz with IRT updates on the Farmers' Protests. Caste-ist harassment of queer, trans, and Dalit Sikhs by 'cishetero Jatt Sikhs' at the onset of the protests intensified in February 2020. These supporters of and participants in the Farmers' Protests espoused a 'Jatt-Sikh pride' through vicious queerphobic and transphobic anti-caste vitriol. In response, Manu Kaur and manmit singh chahal (2021), a non-binary Dalit and a trans Sikh respectively, penned a series of brilliant articles condemning the online harassment and noting failure to realise the radical potential of Sikhi within the terms of Sikhi itself.⁵ They reminded devotees that 'Sikhi annihilated caste but this was not a passive proclamation but an active disavowal of the caste system through instituting various measures like pangat [sitting together], sangat [true congregation], and langar.' Further, to the Sikh community they reassert that 'equality and liberation does not rest in mere statements or the lack thereof, but instead in an active commitment to dismantling casteist cisheteronormativity.' Elsewhere they term this normativity the 'brahminical jatt cisheteropatriarchal order.' This entwinement of caste and gender exemplifies the Mobius strip Rao describes. It also reveals a dialectical process reliant on deepening the contradictions internal to these antagonisms rather than folding into a dominant fundamentalist narrative. Manu and manmit support the protests without idealisation, and desire to render productive the schisms and incommensurability of political antagonisms rather than remain complacent with a presumption that a fantasised 'unity' must be maintained at all costs.

What I find so compelling about these interventions is that they do not profess that Langar is a queer practice, rather they argue that langar, pangat, and sangat are principles of Sikhi cohered only through the multiplicities of gender and the abolition of caste and must be practiced as such. Such queer, trans, and Dalit response to Sikh fundamentalist nationalism is not based on a counter(homo)nationalism, nor on a homoromanticism that would blame colonial rule for present day trans- and homophobia by romanticising a pre-colonial, phobia-free religious practice. Manu and manmit are not arguing for 'recovering' queer and trans subjects, but on drawing on practices and tenets that already exist within the folds of Sikhi and have yet to be realised to their fullness. The radical force of queer, trans, and Dalit Sikhs emanates already from within, not from outside or externally to the Sangat. Their demand is not (only) one for the recognition, inclusion, and visibility of certain identities, as it is for an ethical-theological orientation to these identities, an example of the difference between identity politics and a politics of identity. In other words, there is no true Sikhi without queer, and trans Dalit Sikhs. This has

been condemned as a blasphemous statement, and yet the religious principles confirm it to be true. In a final acknowledgment to that which is already there, Manu and manmit hail the queer, trans, and non-binary bodies at the protests, however defined, marked or unmarked: ‘.may our Waheguru [god] have kirpa [blessing] on the caste oppressed and queer and trans farmers fighting within the *Kisaan Morcha* [Farmers’ movement] right now’ (chahal and Kaur 2021).

The anti-casteism politics among these queer, trans, non-binary Dalit Sikhs are less wedded to the philosophies and legacy of Ambedkar, who once considered becoming Sikh, than to the anti-caste tenets of gender-nondiscrimination embedded in the theology of Sikhi. Thinking alongside Rao’s commitment to a queer anti-caste politics, I wonder how these two strands of anti-caste commitments, Ambedkar and Sikhi, might together further open the possibilities for Rao’s conceptualisation of the politics of ‘backwardness’ which he argues is conditioned by a refusal against the onward march of modernity. My query is about both history and philosophy, but it is also a speculative one. That is not to deny elements of Sikh history that lend to archival reclamation, for example in the playful musings of whether the Gurus were queer. Rather than a relation to tradition and modernity, I read their demands as desire for a utopian radical Sikh horizon which would not be possible without achieving the dissolution of caste and gender differences. Radical Sikhi therefore would only strengthen struggles for more sustainable agrarian futures by nurturing a *sangat* multiply invested in such futures. In fact, as Manu and manmit make clear in their missives, *Langar* and other tenets of *Seva* cannot be truly practiced without challenging casteism, queerphobia and transphobia, or without recognising how queer, trans, and Dalit lives have been integral to these world-making institutions of Sikhi (chahal and Kaur 2021). Far from being ‘distractions’ from the anti-neoliberal and anti-capitalist thrust of the Farmers’ Protests, this queer, trans, and Dalit vision of radical Sikhi is at the heart of an evolved resistance movement.

