

Forum on Rahul Rao's Out of Time, Part IV: A Luta Continua

Rahul Rao*

Abstract: In this piece, Rahul Rao replies to the reflections on his book *Out of Time: The Queer Politics of Postcoloniality* by the six scholars who contributed to the Forum.

Keywords: homonationalism; homocapitalism; law; Uganda; queer aesthetic; hope.

One of the last things that I did before the onset of lockdown in March 2020 was to make a visit to my office in central London for the sole purpose of picking up a copy of *Out of Time* that my editor in New York had posted to me a few days before. In the weeks that followed, I had the sinking feeling that a book that I had worked on for the better part of a decade had come into the world at the worst possible time, when people everywhere were more preoccupied than ever with the existential imperative of staying alive. Of course this is also a preoccupation undergirding the book: what does it take for queer and trans people to survive a hostile world that can apparently only oscillate between seeking their diminishment, dispossession and death and instrumentalising their existence to visit such fates on others? But it seemed too much to expect that readers might have the space in which to reflect on the connections between the maldistributions of health, wellbeing and opportunity that they were negotiating in real time, and the structures, discourses and ideological apparatuses from which these resulted and which they in turn nourished.

So it is deeply gratifying to see that the book is not only still being read four years on, but that this is being done with the kind of care and astuteness that the authors of the pieces in this marvellous symposium have shown. I'm humbled by the generosity and attentiveness that the book has received both from scholars whose work has been foundational to my own and who have been mentors and friends, as well as from those I had not known before whose work I am eager to learn from.

Out of Time is tethered to particular geographies and points of crisis – the short-lived Uganda Anti Homosexuality Act of 2014 (succeeded, at the time of writing, by an identically named piece of legislation passed in 2023), the long-running legal and political struggles over the decriminalisation of queer sex and the recognition of trans subjects

* University of St Andrews, St Andrews, Scotland, UK; rr213@st-andrews.ac.uk. ORCID: 0000-0002-3289-7460.

in India, and a peculiar debate betraying the racialisation of sexuality over the extent and nature of contemporary British responsibility for antiques laws in former British colonies. While I had no pretensions to writing a book that would be of interest everywhere, I often fantasised about writing for three imaginary readers in Kampala, Bengaluru and London (admittedly reflecting the urban and Anglophone bias of the book, my location, and perhaps of queer studies more generally). As such, it is particularly pleasing for me to see the central concepts of the book mobilised so powerfully and persuasively by contributors to this symposium to illuminate queer and trans lifeworlds in contexts that are far removed from those that I was thinking about, in space even if not in time.

Thus, Renan Quinalha draws on my suggestion that we pay attention to homoromanticism as much as homonationalism to offer a fuller 'genealogy of the structures of discrimination and prejudice' as they operate in contemporary Brazil. In doing so, he demonstrates how a biopolitics of regulation of sexual morality forged under Portuguese colonialism is repurposed by the country's military dictatorship to further repress populations that were always already marked out for vulnerability. In many ways, Quinalha's account of how the Brazilian dictatorship 'elevated' formerly private moral standards to the status of public policies is apposite to the situation in Uganda, where moral positions advocated by powerful Pentecostal churches have become state policy under the Museveni regime, demonstrating the hollowness of the latter's pretensions to electoral democracy in what is a one-party dictatorship in all but name.

If Quinalha helps us to see the proximity of ostensibly distinct regime types in the global South, Emerson Maione draws our attention to an analogous proximity between ostensibly distinct ideological formations in the global North – namely, the multilateral establishment liberalism of Obama and the far-right populism of Trump. Through a close reading of the Trump administration's global advocacy in service of the decriminalization of queer sex and the advance of LGB (but importantly not T) rights, Maione demonstrates the endurance and continuity of homonationalism and homocapitalism as the discursive fields within which queer geopolitical claims must still be made. As Jasbir Puar suggests in her contribution to this symposium, we should not be surprised by the endurance of rights talk in 'liberal democratic' states-gone-authoritarian, given that rights operate less as guarantees to entitlements than as racializing markers that structure the field of homonationalism by demarcating the 'progressive' from the 'backward.' We have been sharply reminded of the endurance of this field in struggles over mobilisations against Israel's genocidal war in Gaza, ongoing at the time of this writing. Those of us marching as 'faggots for freedom in Palestine' (in the words of one memorable sign) have predictably been reminded that we would enjoy no queer freedoms under Hamas rule – as if this even warranted consideration in a context where life itself is snuffed out by Israel's carpet bombing, the collective explosive force of which now exceeds that of the bomb dropped on Hiroshima.

