



@COPYLEFT ALL WRONGS RESERVED

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“Why join the Navy . . . if you can be a pirate?”¹

Little did filmmaker Nina Paley know what that meant before she embarked on a solo journey for 5 years to make an animation film called *Sita sings the Blues*. She had no inkling that it would magically transform her life from a full-time animator to a full-time pirate and later an activist but they “aren’t mutually exclusive though” as she says in her interview to Reel13.org.² Her struggle became public when she discovered that the film she was making, was illegal as per the draconian US copyright laws and decided to take to the internet to voice her struggle and make the film free for all. But that was just the beginning.

Soon being aware of the legal repercussions, she was confronted with the cultural adages that came with making a film based on a Hindu mythological goddess singing blues in Annette Hanshaw’s voice which was nothing less than blasphemy as per the Hindu fundamentalists in India and threatened the filmmaker with at least 5 years in jail.

The release of the film online led to access and thus its huge success and serves as a fantastic case to advocate free-culture to the world. *Sita sings the Blues* then became an audience funded project released under a Creative Commons Attribution Share Alike License³ released in the public domain to propagate the spirit of shared culture.

¹ Robert Tuchman, *Young Guns: The Fearless Entrepreneur’s Guide to Chasing Your Dreams and Breaking out on Your Own* (New York: American Management Association, 2009). Quote by Steve Jobs pg 18.

² “Sita Sings the Blues | Indies | Reel 13 | THIRTEEN,” *Reel 13*, accessed December 10, 2016, <http://www.thirteen.org/reel13/indies/indie-sita-sings-the-blues/>. Interview.

³ “Creative Commons — Attribution-ShareAlike 3.0 United States — CC BY-SA 3.0 US,” accessed December 10, 2016, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/us/>.

The Sita Production Project:

“Your name here presents
In association with your money
A funded by your production”⁴

The opening credits of the film where a “whole bunch of corporations are usually listed”⁵ immediately draws attention to the creative process being a cause and effect of the widespread public cultural domain. Also, from the very opening sequence of the film, a goddess in a seductive avatar appears singing jazz blues and caressing the feet of god Vishnu, which led to widespread protests by fundamentalist Hindu groups in India crying blasphemy to the pious Ramayana.⁶ The reactions to the film themselves indicate how culture is a property to be in the domain of the few powerful or the corporations to view, critique and share thereby subverting the tradition of oral storytelling of which Ramayana, the grand epic, is itself a rendition.

The central argument though that revolves around the reception of the film was whether there is a uniform copyright law in the entire world surrounding the reproduction of cultural property and whose property and where? The essay would just be an attempt to see how that works for Sita, the character and the identity of the film and its author. It’s important to unravel the journey of the film to argue if the cyberspace is indeed decentralized an entity to offer a democratic space for it to exist and exude creative freedom spurring a third-wave feminist film about a damned goddess by a Jewish white American author.

The Ramayana, for example, is a freely available 3000-year-old mythological text from India and hence per the west, can certainly be replicated but the hardcore religious Hindu

⁴ Nina Pilay, *Sita Sings the Blues*, n.d.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ “Do You Know the Hindu Epic of Ramayana?,” *About.com Religion & Spirituality*, accessed December 10, 2016, http://hinduism.about.com/od/epics/a/ramayana_story.htm.

fundamentalists have laws protecting the rendition of Ramayana, which is especially condescending to them when interpreted by a white Jewish woman filmmaker. Her responsibility as an artist was the compulsion to do something with the Ramayana because the image of Sita as a victim was problematic to her. “Every filmmaker has a horrible story about how their project was stopped or compromised because of these licensing issues”⁷

The Sita Distribution Project⁸

Questioncopyright.org, a non-profit organization collaborated with Nina Paley to generate a sustainable model of distribution for the project. Their approach was not self-distribution but audience-distribution which meant that the more they encouraged people to share an unlimited copy (free internet version) of the film, the more people would be interested to “buy” merchandise like DVDs, posters, T-shirts and other memorabilia thereby generating revenue for the filmmaker. Hito Steyerl in her essay, “In defense of the Poor Image”, justifies the existence of cheap copies and innumerable replicas of cultural products such as films to penetrate the nexus of capitalist privatization of the cultural economy and the role of piracy in it. She says, “Poor images are the contemporary wretched of the screen, the debris of audio-video production, the trash that washes up on the digital economies’ shores”.⁹

The other method used in the distribution was to publically screen the film as many times commercially (in which case, a donation is suggested) or for free to make the notion of sharing culture free, without any laws, distributors or middlemen in place. As Paley, the creator of the film says in an interview:

⁷ “Sita Sings the Blues | Indies | Reel 13 | THIRTEEN.” Interview.

