

*Context, Genre, Hybridity, Transculture, and Double Bind: Cultural Appropriation
and Sita Sings the Blues*

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The issue of cultural appropriation has moved out of academia and into the arena of popular culture where disagreements between individuals and groups increasingly emulate the naming and shaming, trolling or extolling rampant on the internet with little regard to context. This paper proposes a countermove, a discursive framework that would substitute for an unproductive binary, a space of potentially productive exchange in which all identities and points of view have a place. My focal point is Nina Paley's 2008 animated feature film *Sita Sings the Blues*. Sita has been protested as an appropriation and boycotted by the Hindutva right under its older name blasphemy. The post-colonial left has been more respectful of Paley's artistic achievement, but raises the question of appropriative white privilege. To take a current example, Shefali Chandra (2015) groups *Sita* with Elizabeth Gilbert's memoir and follow-up film *Eat, Pray, Love*, and Katherine Russell Rich's *Dreaming in Hindi* as works in which "India is produced through the desires of the white woman, who is then regenerated by India and made well once more. Hindu India releases her from an acknowledgement of her whiteness, or her imperialism" (p. 509).

Whatever our initial reaction to a work the first step even in a disagreement is to make sure we are talking about the same thing. Using *Sita* as an example I will discuss in turn a set of defining frames that can situate questions of appropriation: 1st, genre and narrative structure; 2nd, the situation of production and reception, what Pierre Bourdieu (1993) calls field, the "space of possibles" (p. 64) and habitus, the actions of individual agents within "the space of possible positions and trajectories" (p. 65); 3rd, the question of hybridity and the distinction between critical transculturalism and appropriation. I will conclude by suggesting that many of the controversies about appropriation in the arts and humanities can be better understood and productively discussed if we abandon the appropriative or not appropriative binary and think in terms of what Gayatri Spivak (2012) calls the double bind that occurs when two of our values, principles, convictions are in conflict. The double bind requires, in Spivak's words, "learning to live with contradictory instructions" (3). The double bind "is not a logical or philosophical problem like a contradiction, a dilemma, a paradox, an antimony. It can only be described as an experience. ... In the aporia or the double bind, to decide is the burden of responsibility. The typecase of the ethical sentiment is regret, not self-congratulations" (pp. 104-5). In the case of cultural appropriation, the contradiction is most often between, on the one hand, the human right to be seen, recognized and respected as an individual or a group in one's own terms, and on the other the freedom of speech and expression essential to the independence of artists and writers in every mode from fiction and film to philosophy.

Genre: *Sita Sings the Blues* is a comedy in an ironic or mock heroic mode, a multi-plot animated, musical film. It interweaves four narrative strands, each with a distinct graphic style. The autobiographical strand, what I call the Ninayana, or Nina's Journey combines photo-realistic backgrounds with repeated overdrawing giving the scenes a jumpy, nervous energy entirely distinct from the Indian strands.

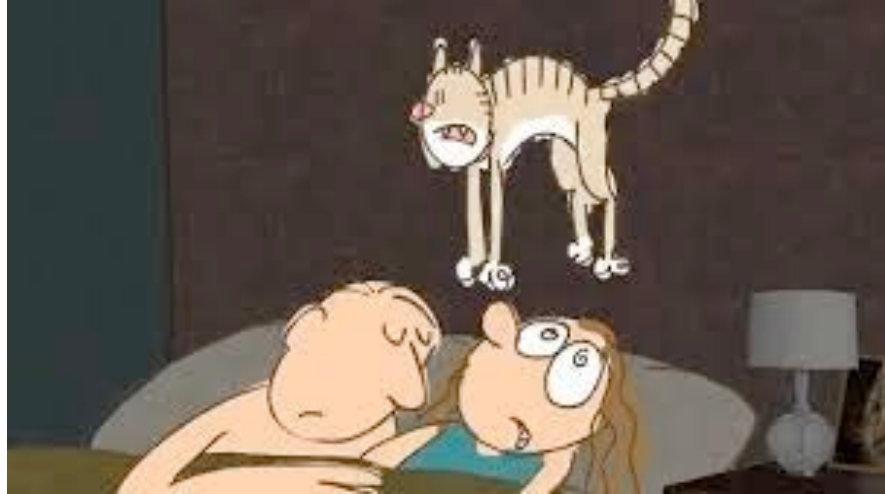


Fig.1 Nina, Dave and Lexi the cat in San Francisco. All *Sita* images, Paley 2008

The strand that has Sita channeling Annette Hanshaw's blues, I call the Ram and Sita Show. It borrows from old-fashioned musical films and their Bollywood analogues with action backed by song and dance numbers. There is even an intermission in which the characters, including ten-headed Ravana, raid the concession stand like actors on a break. Paley extrapolated the muscular Rama from Indian graphic or comic book representations turning him into a mock superhero who pointedly lacks the marks of his divinity.