The Disoriented Grammars of the State

Shirin Deylami

In September of 2007, then President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, was invited to Columbia University (US) for an engagement with the university community. When asked about the death penalty for homosexuality in Iran by an audience member, Ahmadinejad now infamously proclaimed to the Columbia University audience that, 'In Iran, we don't have homosexuals like in your country. In Iran, we do not have this phenomenon. I don't know who has told you we have that.'⁶ The audience jeered and booed Ahmadinejad and hundreds of statements were printed proclaiming the backwardness and homophobic religious extremism of the Iranian government. Many of the responses reflected a common American liberal homonationalism which utilizes the acceptance of LGBT rights a litmus test for modernity. This homonationalist framing, consequently, discursively constructed Iran as the backward anti-modern villain against the progressive liberalism of the United States. Here the juxtaposition is clear: the US is cast as the homophilic and progressive Other to Iran's violent homophobia⁷ But what was more interesting in this exchange between Ahmadinejad and his questioners was the way in which Ahmadinejad affirms the metonym between American identity and homosexual acceptance by articulating the common claim among conservative Islamic regimes in the Middle East that as a political and social identity 'homosexuality is Western' (Rao 2020: 18).⁸

This assertion by Ahmadinejad is not of his own making. At least since the revolution of 1979, the broader claim about the West's sexual licentiousness and perversity, has been long part of the Iranian Islamic regime's discourse of *westoxification* (*gharbzadegi*)--the claim that the West, both economically and culturally acts as an agent of toxicity that engulfs the Islamic world. Popularized by the social theorist Jalal al-e Ahmad, *westoxification* offers a critique of the global flows of capital and culture and particularly hones in on the way in which the ideology of the West manifests new subjects who attempt to mimic the West as a way to ensure their own modernity (Ahmad 1984). However, in the hands of the Ayatollah Khomeini and in the state discourse of the Islamic Republic many of the political and social narratives around combatting *westoxification* have emphasized its gendered and sexualized dimensions. In this way, to embrace the sexual licentiousness of the West was no different than accepting the West's capitalist and secularists ideology; both suggested a turning away from true Iranian-Islamic identity. So, to claim, as Ahmadinejad did, that "there are no homosexuals in Iran" is to both articulate an aggressive heteronormative national identity and to signal the Islamic Republic's ability to fend off sexual *westoxification*.

Only one year after Ahmadinejad's rejection of the existence of homosexuality in Iran, the documentary *Be Like Others* (also distributed as *Transsexual in Iran*) (Eshagian 2008) caused a stir at the Sundance Film Festival. While the film provides a more complex understanding of the ways in which gender and sexuality are fused within the Iranian state imaginary, many of the Western media narratives expressed awe, and

sometimes confusion, at the so-called progressive policies of the Iranian state when it came to transgender identity. Not only had transsexuality (the language most often used in Iran) been approved of by the Islamic State, and supported by an earlier *fatwa* issued by the Ayatollah Khomeini,⁹ but the state was now providing funds and healthcare to facilitate gender affirmation surgeries. In fact, Iran has one of the highest number of gender affirmation surgeries in the world and the Iranian government subsidizes half the cost of these surgeries. How, Western audiences asked, could Iran be so ‘backwards’ on lesbian and gay rights and so ‘forward’ thinking on supporting transgender citizens at the same time? Quickly, Western media narratives and analysis, ameliorated this psychic tension by crediting Iran’s policies on trans-gender/sexuality on the deep homophobia of the culture and the state. Iran is so homophobic, they contended, that they would rather force homosexuals into gender transitioning (and pay for the cost!) than recognize the possibility of queer desire. In this way the common narrative in the West that analyzed the Iranian stance (1) imagined the Iranian state’s homophobia as both intrinsic to and wholly motivating its state policies around transsexuality; (2) that there was no differentiation between gay/lesbian and transgender interests and; (3) that transgender activists had no voice in the Islamic state mandates—they were simply pawns in the Iranian state’s homophobia. Consequently, the Western homonationalist imaginary was put in order: Iran’s anti-queerness was autochthonous to the Islamic culture and any actions (even those deemed by some as progressive) by the state toward queer subjects reflected this ‘backward’ narrative.

