2025 | Hau: *Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 15 (1): 226–231

BOOK SYMPOSIUM

Objects, intimacy, citizenship: A response

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Response to comments on Meiu, George Paul. 2023. *Queer objects to the rescue: Intimacy and citizenship in Kenya*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Queer objects to the rescue is an invitation to think of homophobia and sexuality from elsewhere: that is, not necessarily from the domains of social life that they purport to designate but from a set of objects that, at first sight, appear trivial to sexuality politics or anti-homosexual violence. These are objects that encapsulate anxieties and aspirations, desires and dangers that revolve around, among other things, work, wealth, and economic livelihood; marriage, kinship, and social respectability; bodily afflictions, social intoxication, and environmental pollution; and concerns over ethnicity, belonging, and national citizenship. The book argues that these objects then displace logics and sentiments from these other domains of life and condense them onto a (homo)sexual body suddenly perceived as a threat to the nation and its foundational intimacies. I show that, in centering these objects as entry points into an ethnography of homophobia, we gain striking insight into the social, historical, and political economic conditions through which homophobic sentiment emerges. If the deployment of homophobia is now a tactic of governance associated globally with the security state, the book shows how such globally circulating tactics of power come to resonate with national and regional historical realities.

Rather than offer an exhaustive list of objects that are useful to understanding sexuality politics in Kenya today, the book merely tackles a handful of them to both illustrate an approach and open the possibility of thinking sexuality politics differently. I am therefore honored and humbled by my colleagues' generous, thorough, critical, and imaginative engagements with my book's arguments and provocations. I am most grateful to them for having taken the time to enter into what Tom Boellstorff so elegantly calls here a "scholarly dialogue" with my work: that is, not merely offer reviews of the book, but setting its different threads in conversation with their own work and those of others. For me, this has proven an excellent learning experience. In this short response, I cannot claim to do justice to the richness and depth of my colleagues' remarks, questions, and critiques. But I shall briefly gesture to how I would engage further with the different possibilities they have opened through this dialogue. Departing from a set of ethnographic conundrums and working my way through questions pertaining to analytics and the political potentials of queer theory, each of the following four sections focuses on a set of common, emerging themes.

Difference, ambiguity, sexualization

A first set of questions addresses how processes of sexualization involve social difference, whether in terms of race, ethnicity, class, or imaginaries of the rural and the urban. The intensification of mobility and migration within and across state boundaries has amplified, as we know, questions over belonging, citizenship, and the presumed dangers posed by the "foreign" (people, objects, and ideas). The new forms of intimacy that have emerged with migration, tourism, and other kinds of mobility have rendered

social difference strikingly ambiguous, difficult to pin down. It is then in intimate domains that a desire to divine and distil Otherness occurs most saliently: a desire to name, fix, hierarchize, contain, or even expulse various forms of difference. Intimacy and sexuality suddenly promise to reveal here the ultimate truth of subjects—their essential sameness or difference.

Martin Manalansan emphasizes how transnational mobility appears to subvert presumptions of stability related to national sovereignty. So too perhaps, the homosexual threat is often coded as "foreign," as coming from outside one's nation or culture to undermine its stability—a stability that appears to be founded on a particular intimate order. How then, Manalansan asks, does the globalization of LGBT cultures and discourses come to be racially and ethnically coded? And is the homosexual threat therein "always already [coded as] racially White"?

In Kenya, as elsewhere, efforts to rescue "straight time"—a clear linear and progressive path toward the future, where people with the "right kinds" of desire will more easily acquire respectability—has also involved distinguishing oneself more strongly from various Others. And the discourse of sexuality has been pivotal in making such Others, whether Indigenous people, sex workers, migrants, etc. In this context, the abstract category of "the homosexual" has been pivotal in disambiguating non-citizenship, foreignness, the danger of the polity's outside. To some extent, as Manalansan rightly intuits, in Kenya, the homosexual has indeed been "coded as . . . racially White." "It is you, *wazungu* (white people)," interlocutors sometimes told me, echoing political and religious leaders, "that brought homosexuality to Africa." But homosexuality becomes also about what Frantz Fanon ([1952] 2008: 33) calls a desire for "lactification"—a desire to become White. It is thus, for example, that Obama's presidential visit to Kenya in 2015, celebrated in part as the "return" of a Luo son of the country, was also met with anti-LGBT protests that opposed his support of gay rights. In this regard, too, Obama, a "son of Kenya," had also become dangerously White—his belonging to the country thus simultaneously rendered questionable. Be that as it may, I hesitate to generalize. To the extent that, historically, the homosexual threat has named various kinds of difference in domination, it has also been a shifter. For a long time, for example, Kenya's Christian nationalism has displaced homosexuality onto its Muslim population, mainly coastal Swahili and Arabs, by way of sexualizing ethnic and religious difference and morally legitimizing its national peripheralization. Note also how in West Africa, for example, homosexuality is now associated with corrupt elites and the wealth of Freemasons and Rosicrucians (Orock and Geschiere 2024). Here, the racialization or ethnicization of inequality might also work in unexpected ways.