Fig. 2 Song and Dance: Rama and Hanuman with Sita Singing “If You Want the Rainbow”

The hybrid singing Sita will be discussed later, only noting here that she is dressed in mixed mode as an Indian performer wearing an abbreviated bodice over a more classical skirt.

In what I call the intertext, three of Paley’s NRI (that is Non-Resident Indian) friends with roots in different regions of the subcontinent, become the voices behind Indonesian *Wayang Kulit* shadow puppets who narrate and comment upon the story of Rama and Sita as if it were a modern relationship. As the interlocutors reconstruct the central the story from memory it becomes clear that they are not simply recalling Valmiki’s classic text, but regional variations, dramas and other popular versions. This is the *Ramayana* as cultural artifact not religious text. Paley illustrates their conversation in the style of contemporary Indian poster and calendar art derived from the academic style taught by the British, but now thoroughly Indian, combined with whatever modern objects the commentators mention. In this mode Rama’s forehead bears his royal *tilak*.



Fig. 3 Shadow Puppet Commentary by Aseem Chhabra, Bhavana Nagulapally and Manish Achaarya

(4) Finally there is the Ramayana strand reserved from scenes taken directly from Valmiki’s and drawn after the style of Rajasthani manuscript miniatures.



Fig 4 Paley’s Manuscript Style and Rajasthani Miniature of Rama, Basohli style, Pahari, c. 1730

Context:

In 2002 Paley's then husband Dave took a job in Trivandrum, Kerala. Paley followed, but after three months left for what was to be a brief job in New York only to discover that her husband, who had become withdrawn in their marriage, had withdrawn from it, dumping her, as she always puts it, by e-mail: Alone and depressed in a barely furnished Brooklyn sublet, she found solace listening to a 1920s collection of blues and standards sung by Annette Hanshaw that the owners had left behind, and at the same time felt possessed by the *Ramayana*. The feminist Nina had not found Sita's unquestioning devotion to Rama to be an edifying story, but the abandoned wife suffering both the pain of rejection and the humiliating compulsion to beg to be taken back saw Rama and Sita in a new light. Here was a central cultural myth that did not feature typical western issues of infidelity, misalliance or incompatibility, but male withholding. Rama, warrior prince, incarnation of Vishnu, the ideal man, nevertheless questions and eventually exiles Sita even though his chaste wife never yielded to her kidnapper, Ravana the demon King of Lanka. She had patiently awaited rescue by Rama as befitting a wife. The challenge of creating a work of art linking Hanshaw's singing and Sita's story gave Paley's life a new and positive focus.

It took five years for Paley to craft *Sita Sings the Blues* on her home computer. Over that time, she posted complete scenes on the internet attracting comment, collaborators and piecemeal funding. Her South Asian collaborators were international NRIs, part of what Jonathan Friedman calls "a global, cultural hybrid elite sphere ... connected to international politics, academia, the media and the arts. Their careers, especially if they were born in the Third World and live in the First are thoroughly cosmopolitan ... (1997, 84). And they have real political and economic power, which mitigates the difference in power or cultural authority assumed by the appropriation accusation. Paley collaborated with them as equals. Nevertheless, I said mitigates rather than eliminates the power differential because even this cultural elite is subject to social discrimination and hate crimes. The key point here is that the Sita "contact zone" is not India and the place of the *Ramayana* there, but the Indian diaspora community and the internet, where the story of Rama and Sita, as Paley sees it, is part of world culture or, what some call the cultural commons of cyberspace. By way of contrast, I would argue that a film like Wes Anderson's *The Darjeeling Limited* (2007) is appropriative because India and Hindus serve as an exotic backdrop against which three American brothers work out western family tensions as they travel. The brothers could be taking a train across Indiana rather than India for all that it would matter to the plot. That Anderson dedicated his film to Satyajit Ray and quoted his film scores is a fine gesture, but makes no critical difference.