Even the most cursory reading of *Out of Time* will not fail to note its profound debts to Puar's *Terrorist Assemblages* (2007) in its account of the mutations of homonationalism and the responses thereto in the form of what I call homoromanticism and homocapitalism. I want to focus on the last of these concepts, given its uptake by a number of

the contributors here as well as by a broader queer scholarship. A central claim in *Out of Time* is that queer liberalism might currently ‘work’ less through the civilisationist logics of homonationalism than through the political economy logics of homocapitalism. Focusing principally on the reactions of international financial institutions, donor countries and multinational corporations to the 2014 Uganda Anti Homosexuality Act – reactions that have been reiterated in response to the 2023 Act – I argued that the threat of capital withdrawal as punishment for queerphobia and the promise of capital infusion as incentive for queer recognition had become more significant disciplinary instruments of queer liberalism than homonationalism’s civilisationist rhetorics of barbarism and progress. Yet as Puar rightly points out in this symposium, ‘homonationalism 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.’ Moreover, my description of homocapitalism’s tendency to fraction queers into those who might potentially contribute to economic growth and are therefore deemed worthy of citizenship and those who are unwilling or unable to be productive within the terms of the market resonates considerably with Puar’s well known account of homonationalism’s fractioning tendencies through its dual movements of queer incorporation and abjection. This begs the important question – one that remains insufficiently addressed in *Out of Time* – of why homocapitalism needed autonomous theorisation if it was immanent (as I believe it was) in the assemblage of homonationalism. I address this question more fully in a forthcoming piece (Rao 2024), but offer a preview of the central argument here.

Among the most compelling illustrations in *Terrorist Assemblages* of what Puar now suggests we might read as a kind of proto-homocapitalism is the phenomenon of the LGBTQ tourism industry exhorting US queers to spend money on travel in the immediate post-9/11 moment as a means of restoring the economic and psychic health of a beleaguered nation. For perhaps the first time, market and state interpellation of queers converged where previously there had been only divergence (Puar reminds us that for decades, market recognition of queers had functioned as compensation for the lack of state recognition). This convergence leads Puar (2007: 62) to read ‘the familial and kinship-delineating heteronormativity of the nation and the “value-free” homonationalism of the market’ as ‘convivial and complicitous rather than oppositional entities.’

I suggest that the convergence was as historically unprecedented as it was short-lived. Puar has always been scrupulous about situating her theorisation of homonationalism as an account of US racial formation in the context of post-9/11 Islamophobia especially as it operated in relation to West Asia. Taking up her generous and generative recognition in this symposium that historical shifts in consciousness might necessitate a revision of our conceptual architecture, I suggest that if we were to shift the spatiotemporal focus of our analysis to the post-post-9/11 world, when the ‘war on terror’ was overlaid by the US sub-prime mortgage crisis and the European sovereign debt crisis with both morphing into the ‘global financial crisis,’ it is no longer clear that nationalism and capitalism in the US – let alone globally – can be seen as ‘convivial and complicitous.’ Indeed less than a decade into austerity, we would see them come unstuck with numbing