⁸ “The Sita Sings the Blues Distribution Project | QuestionCopyright.org,” accessed December 10, 2016, http://questioncopyright.org/sita_distribution_project.

⁹ “Sternberg Press - Hito Steyerl,” accessed December 10, 2016, <http://www.sternberg-press.com/?pageId=1398>. Essay, “In defense of the Poor Image”, pg 32.

“I’m not against money. Money is nice. I’m not doing this because I’m good at heart but because I hate extortion and locking of culture is not good. The more the film circulates for free, there’s more demand for it. Zeroes and ones are basically free.”¹⁰

Cyborg or Goddess Sita

The protagonist of the film is goddess Sita who is a victim and a survivor at the same time, banished in the forest due to the subservient patriarchy. It’s an interesting metaphor for the fate of the film in the supposed jungle of the internet where everything is decentralized and thus freely available. However, the goddess is always a controversial figure in feminist theory, just like the film itself, floating in the world of copyright infringement. Paley’s efforts to evoke the entity of the goddess could then be compared to Haraway’s evocation of the goddess as the “other” to the cyborg and is thus interpreted as a figure “who tempts us to invest our energies in other worldly visions, exemplifying a tendency to see power, creative will and most of all moral agency not in human efforts but in some heavenly, abstract realm”¹¹ (perhaps the cyberspace). However, the film is presented and distributed as the greatest break-up story rather than a divine mythical saga. Coupled with an autobiographical split between Paley and her husband, the film argues for a gender-neutral and free space for Sita where she is not judged but accepted by her husband, much like the status of the film amidst the commercial film industry. As if being a goddess is a personification and a justification of her being. As Elaine Graham concludes in her essay, *Cyborgs and Feminists*, “I have tried to argue that there is much to learn from fantastic encounters with semi mythical creatures such as cyborgs and

¹⁰ “Sita Sings the Blues | Indies | Reel 13 | THIRTEEN.”

¹¹ Graham, Elaine, “Cyborgs or Goddesses? Becoming Divine in a Feminist Age,” in *Virtual Gender: Technology, Consumption and Identity Matters*, ed. Adam and Green (Routledge, n.d.).

goddesses as they help us to rethink perennial questions about the nature of our engagement with, and responsibility for, nature, culture and technology”.¹²

Sita sings the Blues is an allegory of images, a duality of concepts oscillating between male/female, Ram/Sita, spirituality/technology, nature/culture, modern relations/divine connections and thus surfaces from these to survive in the womb of the cyberspace. It proves itself to be a vulva with a difference and as if, offers a post-feminist manual to err in the supposedly decentralized but masochistic cyberspace. The film claims it’s Grrrl space¹³ just like how “many women have created web pages which actively confront the harassed female stereotype by creating networks of explicitly women-centered or feminist projects as alternative spaces in computing culture.”¹⁴

Rip Mix Burn Sita

Free software has been around for years but it’s time culture is free from the adages of moral, political and geo-politics. Lawrence Lessing, legal scholar and the founder of Creative Commons and the advocate of Free Culture claims that unlike Code, culture has been protected and that intellectual property has been capitalized by a few corporations and argues for a balance between anarchy and control.¹⁵

Sita sings the Blues, thrives on this “free culture” to form a cultural product which is using free images (graphics and paintings from the internet), free text (the sacred Ramayana) and free music (most of Annette Hanshaw’s radio recordings and music by indie artists) to create an

¹² Ibid.

¹³ “About Grrrl Zine Network,” accessed December 10, 2016, <http://www.grrrlzines.net/about.htm>.