Social differences premised on class and the rural–urban distinction are also central to the making of the homosexual as a target of repudiation. Mwenda Ntarangwi asks that I reflect on "how the subject of homosexuality [is] further framed against this juxtaposition of urban and rural images of livelihood and identity" and on how class tensions play out through intimacy. Rather than approach class or rural–urban boundaries as stable markers of difference, I interrogate them (as Ntarangwi does) as processes of reification in context. What I find most interesting in this sense is how anxieties that emerge over the slipperiness—indeed fuzziness—of these claims to difference also inform efforts to sexualize and stabilize boundaries between the classes or along rural–urban divides. Town dwellers often have family and kin in the village, foster their rural kin's children, or invest in land, agriculture, or rituals in the countryside. So, too, rural seasonal migrants are a common presence in all cities. Hence, social realities render the very separation between the rural and the urban ambiguous. Similarly, the fetishization (and glorification) of the middle class in Kenyan national discourse occludes a context in which "middle-class" households depend on rural or working-class labor, whether as maids, babysitters, gardeners, watchmen, or on the support of poorer relatives or rural kin and acquaintances.

It is then precisely these messy contexts that render social difference not only ambiguous, but also an object of sexualized anxiety. A quick look at Kenyan soap operas such as *Auntie Boss* or *The Real Househelps of Kawangware* illustrate this anxiety quite evocatively: key to the dramas of these shows are the dangers of the maid that seduces the husband or teenage son of the middle-class household that employs her; the threat of the motorbike cab driver (bodaboda) who sleeps with the mother of the middle-class home; the village cousins who bring "bad mores" (*tabia mbaya*) into the house of their urban kin; and so on (p. 57). It is against these anxiety-producing ambiguities, then, that social difference is claimed, performed, and reinscribed. It is thus, too, that bodaboda, by way of shaping collective values and behavior, can claim that "strength [belongs] in the village, [while] intelligence in town (*nguvu kijijini, mjini akili*) (pp. 76–82).

And this, especially in a time when many bodaboda are themselves migrants in towns and sometimes also continue to move across locations and styles of masculinity.

Normativity, time, and death

If this is a book about homophobia, as a form of hate, I must confess that the process of writing it has made me even more skeptical about committing to a stable definition for the term. Pinning down homophobia—trying to understand the conditions of its production, signification, and deployment—has led me to desires, aspirations, anxieties, and fears that often have *nothing* to do with sexuality. Rather, these are discourses and sentiments that emerge in relation to struggles over inequality, work, wealth, gender, marriage, respectability, nature, pollution, or, for that matter, the perceived dissonance between the surfaces and essences of things. The more I tried to understand how sentiments are displaced from these other domains of life and condensed, at particular moments, onto the (homo)sexual body, the more reluctant I became to seek a steady definition for homophobia. That would too readily close the conversation, rather than openly pursue its unexpected threads.

This might be in part why, as Boellstorff rightly observes, I do not explicitly distinguish homophobia from heterosexism in my book. Without a doubt, the distinction can be very productive analytically. If the common sense of a normative heterosexuality does not, by default, presuppose homophobic discourse or violence, it is even more important to ask under which circumstances heterosexist contexts give rise to anti-homosexual animus. I try to get at this indirectly perhaps using terms such as "normativity" or "heteropatriarchal," which, to be sure, only partially overlap with "heterosexism." But if I were to think further with "heterosexism," I would probably think of it in similar ways: that is, reflect on how, in the present, normative heterosexuality comes to encapsulate the promise of intimate security, wellbeing, or progress with respect to all kinds of domains of social life not necessarily associated with sexuality as such. (In other words, and drawing on Lacan, I would see both homophobia and heterosexism as symbolic and sentimental expressions, which, in the collective unconscious, are often also about myriad other things.) While overall heterosexist expectations remain relatively stable, debates over what constitutes legitimate heterosexuality are far-ranging, involving struggles over polygyny, concubinage, prostitution, teenage pregnancies, sex education, pornography, and anal sex, among other things. Each of these, in turn, involve anxieties and aspirations over anything from ethnic sovereignty, bodily autonomy, or porous national borders, and attach themselves in unexpected ways to objects.