regularity. In the UK in 2016, the virulently anti-immigrant right-wing nationalist Brexit vote flew in the face of neoliberal orthodoxy to tear the country out of the European Union. Republican voters in the heartland of the deindustrialised US have remained doggedly loyal to Trump in the face of his demonstrated failure to make capitalism work for them. And from 2014 onwards, Narendra Modi has enjoyed skyrocketing popularity among the very populations on whom he inflicts spectacular economic suffering via ill-conceived policies of demonetisation and Covid lockdown. If in the early days of these regimes, the disjuncture between the imperatives of nationalism and capitalism was resolved through the promise of their temporally deferred subsumption (exemplified in the quaintly hopeful futurities of already obsolete slogans such as ‘Take Back Control’, ‘Make America Great Again’ and ‘Achhe din aane waale hain’ (‘Good days are coming’)), few today retain much faith in the prospect of such subsumption. Authoritarian populism names the strategies that manage the frustration engendered by the belated realisation that liberalism, democracy, nationalism and capitalism are not the package deal they were once believed to be, typically by constructing the racialised, gendered and sexualised scapegoats on whom the permanent estrangement of these components of the good life can be blamed. (I cannot help but note here that the Iranian notion of ‘gharbzadeghi’ (westoxification), which Shirin Deylami so insightfully writes about in this symposium, functions perfectly as the negative mirror image of what was once this package deal, in its opposition as much to the putative sexual licentiousness of the West as to its ideologies of capitalism and secularism.)

If queer liberalism must now operate in a field in which the fantasy of the coherence and adherence to one another of liberalism, democracy, capitalism and nationalism is no longer sustainable, it is not difficult to understand why it might place its bets on the most reliable of these moorings. It is tempting to invoke here the aphorism that is variously attributed to Frederic Jameson and Slavoj Žižek: ‘It is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism.’ Indeed queerphobes have found it all too easy to imagine queer and trans existence as portending the end of the world in apocalyptic fantasies about the death of the family, the perversion of children, the demographic collapse of nation and the coming of Armageddon. In the face of such doomsday scenarios, how better to persuade the barbaric queerphobes to accord queer and trans folks the paltry freedoms of liberal recognition than by promising their frictionless participation in the only game in town in which everyone seeks success.

I have tried to parse this emphasis on persuasion by suggesting that while homonationalism and homocapitalism both rely on combinations of threat and inducement, homonationalism evinces a greater reliance on the threat of exclusion and extermination while homocapitalism seduces through the hegemony of neoliberal reason. In saying this, I do not mean to deny that homonationalism is also a reward structure (as Puar rightly insists in this symposium) but suggest that its rewards are more easily refused than those promised by homocapitalism. Thus, even as Russia and Iran vociferously reject Western liberalism and champion ‘traditional’ and Islamic revolutionary values as a vehicle for their own counterhegemonic leadership, both feel the pain of global economic exclusion which they seek to mitigate by every means possible. Uganda positions

itself in the vanguard of authentic Africanness by portraying itself as what evangelical Christians would call a 'purpose-driven' country, but must balance the gains – such as they are – inherent in such posturing against the loss of aid and investment. Many countries – typically those that travel under the sign of 'rogue' and 'failed' states – have little use for 'Western values' (whatever those are) but have difficulty remaining viable outside the terms of capitalism. As Partha Chatterjee (1986) long ago taught us and as Deylami illuminates in her account of the entanglements of Iranian governmentality with trans lifeworlds, the postcolonial dilemma has always been that of crafting a future that is modern (read: capitalist) without being Western.

Let me now turn to questions of method and style, to which at least two of the contributors to this symposium devote considerable attention. Laleh Khalili remarks on my interest in gathering materials, interlocutors and methods to range across and between scholarly conversations. It is true that *Out of Time* is omnivorous in what it reads, drawing on legal and policy documents, parliamentary debates, social media, novels, plays and films, and strays into disciplinary terrains beyond those in which I was trained. In part, this is a function of my determination (well noted by Quinalha) not to fetishise the law as the primary locus of queerphobic affect but to think of it as epiphenomenal. It is also the consequence perhaps of the ubiquity of the methodology of cultural studies of the kind pioneered by Stuart Hall and his collaborators, without which queer studies as we know it today would be unimaginable. And it is the result of my own mongrel disciplinary formation – in law and international relations with a good dose of humanities envy – which has predisposed me to follow questions that press themselves upon me wherever they lead without being too concerned (no doubt sometimes to my detriment) about the methodological protocols of academic guilds in which I cannot claim membership. I have found the essay form to be most conducive to this style of thinking, allowing as it does for the kind of meandering exploration that is only possible in the act of writing itself.