¹⁴ Nina Wakefield, “Networking Women and Grrrls with Information/Communication Technology: surfing Tales of the World Wide Web,” in *Processed Lives: Gender and Technology in Everyday Life*, ed. Terry and Calvert, 1997th ed., n.d. pg 53.

¹⁵ Lawrence Lessig, *Free Culture: The Nature and Future of Creativity* (New York, NY: Penguin Press, 2004). Pg11

original product for free distribution. When critiqued for moral misdemeanor and for the use of open-source intellectual property, esp. some of Annette Hanshaw's recordings that Paley had to eventually pay for, Paley said, "I had to tell this story. This story had to be told".¹⁶

For personal reasons and for reasons that made her uncomfortable with the portrayal of Sita in the epic Ramayana.

Clearly, the criticism of the film has directed her into two very different worlds, with different piracy laws and opinions on intellectual property rights. Sita sings the Blues could not be released in the state of New York because it uses Annette Hanshaw's radio recordings which have expired licenses but they still don't exist in the public domain. However, for the fact that the protagonist of the film is a cult goddess figure of Sita singing blues is blasphemous in Asia (especially India) and thus couldn't be released there. So, multiple copies were produced of the film and circulated freely. In the US, strict piracy laws call for censorship unless the licenses are paid for the music. In India, however, the moral policing bridles its circulation while cheap copies get circulated by scores. Lessig, also clearly states that "Asian piracy is bad piracy"¹⁷ and asserts numerous times that Asian piracy is wrong/inexcusable/unjustifiable because of its flouting of bourgeois law and law of the free market.¹⁸

What color is Sita?

By choosing a damned goddess as the film's central character, Paley has doubly challenged the future of the film in the mainstream world. Firstly, by it being a story about an Asian mythical goddess who threatens the social and patriarchal norms and secondly by it being a story of a

¹⁶ Nina Paley, *Nina Paley at HOPE 2010*, accessed December 10, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n04leQo4RCQ>.

¹⁷ Lessig, *Free Culture*. Pg 77

¹⁸ Kavita Philip, "What Is a Technological Author? The Pirate Function and Intellectual Property," *Postcolonial Studies* 8, no. 2 (May 1, 2005): 199–218, doi:10.1080/13688790500153596.

goddess interpreted by a Jewish white, woman artist. Sita sings the Blues threatens the code, the law and the hegemonic norm within which such a cultural product is doomed to have a stifled future. As Kavita Philip, noted scholar says,

“Computing technology has disproportionately been associated with the resources of the developing world including India, China, South Korea and Taiwan. Representations of the economic threat posed to the West by Asian countries has commonly been gendered, as, for example, in the recent issue of *Wired* magazine, whose cover represented the outsourcing threat as an exotic Asian woman on whose hand was inscribed Henna patterns formed by lines of computer code.”¹⁹

Apart from the threat that Sita poses to the West and to the East, the numbers of its copies escalated. Cheap, pirated copies perhaps but they inundated the markets and threatened the “code” of the network and the culture, both at once. Lawrence Liang, an intellectual property rights attorney based in the Silicon Valley of India (Bangalore) and “the other Lawrence” as Kavita Philip calls him doesn’t see that as a problem necessary and she says, “while both Lawrences recognize the threat posed by the digital revolution to the notion of authorship and private property but the geo/cultural/political locations of the two Lawrences ungird the differences in their aims and tactics which are worked out in their readings of Asian piracy”.²⁰

Sita sings the Blues available on the Indian streets for less than a dollar is then perhaps like any of the free software, music CDs and other cultural property which is not dependent on high bandwidths to be re-produced into a copy and “being an entry point into the material for a large

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

number of people who otherwise would have no access to it”.²¹ It thus historicizes that creativity is not limited or dependent on the author and therefore, is new-media.

Fred von Lohman, a senior intellectual property rights attorney represents the techno-entrepreneurial resistance against big media corporations, reminding us that “New media and technologies make copyrights more valuable because they unleash new markets and business models”²²

Whose property is Sita?