"How might objects," Boellstorff asks, "become queering devices that trouble teleologies of rescue?" And how may "alternative temporalities" figure herein? While time and futurity are a central backdrop to my story, the book may in fact entail an implicit argument about temporality. On the one hand, tensions emerge between the rhizomatic ways in which people have come to imagine futures and their continued commitment to the "straight time" of modernity, progress, and development (pp. 28–30). I see this tension play out in terms of the often illicit and exceptional ways in which one imagines a near-future, while continuing to desire a normative, respectable far-future. I also claim that non-normative means to the near-future may short-circuit long-term plans, the fantasy far-future (p. 31). On the other hand, rescue inserts another temporal dynamic into the equation: a desire to expose such interruptions, short-circuits, or zig-zigzagging, to bring intimate livelihoods into temporal alignment. Yet, against the complexities of political economic context, pursuing such alignments is itself an exercise in futility. I agree with Boellstorff's suggestion that rescue may contain what he calls an "untimely flashforward" or "prolepsis": people engaged in it also expect it to fail. This might indeed at times prompt radical and desperate ways to actualize temporal alignments in the near future, including through sudden acts of abject exclusion and terrific violence.

And it is in death, as Anne Allison beautifully notes, that the threads of these different temporalities, and therewith, the promise of belonging might come most sharply into question. Allison asks what the relationship is between, on the one hand, the projection of an imaginary distant future in which normative expectations would be realized and, on the other, death, "when those who have deviated too much from the heteropatriarchal script in life are denied burial . . . alongside one's 'straight' ancestors in the patrilineal grave." Should we think here of a "queering of belonging in death," Allison asks, and is death handled in queer ways as well?

To be sure, queer people are being denied burial—both mortuary rituals or internment in the family grave—as ways to reject their claims to familial, lineage, or national belonging (cf. Ndjio 2020). But in any case, funerals have long represented an ultimate test of belonging, with the

repatriation of bodies to their places of origin or their acceptance by kin remaining generally uncertain. To the extent that, as Peter Geschiere (2009) shows, belonging is never guaranteed, never a done-deal, always an object of anxiety and investment, the possibility of nonbelonging in death is always there; and not just for queer people. The difference might be one of magnitude rather than kind. In northern Kenya, young men I worked with often feared that to die unmarried and without children meant to be buried in the most undignified way: in villages, this meant to be buried outside the homestead, "in the bush"; in towns, to be abandoned in a mortuary or in the anonymity of a municipal cemetery. For Samburu, the names of those who died unmarried and without children become themselves taboo. As the embodiment of a lineage's nonreproductive potential, such dead must be erased. Since the rise of AIDS-related deaths, numerous such funerals have taken place. But I also witnessed myriad efforts to reconfigure funerals. In 2009, after a friend of mine in his late twenties died (unmarried and without children) in a hospital, in Maralal, his mother and siblings abandoned the body at the mortuary. At that point, the town's so-called "plastic boys" (pp. 122–26), with whom the young man identified, purchased a coffin and returned the body to the mother's homestead, obliging her to bury it with dignity. Meanwhile, on the Kenyan coast, when people prepare to drive off a young migrant's dead body on its last journey back "home," to the town or village of origin, people say that sometimes "the dead stops the car" (*marehemu anasimamisha gari*). That is, the dead causes the vehicle transporting the coffin to break down, mostly just after it set off. This, people say, is because, having died prematurely, the migrant has not achieved the means of normative reproduction that would assure respectability at home. This is an acknowledgment of shame and failure in death. But perhaps it is also a desire to buy time—a desire that outlives the body and continues to pursue respectable belonging in its name. It would not be too farfetched to think of such moments as a "queering of belonging in death," with temporal accelerations or decelerations of a body's return and acceptance subverting ideas of both death and belonging.