Khalili also notes my comfort with dwelling in ambiguity and ambivalence. There is a certain paradox in attempting to write clearly about the things of which one is not sure. This is perhaps more easily achieved with ambivalence, the explication of which demands the articulation of at least two antithetical affects. But what might writing about ambiguity in ways that nonetheless convey some meaning entail? Towards the end of *Out of Time*, I speak of disorientation as a strategic intervention in ongoing discourses of queerphobia. To make sense of this, we might turn to Paulo Chamon, who reads the book with a stunning clarity that frankly eluded me while I was writing it. Chamon reminds us that at the heart of the book are three discourses – homonationalism, homoromanticism and homocapitalism – that are themselves rooted in more foundational discourses of orientalism, nativism and modernism and that attempt to stabilise the meanings of homosexuality and homophobia by suturing sexuality to place and time. In tracing a genealogy of queerphobia in ways that make visible the entanglements of British colonialism with the court of the late 19th century Buganda monarch Kabaka Mwanga, of early 21st century transnational evangelical Christianity and HIV/AIDS policymaking with Ugandan priests and politicians, of international financial institutions and donors with kuchu (queer) activists, and of the haunting presence of past entanglements in

contemporary ones, I seek to destabilise settled assumptions about the place and time of sexuality. Think here of disorientation, quite literally, as the dismantling of orientalism. My hope is not simply that prior stabilisations of sexual politics that have produced the field of homonationalism might be dislodged but also that the analytical scepticism that this process engenders might preclude new stabilisations from crystallising unreflexively.

But what is at stake ethically in this work of disorientation, of making ambiguous and ambivalent things that were believed to be clear? I am mindful here of the critique of a first generation of postcolonial studies that was accused of being too ambivalent for its own good. Benita Parry (2004) famously excoriated Homi Bhabha's critique of the putative nativism of anticolonial movements and his concomitant valorisation of ambivalence, hybridity and synthesis in such movements. She argued that such a view offered a highly selective reading of the anticolonial archive, underplayed the drive to mastery and domination inherent in coloniality, and misrepresented the colonial encounter as a competition between peers rather than the brutal, often existential, struggle between highly unequal adversaries that it actually was. In common with other Marxist critics of postcolonialism, Parry bemoaned the fact that the focus on ambivalence blunted the sharp edges of oppositionality that anticolonial struggle typically requires.

Early in *Out of Time*, I clarify that the book is interested less in the question of what is to be done than in what is being done temporally in struggles over queer postcoloniality. As Khalili puts it, the book is more invested in entering into a conversation among comrades *now* than in rendering future judgment. Yet I have never disavowed the need for us to ask, collectively, the question of what ought to be done, even if that is not the task I set myself here, and indeed my hope has always been that a greater reflexivity over what is at stake temporally in struggles around queer desire might enable a more expansive politics of liberation. If homonationalism structures a field that sutures sexuality to place, race and time in certain ways, in mapping the complex global and transtemporal travels and travails of queerphobia, I think of my work as offering the negative image of Aimé Césaire's (1968) stirring insistence that 'no race holds the monopoly of beauty, of intelligence, of strength and there is a place for all at the rendezvous of victory.' As such, I am thrilled that Chamon registers without exaggerating the place of disorientation in the text – 'Disorientation, yes, but not only' – while also feeling guided and hopeful as he reads.