The vexed question of Hybridity

The figure of the performing Sita with her pin-hinged limbs and pipe-stem waist mark her as an avatar of Laxmi as she appears in the opening sequence of the film. Paley reverses and so negates the category error of the racist who confuses the accidents of culture with the determinations of biology by having Sita's appearance represent cultural hybridity. Her costume and jewelry echo those of Indian female performers, but her wide

face and round eyes are not those of Laxmi, but resemble Annette Hanshaw's cartoon contemporary Betty Boop.



Fig. 5 Sita, Laxmi and Betty Boop (For more on Betty Boop in Asia see Annette (2013))

This head on that body is a translation different in kind than either English language texts and performances of the *Ramayana*, or the *Ramayana* strand in the film. Like the “translated” Nick Bottom in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* she is an embodied hybrid and one that pointedly upsets racial stereotypes.

One thing that can distinguish a work of critical transculturalism from cultural appropriation is respect for the border, the distinction between things that can legitimately cross over, in this case Rama and Sita as a love story, and what cannot, in this case the Hindu essence of Ramachandra as the seventh avatar of Vishnu, and Sita the avatar of Laxmi and daughter of Mother Earth, not merely their representation. The first version of Sita’s test by fire, the *agni pariksha*, which is part of the Ram and Sita Show, contains traditional elements. The hybrid Sita sings unharmed through the flames and the major Hindu deities are witnesses as tradition requires, but the episode is simply part of the background to Sita/Hanshaw’s rendering of Alhert and Turk’s standard “Mean to Me.” This is the version of Sita’s test by fire that Paley posted on the internet without context, and so could be read as equating Sita and Nina, as some Indians did, which would be an allegorical appropriation. But the finished work keeps the autobiographical strand separate from the others and has NRIs tell the Rama Sita story in their own words with Paley serving not as the interpreter of the epic but as editor and illustrator, allowing us to see parallels between Paley’s story and Sita’s without subsuming one to the other. By surrendering the position of narrator and recording NRIs telling the tale she preempts any implicit claim to “own” the story or to be an authority on the *Ramayana*.

Paley placed the second *agni pariksha* at the center of the film immediately after Nina receives the heart breaking e-mail: “Dear Nina, Don’t come back, love Dave.” It takes the form of an original dance performed by a rotoscoped Reena Shah, a Bharatanatyam trained NRI dancer and vocalist. Shah sings the accompanying song written in Hindi by her mother, and set to music by her husband Todd Michaelsen in which Sita tells Rama that her love is as sacred and pure as Agni’s fire and Ganges water. On the surface, literally, the surface, this looks like an act of appropriation as Paley pours her western heartbreak over the dance in a myriad of colors and transformations amid what sometimes looks like hell fire. As in the first test, we see the fire god but Sita is now outside western visual representation and present only in Hindi song and the gestural

language, the mudras of the dance. Pulsating images of the heart projected onto the dancer convey Paley's pain; but the dance itself is under the aegis of rapidly cycling images of the Indian pantheon, and the song never wavers from the serenity Sita always displays in traditional renderings of this scene.



Fig. 6 The Sign Language of Indian Dance: The *Katakamukhra* Mudra (opening in a bracelet



Fig. 7 Dancer and Heart; Dancer and Rotating Deities

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the Book of Daniel were preserved in the fiery furnace by an Angel of God, but Sita survives the flames of her anti-sati because she is herself divine. This is the limit point -- Sita's divine aspect, a song in a language neither Paley herself and the vast majority of westerners can understand, the gestural language of dance, mudras that can only be appreciated aesthetically and seen as implicitly not literally narrative by a western public -- these mark the line between what can be shared transculturally and what can only be appreciated respectfully from outside and will be culturally appropriated if decontextualized.

Critical Transculturalism as formulated by Marwin Kraidy (2005) is a mode of cultural analysis that has three foundational pillars: a conception of culture as synthetic, an emphasis on the translocal and intercontextual links between hybridity and agency, and a commitment to an epistemology with multiple methodologies – discursive, textual, and empirical. “Critical transculturalism advocates doing away with the view that cultures are stable and autonomous units, because the holistic view of culture is an obstacle to a critical approach to international communication....[It] differs from both cultural imperialism and cultural pluralism in that it rejects what the anthropologist George Marcus called the “fiction of the whole” but at the same time emphasizes that intercultural relations are unequal” (pp. 152-3). Like Spivak's “double bind,” it stresses experience and social engagement over winning an abstract argument, and opens a space for protest, contest, and exchange.