Conversely, for the wealthy, excessive funerals and burial sites might also work to occlude histories of illicit wealth production. Famous in Mtwapa is the story of a sex worker said to have become wealthy in the 1970s, through her sexual relationship with Kenya's first president. Because she could not have children of her own, she eventually took another woman as a wife, who then gave birth to children in her name. She then passed down her spectacular wealth to the lineage she founded and whose members, in turn, buried her in a spectacular mausoleum in the town's cemetery (Meiu 2023). Her mausoleum continues to drive whispers of the deceased's sex work (and of the witchcraft she might have used to seduce the president). This attests to the complicated relationship between pursuits of respectable intimate citizenship and the impossibility of achieving it, but also to how illicit means to normative futures *can* indeed be occluded—at least partially—through the performance of excess in death.

Alternatives, articulations, mess

My book does not look at *one* group of people, as many ethnographies do. It is not a study of homophobia from the perspective of an ethnic group, a queer community, or even Kenyans as some sort of homogenized totality. Instead, I attend to the *articulations* of the discourses and practices of myriad publics—regional, ethnic, sexual, generational, national—whose idioms, while not always mutually intelligible, nevertheless, in key moments, *resonate* with one another. It is precisely in such resonances, symbolic and sentimental, that the conditions of possibility of homophobic violence arise. And what I call queer objects—objects through which desires, anxieties, and sentiments are displaced and condensed—constitute means of articulation. Indeed, I think that understanding the production of homophobia requires such a multi-scalar focus that also dwells in the in-between of various publics and phenomena and does not retreat into any one public and social space to offer its views as somehow external, alternative perspectives.

Moisés Lino e Silva asks me to consider what might be lost when the queerness of objects "is not radicalized into a more explicit ontological examination"? "What difference does it make to think materiality through a 'political economy' lens or an 'ontological turn' approach?" And would it be possible to do both: attend to questions of inequality, material livelihood, and political economy *and* highlight the importance of an "ontological self-determination"?

This is a difficult set of questions. To reflect on them with generosity and depth, I would probably need more time and space. So, all I can offer here is perhaps a few initial thoughts. First, to the extent that my work is interested in precisely the *articulation* of myriad global,

national, and regional publics and processes, I am, of course, keenly interested in how different ontological perspectives come to intersect. Lino e Silva sensibly observes how, in my ethnography, there is evidence that various "alternative ontologies" persist. Consider, for example, the panic that occurred among Samburu on social media over the so-called "boy with beads" (pp. 1–9, 184–89). Many middle-class, educated Samburu identified this young person as "homosexual," while some rural elders spoke of them as *sunkulaate*, a term associated with an older ontological framing of gender, embodiment, and in-betweenness. But, in analyzing this case, it would have been insufficient, I think, to seek refuge in an alternative "Samburu ontology" instead of attending precisely to the historical articulations that rendered these various meanings at times commensurable, at times unintelligible. My whole argument revolves around the fact that the "boy with beads" was suddenly targeted for death precisely because of the ways these various publics with their—let's call them, ontological—differences momentarily resonated with one another.

Second, while I am inspired by different approaches to objects and matter in ontological anthropology and new materialisms, my goal is ultimately to understand what we can learn about the production of the subject-citizen from objects, as perceived and produced and understood *by humans* in a particular social and historical context (p. 201n6). While I pay careful attention to how, say, the actual materiality of plastic limits and conditions (what one might call the "agency" of matter) the possibilities of its deployment in imagining ethnicity, autochthony, reproduction, affliction, and more, it is ultimately how *people* deploy this category of objects to produce exclusion that interests me here. (To imagine how homophobia or state citizenship would look from the perspective of plastic would be a completely different project.) To the extent that many approaches in ontological anthropology have turned away from political economy and the history of colonialism or modernity, I am less convinced of their "radical" nature. Rather I am inclined to agree with Bessire and Bond (2014: 441) that, in some ontological approaches, "domains of difference like culture and the environment instantiate vertical hierarchies of life in ways that simultaneously narrow the areas of legitimate concern and widen the scope of acceptable disregard."

