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## **Review of Rahul Rao's *Out of Time***

Eddie Bruce-Jones

To my graduate students,

You are going to enjoy reading this book, for its clarity and linguistic flare, but also because of the challenges it will present you as you grapple with colonial history and with the possibilities afforded you by the concept of queerness. You will find it an invaluable part of your library. Read it slowly and mark the margins liberally.

Rahul Rao offers three major disruptions you should study, for content and approach. First, the book parses through conventional postures for understanding the potted histories of colonialism and, by extension, contemporary politics of struggle. Second, the book offers a particularly sharp innovation in its conception of the temporal, disrupting linearity in order to make room for the full potential of historicity and futurity. Finally, the book offers an expansive possibility for how queer, conceived as a form of becoming, might reconfigure our sensibilities of time, history, critique, and struggle.

### **Convention**

*Out of Time* is fundamentally interdisciplinary. One would be hard pressed to describe the work as predominantly one of international relations, although it enriches the discipline and international relations scholars are clearly one audience of the work. Rao is in conversation with critical geographers and sociologists, historians, political scientists and legal scholars. He uses empirical methods from anthropology and grapples with theoretical perspectives from gender studies, queer theory and critical race studies. By closely examining the political, theoretical, theological and moral facets of queer struggles in Uganda and India, in the high level of detail these struggles demand, *Out of Time* demonstrates why our understandings of history, political strategy, and time itself need to be reframed if we are to adequately reckon with coloniality.

The book reframes key tensions at the juncture of scholarship, social justice advocacy, and the praxis of transnational solidarity. The introduction raises fundamental questions about the adequacy of single-issue approaches and with simplistic categories of analysis. One concept introduced in the first pages of the book is “homocapitalism,” of which Rao says:

“While sharing key discursive features with homonationalism, homocapitalism operates in accordance with a distinct set of imperatives. Holding out the prospect of a rosy future redolent with growth and productivity should a state embrace LGBT rights, homocapitalism is arguably more significant than homonationalism in certain contexts. In drawing on the hegemonic logic of neoliberal reason, it offers an apparently more consensual strategy of persuasion than homonationalism with its coercive tropes of civilisation and barbarism” (12).

Rao, by introducing homocapitalism among other key concepts, offers a complex, and in my view an intellectually open view of the plural political realities in queer struggles in Uganda, within a global economic context and with a keen awareness of the processes according to which we narrativise the past. One might refer to Rao’s approach as a form of dense contextual analysis, but one would need to consider the context to be trans-temporal, as time is by no means a neutral proposition.

Rao’s interrogation of oppositional logics is constant. He unpicks the distinctions between memory and history, speech and silence, chronology and disruption, past, present and future, as he maps with precision the language and concepts required for his treatment of colonialism and queerness.

“Much of this book is concerned with the dialectical opposition between two statements that commonly frame scenes of queer postcolonial contestation— ‘homosexuality is Western’ and ‘homophobia is Western’. By way of preface, I want to note how these apparently spatial claims also stake out temporal positions on the question of ‘homosexuality’. This might begin to allow us to see how the temporal imaginaries of queer liberation in the formerly colonised world are forced to grapple with a quite distinct set of preoccupations from those in the West” (18).

Rao offers two narratives of homophobia in Ugandan society (33), as inherent and deeply rooted in the fabric of Ugandan society on one hand, and as an instrument of Western organizations and interests on the other. This has shaped a great deal of domestic and transnational activism and social debate on repressive laws in Uganda, and in post-British colonial contexts more generally. He troubles this simple dialectic throughout the book, which I think does a service to queer struggles in Uganda by avoiding easy explanations or

solutions. He responds directly to this particular opposition by complicating what we might understand as homophobia in contemporary terms and applying that to colonial era prohibitions on same-sex sexual activity, and by introducing his concept of homoromanticism to explain the opposing view, which “romanticises the indigenous precolonial as a spacetime of unmitigated tolerance” (44–45).

The opposing logics of the West as having produced homosexuality on one hand or rejected it on the other are not the only oppositions that Rao names, interrogates and dispels. The text will lead you through a series of oppositional logics that Rao locates in the terrain of historical debates, and he will stage a tightly managed series of interventions with such a masterful voice that the flow of the book remains, ironically, undisturbed. This, despite the fact that Rao transports us across geographies, from churches in Uganda to the Supreme Court of India, and across time, accounts of the Ugandan Martyrs to the imperial legal transfer of early British criminal laws on same-sex sexual activity, to the imagination of a future in the context of the possibilities opened up by queer *becoming* (15).