But of course, state responses to queerness¹⁰ are never that simple and as Rahul Rao (2020: 15) so compellingly points out in his brilliant new book, *Out of Time: The Queer Politics of Postcoloniality*, we must understand queerness as a *becoming* that is mediated through and with discourses of nationalism, postcolonial identification and history in, against and through the state. So that just as one, in the West and in Iran, might think that they know exactly how the Iranian Islamic state might respond to the fact of queerness—through both erasure, violence and as a metonym for westernization—we also, simultaneously, see the avowedly Islamic state embrace other queer forms like transgender identity. How does Iran make space for these two responses at once? And how might Iran’s experience with and refusal of *westoxification* shape both state and activist approaches to queer freedom? What Rahul Rao’s new work does is to give us a framework and method to think about this question in a provocatively new way by challenging his readers to think through the complexity of queer identification and acceptance in the context of postcolonial time.

There is no doubt that that the rampant homophobia of the Islamic state continues to pathologize, dismiss, and punish homosexuals in Iran and that simultaneously, the Islamic Republic has been growing a biopolitical apparatus of state supported gender affirmation surgeries. This apparatus not only legitimizes certain forms of being transgender but it also cultivates a social and political life that affirms heteronormativity in the name of Islam. The question that I wish to explore, with Rao’s thinking as my guide, is, how we might come to understand the relationship of state sanctioned medical transitioning and its relationship to Iran’s stance on queerness as part of what Rao, following

Hortense Spillers, has called the ‘foundational grammar of the state?’ This foundational grammar is the ‘dominant symbolic order, “the ruling episteme”’ through which states have tried, and failed, to make sense of society (Rao 2020: 214-215). In what follows, I turn to Rao’s (2020: 215) important intervention to think about the ways in which ‘confronted with the fact of queerness, institutions respond in ways that betray the persistence of their dominant grammars’ by thinking through the complexity of the Iranian state’s response to homosexuality and transgender identity and its relationship to *westoxification*. Further, I wish to examine the ways in which ‘queer difference struggles to make space for itself’ (Rao 2020: 16) in the differing ways in which Iranians themselves engage with the fact of (their) queerness and the fear of and fight against *westoxification*.

In *Out of Time*, Rao situates the ways in which the colonial past, the postcolonial present, and the desires of critical futurity are sutured together by queer activists in attempts to instantiate and make possible queer freedom. Further, he argues that this queerness is always mediated by the state’s articulation and response to the fact of queerness. For Rao, the use of the colonial past is contextualized, reinvented and sometimes refused in order to bring forth varying visions of queer futures that both map and re-imagine the state’s vision of itself. This means that, in various moments and in varying contexts, queer constituencies might reinterpolate the colonial past in homoromantic (homophobia as an external invention) instead of homonationalist ways. Looking to the work and discourses of Ugandan queer activists, for example, Rao shows the ways in which the cause of homophobia and the state violence done against queers is anchored in the influence of the West, especially American Christian churches, rather than its own cultural history of homophobia. This homoromanticism relocates the homophobia of Uganda to the West and its neo-colonial relationships thus challenging the homonationalism that articulates LGBTQ rights and freedoms as reflective of the modernity and progressivism of the West, and homophobia as indicative of the antimodern backwardness of the African East. But just as queer futures are reimagined through an engagement with the past and present of coloniality so too is the rejection of queerness in the name of cultural authenticity and anticolonialism. So in stark contrast to Ugandan activists, Rao also traces the ways in which the Ugandan Anglican clergy’s rejection of homosexuality was also steeped in a broader desire to reject a neocolonialism of faith they saw as inflicted upon them by their American counterparts in the Anglican Church. So too do nationalist narratives play into the ways in which queerness is imagined by state actors and leaders in Uganda. What Rao deftly concludes is that the conflicting narratives, both historical and political, of the Ugandan state, its clergy and its queer activists offer competing and contrasting accounts of the origins and causes of anti-homosexual sentiment. At stake in tracing out this complex narrative is to show the reader that the binary divide instantiated by often Western homonationalist discourses are far more complicated and messy. The articulation of and rejection of queerness, then, is grounded in broader discourses of colonial memory and visions of a postcolonial identity and future.