But if I remain wary of ontological alternatives that offer too quick an "escape" from political economic processes, does that mean that we are stuck—that there is no way out? Vaibhav Saria raises the possibility of using the concept of "captivity" to describe the wider context of intimate rescue I attend to in the book. Could captivity, Saria asks, better describe a situation that does not seem open-ended or boundless after all? To the extent that grammars of intimate rescue are shared, aren't "both the nation and its citizens hold[ing] each other captive: each side tries to rescue the other, but eventually realizes it remains hostage to this other"? Precisely in light of the realization that such grammars fail, Saria argues, the concept of "fugitivity"—a "dimension of living defined by constantly escaping yet remaining caught"—might also shed light on what is happening here. I find both concepts very pertinent. What is particularly evocative in them is precisely their interrelation: that the fantasy of escape is itself a condition for the reproduction of a status quo that maintains captivity. I think Boellstorff also gets a this when he suggests that "a grammar of anti-rescue" might itself leave its "core assumptions intact." It is with this realization that I avoid reproducing the fantasy of a too quick alternative, escape, or outside—whether cultural, ontological, or otherwise—to the phenomenon I examine. But I would also like to think of captivity and fugitivity as being in a dialectical relation that, if certainly not perfectly open-ended or boundless, nevertheless transforms and moves particular grammars — slowly and painstakingly—in unexpected directions.

Hope, deception, and the in-between

Saria proposes we think further, not only of the paradoxes we encounter in the social phenomena that we seek to understand, but also of the very conceptual and political frameworks with which we work. Here, the forms of self-deception that we may encounter in relation to rescue, Saria proposes, may also occur in relation to queer theory. "Isn't queer theory itself in need of rescue," Saria asks. "One of the objects that could be seen as doing the rescue in this book is indeed queer theory. Yet it also seems that queer theory ends up being exposed as deceptive if not fake." I find that Saria's observation very elegantly encapsulates a conundrum in my own work and that of other anthropologists: that we work from within hegemonic systems of meaning—even when we desperately seek a quick escape from them—and that we interrogate these systems with otherwise compromised tools, even as we continue to search for better ones. I make a similar argument about the objects that, in the book, I call queer. To be clear, there is nothing

inherently queer about them. These are objects otherwise deployed in the making of normative intimate arrangements *and* in the production of sexualized hate. But the very same objects, compromised as they are, if brought in the foreground, may also reveal how such arrangements are produced. They have thus also a queer potential. This means, in part, dwelling in these messy situations of contrasting, indeed contradictory potentials in objects and ideas. It means occupying, if only momentarily, an analytical in-between.

A focus on objects, I argue, may also be interesting because of the way some objects petrify and thus render perceptible a certain *in-between*: the space in and through which sentiment is displaced from one domain of life onto another. Such objects thus deobjectify and de-essentialize more normative artifacts of political mobilization, such as the (homo)sexual body. But they do not offer necessarily steady alternatives or escapist outsides. This may begin to address Allison's question as to whether a "queer in-between [may] ever more radically challenge, or subvert the attachment to heteropatriarchal normativity"? I am reminded of a queer artivist exhibit in Nairobi that uses a set of rather normative types of loincloths (*kangas*), worn by women and carrying normative messages about love, marriage, family, and domesticity. There, the artist seeks to resignify such objects with queer-loving messages and proverbs (Meiu 2022), amplifying a liberatory potential in an otherwise normative means of patriarchal respectability. This would probably also begin to address Manalansan's questions as to the role of how "queer utopian yearnings and minoritarian hopes" could further play in my ethnography.

But rather than seek too easy a retreat out of homophobia by way of foregrounding queer utopian yearnings, *Queer objects to the rescue* tries to dwell in the mess—an analytic that, as Manalansan argues, resonates with my use of "queer"—that entangles objects, desires, fears, and imaginaries of rescue. Such mess might presuppose resistance but also attention to incitements to tidy up, declutter, or order. But, as with the ritual *mbusa* objects I discuss in the Introduction (pp. 13–15), messy situations can also be grasped by temporarily ordering things in new ways, ways that from a dominant point of view would remain somehow untidy. Foregrounding the trivial over the spectacular, the vulgar over the decent, new meanings and possibilities for imagination might also emerge. Rather than an escapist fantasy—an escape through an essentialized or ontologized "queer"—this presupposes an effort to play with and continuously exercise and expand our imagination against contexts that narrow or foreclose its possibilities.

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