Rao argues against making either too firm distinction between memory and history, while in the same analysis, argues that they should not be understood as the same. He instead argues, using the work of Victoria Browne, that “‘traces of the past ‘spill forwards’ into the present’” and the “‘historical past is also ‘constituted backwards’ when traces are taken up and configured within a historical narrative.’” (80, quoting Browne). He uses this frame of ‘two way temporality’ as a foundation for his interrogation of the history of the Uganda Martyrdoms. This interrogation is enlightening and surely a major contribution to understanding the position of the ‘homosexuality is Western’/ ‘homophobia is western’ dialectic in the context of Uganda, which carries a narrative of same-sex desire, to some extent, through a core facet of state and religious history in the Martyrdom of the pages of Mwanga.

On a very different register, Rao reconciles major theoretical positions as he reveals his own theoretical perspectives. He pays careful attention to foundational concepts, their circulation, inflection and misinterpretation, and wraps them into the fold of his most generative readings. For example, in an early moment of instruction in the book’s first chapter, he carefully clarifies Jasbir Puar’s critique of a type of analysis that, purporting to be intersectional analysis, for its ‘separable analytics’. He emphasises that Kimberlé Crenshaw’s project of

intersectionality actually attempts to reveal systemic erasure in order to preserve a view of human complexity that can be represented in law that is closer to wholeness than the law currently allows. He says that, ‘in doing so, [Crenshaw] throws the presumed separateness of these categories into crisis’ (13). He mentions that a simplistic reading of the metaphor of the intersection, without full acknowledgement of the theory, is a case of the metaphor overwhelming its referent (14), rather than the case that intersectionality does not do the theoretical work our lives demand. It is these types of careful readings, that seek to curate and organise core assumptions, that will provide you with a theoretical foundation that will sustain your work when you carry out your own research projects.

## **Time**

The concept of time, in the context of envisioning history and imagining the future, requires a rethink. The recent pandemic has intervened in many of our lives, slowing some aspects and accelerating others, spotlighting global inequity and moving whole sectors of commerce, not to mention sociality, into cyberspace, where time is a different proposition. An anxiety that I have grappled with for at least the last decade—and I suspect I am not alone—is the velocity of information flow, mirrored by an ever-growing appetite for simplified messaging, and how this predicament of culture and technology can quickly change the course of social and political life. For all that we gain in speed of access to information and the potential exposure (but for gate-keeping algorithms) to an ever-increasing range of worldviews, what do we lose by not being made to sit in complexity between the soundbites? How do we slow things down in order to critically assess the grey areas, or to contest the terms of temporality itself? And how are we to do this whilst being swallowed into the relentless pace of polarisation, both strategic and incidental?

Rao instructs us to revise our conceptualisation of time, as a set of logics that animates the ways we construct place, history, memory, queerness and futurity. On the book’s cover is artwork by Ugandan artist Eria “SANE” Nsubuga titled *Berlin Conference*. It features heads and shoulders—some clothed, but not all; some have sideways mouths that open sideways. There are masks and single eyes floating around the scene, traversed by what seems to be a snake or a long black penis, and the background is of newspaper print. The scene is effective no matter which way one turns it—there is always a gaze to be met or a mouth that could be speaking directly to its viewer. This rendering of the 1884/5 Berlin Conference, during which

fourteen European countries participated in dividing and claiming territories on the African continent, is a useful point of departure for some of the books' main contentions. In a sense, the conference is imagined as a fixed point in the chronology of history, one which Nsubuga dislodges from its fixity by introducing it into the turbulence of remembering, narrativising and assigning value.

Rao uses Freeman's term 'chrononormativity' to recall the ways that homonormativity, historiography and linear progress narratives conspire to reinforce colonial ways of thinking. Moreover, he asserts that it is queerness that provides an opening for disruption, as he notes that queer theoretical work entails "untimely gestures—feeling backward, anti-futurism, critical utopianism."

A further dimension of the temporal that Rao brings into the frame is the spectral, engaging with the work of Avery Gordon and insisting on the importance of ghosts to help construct our concepts of history, as haunting provides a "way of knowing' that understands 'the constellation of connections that charges any time of the now with the debts of the past and the expense of the present'" (23, citing Gordon).