How do experiences of the colonial past, and the concomitant invocation of memory, seep into and frame the present and future of queerness? This to me is the essential question that Rao’s book wishes to explore and one in which I would like to apply

to post-revolutionary Iran. While Iran did not experience colonization like India and Uganda—Rao’s primary examples—it is clear that the Islamic Republic’s rejection of *westoxification* was grounded in its deeply fraught relationship with the US and the UK. In turn, this rejection of *westoxification* was instantiated in discourses of proper sexuality against what was imagined as the West’s overt embracing of sexual desire outside of the confines of heterosexual marriage. Khomeini imagined any form of ‘excessive’ or ‘licentious’ sexuality as debilitating for the Islamic subject and for the Islamic nation. While he often focused on the publicity and extravagances of hyper-(hetero)sexuality, the current Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei describes homosexuality ‘as the worst form of moral degeneration,’ that is ravaging the West and likens it to one step away from the acceptance of incest (Khamenei 2016). Thus, in the Iranian Islamic state imaginary, the West’s so-called sexual perversity has the capacity to infect Iran as it did during the reign of the Shah Reza Pahlavi, whose close relationship to the United States and desire to “westernize” Iran caused much anger.¹¹ As Janet Afari and Kevin B. Anderson (2005: 161) argue,

There is... a long tradition in nationalist movements of consolidating power through narratives that affirm patriarchy and compulsory heterosexuality, attributing sexual abnormality and immorality to a corrupt ruling elite that is about to be overthrown and/or is complicit with foreign imperialism. Not all the accusations leveled against the [the deposed shah of Iran, and his] Pahlavi family and their wealthy supporters stemmed from political and economic grievances. A significant portion of the public anger was aimed at their ‘immoral’ lifestyle. There were rumors that a gay lifestyle was rampant at the court. The shah’s prime minister, Amir Abbas Hoveyda, was said to have been a homosexual. The satirical press routinely lampooned him for his meticulous attire, the purple orchid in his lapel, and his supposed marriage of convenience. The shah himself was rumored to be bisexual.

From Afari and Anderson’s recounting, we can see that the revolutionary discourse around the Shah Pahlavi functioned to metonymically connect queerness with Western imperialism (*westoxification*). Consequently, the rejection of homosexuality coincided with and helped constitute the rejection of the Shah Pahlavi’s power and concomitantly the power of the United States and Great Britain. However, we should not limit this metonym to the time of the Shah, for we can see the traces of this convergence between *westoxified* political power and sexuality in contemporary Iranian state discourses about homosexuality. In the revolutionary era, the answer to the overtly sexualized *westoxified* subject was simultaneously the blockage of Western culture from invading Iran and a vast disciplinary apparatus of normalization through familial, religious, and state institutions. This disciplinary apparatus not only affirmed patriarchy and compulsory heterosexuality, as Afari and Anderson (2005) suggest, but it also proclaimed excessive sexual desire as antithetical to Islam. ‘Islam stops all lust,’ proclaimed Khomeini (1980: 30) and for the Islamic clerics the homosexual was (aberrant) lust personified.

This collusion between *westoxification* and homosexuality was not limited to the revolutionary era. In the current moment, too, confronted with the fact of homosexuality and the public pressures of the Green movement, gay and lesbian diasporic organizing, and trans organizing, the Islamic elite continue to recycle the narrative that homosexuality is Western, all while the Islamic state accommodates gender affirmation surgeries by mobilizing and making real Khomeini's *fatwa*. In fact, the Iranian Islamic state has developed a complex biopolitical system that sanctifies and accommodates medical gender affirmation through an interconnected web of religious, medical, governmental and familial institutions. At first glance then, it would seem the Western and homonationalist critics are correct—the Iranian state is encouraging gender transition in order to erase homosexuality. However, if we take Rao's model of analysis seriously then we must engage in thinking about the ways in which the state is both responding to the international geo-political pressures and histories of *westoxification* and the internal activism of queer citizens. The Islamic state's policy around transgender rights cannot simply be seen as an apparatus to funnel homosexuals into unwanted surgeries that simply affirm their binary views on sexuality and gender conformity. Rather the state and cultural practices of homosexual erasure, the disciplinary narratives of proper heterosexuality, and the historical convergence of 'excessive sexuality' and *westoxification* allow the state to simultaneously disavow homosexuality (as Western) and claim a progressive accommodation for transgender citizens as a way to challenge the Western imperial discourse of homonationalism. In this way, the clergy, who are also the most powerful state actors, are able to reject *westoxification* and claim a progressive and modern response to transgender identity, unlike their Western counterparts. As Farah Jafari notes, 'Without recognizing criticism of their mistreatment of homosexuals, some clergy, such as Mohammed Mahdi Kariminia, a cleric in the holy city of Qom and one of Iran's foremost proponents of using hormones and surgery to change sex, also boastfully presents Iran's self-proclaimed policies on SRS [sex reassignment surgeries] and transsexuals as a beacon by which human rights can be measured: "One could say that a transsexual's right to sex reassignment is an instance of human rights"' (Jafari 2014: 40). These attempts by the Iranian Islamic state then are reflections of Rao's understanding of the foundational grammars of the state. As the Islamic state performs the sorting function of 'establishing the mechanisms of incorporating/quarantining, setting the terms of recognition, and undergirding the patterns of inclusion and exclusion that are foundational to its institutions' (Rao 2020: 215), it must also reinvest in, but also re-envision, the gender binaries and anti-Western narratives that undergird the Islamic state's identity. In doing so, they can claim an alternative conception of modernity.