Chamon perceptively observes that the text walks a tightrope between orientation and disorientation, between a 'suspicion of liberation' and a 'politics of reparation.' Asking how this navigation works, he points to a set of concepts that stabilise the analysis without immobilising it – the notion of 'permanences,' which I borrow from Alfred Whitehead, to describe the temporal and processual character of place, as well as that of 'grammars,' which I take from Hortense Spillers, to describe the dominant symbolic order through which states apprehend their societies. In his reading, such concepts offer a middle ground of sorts. Think of the linguistic function of grammar, for example, which captures the formal structure and system of language while never precluding its ceaseless and quotidian violation in the form of slang. The linguistic analogy works, but only up to a point: unlike linguistic grammars, political grammars forged in the originary violence

through which states are founded and refounded can change dramatically in revolutionary upheavals of the kind that Deylami writes about. This is also why a queer left politics can never fully disavow dreams of revolution however unpropitious the conditions for it may seem.

For Chamon, *Out of Time* oscillates between sovereign first lines outlining the contours of grammars and hopeful last lines gesturing at lines of flight from them. I wonder if there is also something to be said about the book's tendency to turn from the analysis of actually existing politics to literary, dramatic and cinematic fiction as the soil within which its hopeful last lines germinate. This move follows José Muñoz's immersion in a queer aesthetic, which he saw not as an escape from the social realm but as mapping a queerness that is not yet here (2009: 1). My own motivations were also more prosaic. I have tended to be wary of holding up actually existing utopian possibilities as exemplars for fear of freighting them with the unbearable burden of our collective hope, not to mention repeating the monumental errors of revolutionary vanguardism. But perhaps there are ways of recognising quotidian joy and hope in the bleakest of times while recognising their contingency and fragility.

It hardly needs reiterating that the times *are* bleak. Even as I write this, kuchus in Uganda live under the yoke of another draconian Anti Homosexuality Act, passed in May 2023 with overwhelming parliamentary support. Like its predecessor in 2014, it imposes the death penalty for what it calls 'aggravated homosexuality,' life imprisonment for other categories of offences, and severely restricts freedoms of speech, residence, employment, marriage and association around sexual orientation. The 2014 Act was struck down by the Uganda Constitutional Court, ostensibly on grounds of a procedural irregularity although it is widely believed to have been pressured into doing so by the Museveni regime, which sought to cultivate the support of an evangelical Christian constituency without losing access to international aid and investment. Nine years on, analysts suggest that Museveni has much less room for manoeuvre as his hold on power – uninterrupted since 1986 – grows ever more tenuous (Titeca 2023; Byarugaba and Burnett 2023). With legitimacy draining away, the regime relies more heavily on patronage and force, the latter evidenced by increasingly brutal crackdowns on the political opposition and human rights groups especially those working on sexual minority rights. In the absence of meaningful democratic mechanisms for succession, disquiet grows within the ranks of the ruling party itself as rivals jostle for power by opportunistically surfing the waves of the most virulent moral panics at hand. In any case, a liberation that relies on the shadowy manipulations of a Caesarist figure is no liberation at all. What else to do but to follow the rallying cry of the kuchu movement, borrowed from FRELIMO's struggle for the liberation of Mozambique: 'A luta continua!'

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About the author

Rahul Rao is Reader in International Political Thought in the School of International Relations, University of St Andrews. Prior to this, he worked at SOAS University of London and the University of Oxford. He is the author of *Out of Time: The Queer Politics of Postcoloniality* (2020) and *Third World Protest: Between Home and the World* (2010). He is currently writing a book about the politics of falling and rising statues. His work has been supported by fellowships awarded by the Leverhulme Trust and the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study. He is a member of the Radical Philosophy collective.

Fórum sobre o livro *Out of Time*, de Rahul Rao, Parte IV: A Luta Continua

Resumo: Neste artigo, Rahul Rao responde às reflexões sobre seu livro *Out of Time: The Queer Politics of Postcoloniality* feitas pelos seis acadêmicos que contribuíram para o Fórum.

Palavras-chave: homonacionalismo; homocapitalismo; lei; Uganda; estética queer; esperança.

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