In examining the possibility of bringing the present into the past when navigating and interrogating history, Rao looks for a generative way to "draw on the potentially reparative possibilities of a turn toward the past without succumbing to the temptations of vulgar empiricism, ventriloquism and anachronism" (20). He speaks of the ethics of queer time travel—of an engagement with the past in an effort to preserve the full potential of futurity—and centrally questions the role of the researcher, the historian and the queer postcolonial subject.

### **Queerness**

Rao's intervention into the conceptual possibilities of queerness involves drawing on queer of colour critique, queer Marxism and Dalit perspectives to explore queerness as 'becoming' anti-imperialism (15). His analysis moves back and forth across these potentialities of queerness and, in his words, reveals "the foundational grammars of the states and social institutions in which queer difference struggles to make space for itself" (9). He does not define queer in a singular way, but rather points to its possibility as an analytic for explaining violence (9–10), for interrogating memory (21) and futurity (24). He also considers its

political salience as a marker of position in struggle, as he notes that it can “signify sexual and gender non-normativity” (27). It is notable, here, that Rao creates the space for due regard of LGBTQ struggles within anti-capitalist and anti-colonialist frames, and he keeps these struggles present in a sustained way throughout the book. Of course the book destabilises notions of time and place, so perhaps keeping them within a ‘frame’ is unsteady phrasing, but his question regarding an ethics of how “queer movements might leverage the ‘now and hereafter’ to their quest for liberation,” is marked throughout the book (24). He makes sure Fanon is not obscured behind debates about his heteronormative claims, which while worthy of critique also serve to underplay the vastness of his contributions to postcolonial thought (49–50). He makes sure to underscore the specificity of the Ugandan context so as not to reproduce the idea of the singular African story, and within that, to distinguish at least four categories of narrative in the case of examining the Ugandan Martyrdoms.

The context in which this book and this work comes into the world is crucial. This volume is the product of years of thinking, researching, and writing, and of many conversations with interlocutors and colleagues; but now is a crucial time to come to terms with the insights of this book. These insights include reflection on the instrumentalization of queer rights struggles in two politically opposing arenas—both in the service of anti-colonial struggles as well as in alignment with the coercive forces of global capital and present-day forms of colonialism. They include the importance of holding a broad range of theoretical positions that queer scholars, feminist scholars and scholars of colour have produced and paying careful attention to the possibilities that they offer rather than only the ways in which they might threaten to foreclose one another (e.g., by putting the work of Kimberlé Crenshaw and Jasbir Puar in conversation with B.R. Ambedkar and Elizabeth Grosz)(14–15). It is a timely study in close, careful reading, of our political environment as well as of longstanding historical and theoretical debates, and it is a crucial contribution to international relations at a vital time.

Rao’s fieldwork in Uganda, involving qualitative interviews and a cataloguing and analysis of the narrativization of the Ugandan Martyrdoms, provides a nuanced account of how sexuality, religious history and colonialism intertwine in complex and sometimes contradictory ways. Note his astute queries of the distinctions between speech and silence, history and memory. From there, he comments on the strategies of contemporary queer

liberation struggles in India, setting out the opportunities and shortcomings in analogising between queerness and caste backwardness in the context of Indian constitutional protections. He grapples with the strategies of affirming and ameliorating identity, as he reads gender and caste intersectionally in a poignant critique of analogising—one that is sure to be as useful for theorists as it is for those engaged in the everydayness of struggle (192–194).

As a legal academic and avid reader of fiction, it is a special pleasure to read a piece of writing that is both concerned with questions of justice and stylistically beautiful—erudite and layered, but crystal clear. Rao, with the language and subtle but ever-present self-reflection, will draw you in as a reader, with the commanding wit of a storyteller. Most chapters beginning with a perfectly framed vignette, and with the passion and rigour of an historian intent upon dispelling myth after myth, he does just that. Rao's observations and contentions are lucid and colourful, just as they are generous and utterly succinct, gently prodding and razor sharp. It is the kind of writing that makes unpacking complex theoretical debates seem common sensical, and that is no small feat for an interdisciplinary book of critical theory.

Rao carefully attends to his own position, which is one of the book's many virtues. His voice is present, and the story's frame is openly and faithfully of his own design. This is the honesty of good writing.

*Out of Time* is nothing short of ground-breaking. It combines critical insights from queer theory and critical geography with meticulously reflective qualitative research, detailed close readings of important theoretical texts and a keen understanding of the political context of its subject matter. Rao challenges conventional understandings of coloniality, history and time, and in this way, reveals how important it is to analyse the process of imagining what postcoloniality might mean in the real world—where history is as much about the present as it is the past.

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