The big question in the narrative of the film is, Who does Sita belong to? In the patriarchal world of Ramayana, Sita’s body is a commodity to be exchanged between the god and the demon. Does she belong to Ram, her husband who suspects her modesty and banishes the pregnant her to the jungle or Ravana, who lusts for her and abducts her? In the epic, Sita appeals to mother earth to take her into her womb. Metaphorically, the film too gets absorbed by the womb of the cyberspace. The question then arises is, whose property is Sita sings the Blues? Is it Nina Paley or the people who consume it through piracy or artists/hackers/technologists who are free to rip/burn and mix the film to do another version of the Ramayana? Or does it belong to the Hindu fundamentalists or the Intellectual property laws governing its fate in the Asian and US markets? “Who is the technological author”²³ here?

²¹ Lawrence Liang, The following quotes are from an interview Kavita Philip had with Lawrence Liang in Bangalore on August 13, 2004. Several of Liang’s essays can be found at <http://www.altlawforum.org/PUBLICATIONS.>, August 13, 2004.

²² “Fred von Lohmann Article Published in California Lawyer Talking about the next Big Copyright Battle,” *Electronic Frontier Foundation*, July 16, 2007, <https://www.eff.org/document/fred-von-lohmann-article-published-california-lawyer-talking-about-next-big-copyright>.

²³ Philip, “What Is a Technological Author?”

The Imperfect Sita

Sita was considered an immodest and unchaste woman by society and by her husband Ram because she lives in the house of the man who abducts her. Much like the fate of the film, thus making them both “imperfect” - Imperfect women (Sita and Paley) and their Imperfect Cinema. Hito Steyerl mentions Imperfect cinema as “one that strives to overcome the divisions of labour within class society. It merges art with life and science, blurring the distinction between consumer and producer, audience and author. It insists upon its own imperfection, is popular but not consumerist, committed without becoming bureaucratic”.²⁴

The Collaborative Sita

In today’s day and age, Collaboration is the buzz word for artists and technologists alike. In the world of new-media where a collaborative work is the norm yet is not recognized or appreciated as it lacks a single authorship. Much like Sita sings the Blues which is a collaborative way of exchange of ideas, talent and culture and some like Lovink argue that “ Participatory, creative online tools rule in new-media art. Mass amateurization as promoted by Lessing, Joi Ito and countless others, is a powerful, empowering ideology that appeals to a broad spectrum.”²⁵

It holds true in the world of new-media at least, where several artists meddle with the cultural contexts and offer interpretations which can then be approached by others. Participatory, creative tools rule the online world and Sita sings the Blues has truly harnessed that potential to survive and thrive.

²⁴ “Sternberg Press - Hito Steyerl.” Pg 39

²⁵ Geert Lovink, ed., *The Art of Free Cooperation* (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 2007). Introduction pg 13.

Code Sita: Conclusion

Sita as a character and as a film is both a new “code” that anyone has the freedom to play with. It comes across as a cultural product fighting its way through cultural and audio-visual capitalist and bourgeois structures.

"Digital code is a universal medium of exchange, like money: it makes any given object commensurate with any other. The ideal of modernist aesthetics is thus ironically realized: in the digital realm, form and content are one. It is no longer possible to make the old distinction between ideas (which cannot be copyrighted) and specific expressions of those ideas (which can). Everything is code, or specific expression."²⁶

Nina Paley has undoubtedly set a brave example to leave the realm of authorship and whip the formula of this code for a successful creative experiment to exist in the grid of hyper-identities of capitalism, autonomy, control, privatization and intellectual copyrights which at least challenges them and argues for (if not creates) a space beyond race, gender and technology.

It may be a rare example of achieving such feat much that Paley hasn't had the strength to do it again would then be worth thinking about Lovink's critique of an amateur collaborative new-media world, "So what is the problem with extreme-democracy (Ratcliffe/Lebkowsky) in a time when there is only loss of individual liberties, mass deception and spin? For this we need to transcend good intentions and look at the long-term economic implications of this ideology-of-the-free"²⁷

Paley admits so too in her interviews and thus after the massive success of *Sita sings the Blues*, it would an interesting sojourn to map this network of access and resistance for more films like these.

²⁶ Steven Shaviro, *Connected, or What It Means to Live in the Network Society* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2003). Pg 47.

²⁷ "Http://Www.waag.org/Free/," n.d.; Lovink, *The Art of Free Cooperation*. Introduction pg13.

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