Consequently, although I have maintained that *Sita Sings the Blues* succeeds as a transcultural work, I acknowledge that I do so from a position like Paley's own, a secularized, Jewish- American. Someone watching the film in Chennai or Mumbai might see *Sita Sings the Blues* against debates about cultural purity, or the place of the epics in Indian education, or a particular view of Non-Resident Indians. I might disagree with that view as a critic and argue for my position, but I cannot contest a different experience of the work. An African-American, or someone with the history of the blues in mind might accept the Indian part of the film without question, but point out that Annette Hanshaw benefited from White appropriation of Black musical innovations. After all, Sam Coslow's “Daddy Won't You Please Come Home,” which Sita/Hanshaw sings when she is the prisoner of Ravenna longing for rescue, was first sung without credit by Theresa Harris, an African-American, in Joseph von Sternberg's *Thunderbolt* (1929), but it was the white woman who got the recording contract.

Finally, I suggest that Spivak's double bind and Kraidy's rejection of holism while acknowledging inequality can be fruitfully applied to a more immediate controversy, the stand-off over a possibly failed attempt at transcultural expression, Dana Schutz's painting *Open Casket* in the Whitney Museum's prestigious Biennial for 2017 and the protest letter sent by the British artist Hannah Black with over 30 cosigners.



Fig. 8 This combined image from Trey Speegal (2017) exemplifies both the strong feelings stirred by *Open Casket* and the spread of the internet troll's language into public discourse. Because Schutz makes radical use of *impasto*, building paint almost into relief and slashing into it, the painter deliberately implicates herself in an act of symbolic violence. No photographic reproduction can capture that aspect of the work.

Putting aside the question of who gets to speak for a disparate group, Black's manifesto contains a trenchant critique of the treatment of Black subjects by non-Black media:

Ongoing debates on the appropriation of Black culture by non-Black artists have highlighted the relation of these appropriations to the systematic oppression of Black communities in the US and worldwide, and, in a wider historical view, to the capitalist appropriation of the lives and bodies of Black people with which our present era began. Meanwhile, a similarly high-stakes conversation has been going on about the willingness of a largely non-Black media to share images and footage of Black people in torment and distress or even at the moment of death, evoking deeply shameful white American traditions such as the public lynching. Although derided by many white and white-affiliated critics as trivial and naive, discussions of appropriation and representation go to the heart of the question of how we might seek to live in a reparative mode, with humility, clarity, humour and hope, given the barbaric realities of racial and gendered violence on which our lives are founded. I see no more important foundational consideration for art than this question, which otherwise dissolves into empty formalism or irony, into a pastime or a therapy (quoted in Greenberger (2017).

The general case, however, does not cover every instance after the manner of postulates and theorems. There may be no more powerful artistic rendering of the horror of public lynching than Billie Holiday's rendition of "Strange Fruit," a song composed by a Jewish-American teacher Abel Meeropol. But neither does the exception disprove the general case. Black's critique of media coverage of Black people rings true, but the debate over the right of someone in the majority culture to make use of an iconic African-American image regardless of her

intention is less clear cut, the question of whether motive can be inferred from that image even more so.

As Spivak insists, it is disquieting, disturbing, uncomfortable to be caught in the double bind, to hold in mind the value of free expression and the belief that art of all sorts has the potential to put one in the place of another through sympathetic imagination, and be aware at the same time that a work like *Open Casket* that attempts such an act may be deeply offensive regardless of its quality as a painting. "I don't agree with what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it" is part of the American creed. But the other side of the coin, "I cannot be who you are, but will defend to the death your right to have your chosen identity recognized and respected" is missing.

At the outset of her petition Black calls for the removal and destruction of Schutz's painting. That demand takes us out of the painful but potentially dialogic place of the double bind and into the realm of free speech. The call for censorship, even if it is only a symbolic gesture, carries the danger of playing into the hands of those who hold institutional and political power and are all too willing to invoke the rhetoric of the oppressed to justify actual acts of oppression. Finally, as a reminder that commitment to a common identity does not mean uniform responses, Kara Walker, whose depictions of Black history have been criticized within her own community, points out that: "The history of painting is full of graphic violence and narratives that don't necessarily belong to the artist's own life....A lot of art often lasts longer than the controversies that greet it. I say this as a shout to every artist and artwork that gives rise to vocal outrage. Perhaps it too gives rise to deeper inquiries and better art. It can only do this when it is seen (quoted in Boucher, 2017).

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