However, it is worth noting that this reinvention of the grammar of the Iranian state is not solely an effect of the benevolence of clergy and politicians, but is also in response to trans activists calls for care from the state. As Rao reminds us in his analysis of the complexity of homonational and homoromantic discourses that emerge in the postcolony, we must consider the agency of those who are deemed 'weak' in the processes that make these differing stances possible (Rao 2020: 72). Like the Aravani activists Rao writes about who mobilize the structures of caste and language of backwardness

in order to gain both rights and substantive goods like housing in India, Iranian trans activists have relied on a language of vulnerability to engage the clergy and the varying bureaucratic dimensions of the state (Najmabadi 2014). Likening it to a game of ‘snakes and ladders,’ Afsaneh Najmabadi shows the way in which trans Iranians articulated a de-politicized activism that sought entitlements rather than pursuing a rights discourse in order to make their lives more livable. In addition, they actively sought to codify both legal and medical distinctions from homosexuality (Najmabadi 2014: 173). This type of engagement articulated trans activists themselves as vulnerable citizens in need of governmental and religious protection and care from a society that sees them as homosexuals. In this way, the trans activists strategically relied on religious and medical discourses in contrast to an often- Western narrative of LGBT rights discourse that as Joseph Massad has so critically argued has incited a discourse that furthers both rigid categories of sexuality but also their persecution (Massad 2007). My intention here is not to make judgments on these biopolitical developments nor on the strategies of these activists but rather to turn back to Rao in thinking through how the claims of trans vulnerability and even illness function to build a queer future for these activists and how in that activism they must also delineate their practices, strategies and identities against a vision of homosexuality as Western. In turn, the Islamic state’s capacity to care for its transsexual population allows their own proclamation of modernity. These complex, sometimes oppositional and sometimes concurrent narratives, help to shape the selfhood of these transactivists and Iranian identity. Importantly, as Rao so distinctively shows these identities and their making are always in a temporal flux. So as Iran and Iranians take on different positions towards westoxification there is no doubt that we will see shifting meaning and modalities of power.

How might we understand the confluence of homonationalism, homoromanticism and post-colonial state identity at play in the Iranian context? As Rao so deftly implores us, we must understand the activities of both individuals and states as reflective of a dialectical relationship in which queerness (but also national identity) is both made and is always in process of becoming. This viewing allows us to dismantle the vision of homonationalism that sees the West as the progressive ideal against the homophobia of the East but it also challenges us not to romanticize the postcolony. Instead, we must embrace the disorienting nature of queerness in the postcolony.

Notes

- 1 [Note by Puar] For an analysis of the historical arc of Islamophobia beginning with the 1857 Indian Mutiny, see the brilliant *Epidemic Empire: Colonialism, Contagion, and Terror 1817-2020* by Anjali Fatima Raza Kolb (2021).
- 2 [Note by Puar] For an analysis of the elitism of the US academy and how it conditions and impacts queer theoretical knowledge formations see the trenchant *Poor Queer Studies: Confronting Elitism in the University* (Brim 2020).
- 3 [Note by Puar] For a sampling of academic and activist commentaries, see Ravinder Kaur (2020); Navyug Gill (2021); a forthcoming book by Bikrum Sing Gill titled ‘Race, Nature, and Accumulation: A Decolonial Political Ecological Analysis of Land Grabbing’; Harsha Walia (2021); Amadeep S. Dhillon’s

recent work in *New Socialist*, especially ‘Understanding Kissan Andolan’ (Dhillon 2021); Nivkaran Natt’s contributions to the *Trolley Times*, <https://trolleytimes.com>; an interview from last year with Nodeep Kaur published on the Alliance for Workers’ Liberty website, <https://www.workersliberty.org/story/2021-11-23/nodeep-kaur-farmers-and-workers-struggle-beat-modi>; additional resources can be found on the Panth-Punjab Project, <https://www.panthpunjab.org/key-readings>.

- 4 [Note by Puar] See Bal Sokhi-Bulley’s forthcoming article, ‘Friendship as a Way of Life: On Foucault, Spirituality and Sikh Praxis.’
- 5 [Note by Puar] manmit singh chahal and Manu Kaur published a three part series of essays in the online magazine, *Kaur Life*. The first was published 22 January 2021 under the title, ‘When Will Caste-Oppressed and Queer and Trans Folks Find Liberation in Sikh Spaces?’ (chahal and Kaur 2021).
- 6 [Note by Deylami] A few days later Ahmadinejad’s office rejected the interpretation of his comments, arguing that he did not mean that there are no homosexuals in Iran but that homosexuality as a social and political phenomenon is not as prevalent as it is in the United States. Regardless, his comments created quite the furor among Western (mostly American) audiences.
- 7 [Note by Deylami] Juxtaposing American constitutional freedoms for gays and lesbians against the extremism of Iranian policies and Ahmadinejad’s refusal to even acknowledge gay and lesbian Iranians, Columbia Law School’s Sex and Gender Clinic (2007) put out a press release that read, “Iran’s constitution provides no protection for LGBT Iranians, unlike in the United States, where the Supreme Court recognized in its landmark 2003 decision, *Lawrence v. Texas*, that, at a minimum, the U.S. Constitution prohibits criminalizing sodomy. Iranians discovered to be gay have suffered intense discrimination, torture and even state-sponsored execution.” Invoking the homonationalist discourse so common in liberal American circles, the Sex and Gender Clinic recognized yet elided that these legal freedoms in the US had only been established *four* years prior. The focus then became about the ways in which Iran rejected modernity. See <https://www.law.columbia.edu/news/archive/sex-and-gender-clinic-blasts-iran-presidents-anti-gay-remarks>.
- 8 [Note by Deylami] Surely Ahmadinejad does not think that same-sex desire is a Western construct. Rather his claim about the Westernness of homosexuality suggests that the political and social approval of homosexuality and homosexual identity is a Western construct that rejects the ‘truth of Islam.’
- 9 [Note by Deylami] The original *fatwa* by Khomeini, issued in 1967, argued that from a religious perspective there should be no restrictions for hermaphrodites for sex reassignment surgery. In 1985, Khomeini revised that ruling by including those with diagnoses of gender dysphoria.
- 10 [Note by Deylami] I use queerness here as an expansive term that signifies both sexual desire and challenges to sexual and gender normativity. Of course, these forms of identification are specific and diverse but also work similarly in their challenge to forms of normativity.
- 11 [Note by Deylami] For a much more detailed and compelling account of the relationship between modernization, westernization and sexual desire see Najmabadi (2005).

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Fórum *Out of Time*, de Rahul Rao, Parte II: Repensando o homonacionalismo

Resumo: Neste Fórum, seis acadêmicos refletem sobre o recente livro de Rahul Rao, *Out of Time: The Queer Politics of Postcoloniality*, a partir de outras geografias, temas e possibilidades radicais. A Parte II explora a análise do homonacionalismo em diálogo com *Out of Time* de Rao. Jasbir Puar, que cunhou o termo em um trabalho pioneiro anterior, pensa com e contra o livro de Rao sobre as relações entre o homonacionalismo e o que Rao chamou de homocapitalismo. Puar também explora como a política de casta e gênero do Radical Sikhi durante os protestos dos agricultores na Índia (2020-2021) pode servir como uma fonte alternativa de inspiração, acompanhando os Dalits queer e trans do livro de Rao. Shirin Deylami reflete sobre o trabalho de Rao explorando as gramáticas desorientadas do Estado islâmico iraniano. Especificamente, Deylami analisa a maneira pela qual o discurso da oxigenação ocidental influenciou e desafiou as respostas divergentes do Estado às reivindicações transgêneras de cuidados em relação às reivindicações de direitos de gays e lésbicas.

Palavras-chave: homonacionalismo; homocapitalismo; casta; gênero; queer pós-colonial; Irã; Westoxificação

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