Dancing with Ga(y)nesh: rethinking cultural appropriation in multicultural Australia

SELVARAJ VELAYUTHAM & AMANDA WISE

Into the asserted authenticity or continuity of tradition, ‘secular’ blasphemy releases a temporality that reveals the contingencies, even the incommensurabilities, involved in the social transformation.

The discourse and practice of ‘official’ multiculturalism is always constituted through cultural hegemony, struggles over representation and prevailing ideological norms. It is not surprising that these processes are also played out in everyday encounters. When multiculturalism is celebrated because it is socially and culturally enriching, this hegemonic ideal renders all forms of cultural borrowing and appropriation as positive contributions to the multicultural project. While multiculturalism offers a space for the intermingling and mutual borrowing of ‘difference’, rarely are the ethical and discursive dimensions of such practices debated. Here, our aim is to examine these dimensions in relation to the question of the very thin (and difficult to discern and define) line between positive ‘enrichment’ and problematic ‘appropriation’. Our argument here is that multiculturalism should be conceived as lived practice, rather than reified cultural formation. Such a move highlights the need for sustained analysis of contextual and situated instances of intercultural and intercommunal interaction and borrowings.

In this paper, we will examine the ethical and discursive dimensions of one particular act of cultural borrowing, where, in the view of some, this line was crossed. The paper offers a brief analysis of the appropriation of Hindu religious imagery at the 1999 Sydney Gay and Lesbian Sleaze Ball, themed ‘Homosutra’. Our discussion is primarily directed at understanding the distress this ball caused Indian communities in Sydney and abroad. At the centre of this debate were the twin issues of religious appropriation and the preservation of religious tradition. Our concern therefore is to critically examine the ethical dimensions of cultural appropriation, in relation to questions of power and social context, and the implications for intercommunal relationships in multicultural Australia.

The event

On 2 October 1999, members of Sydney’s gay and lesbian community held their annual Sleaze Ball. The Sleaze Ball is held as a fundraiser for the Sydney Gay
and Lesbian Mardi Gras, and is organised by the Mardi Gras committee. The Mardi Gras began in 1976 as a protest march through the streets of Sydney’s Gay and Lesbian quarter. It became an annual event, aimed at raising political and social awareness of issues facing the Gay and Lesbian community. The march evolved into an annual Mardi Gras parade with increasingly sophisticated and decorative floats and costume design. Due to the increasing costs of organising the Mardi Gras, the Mardi Gras organising committee has held an annual fundraising ball, called ‘Sleaze’. The Sleaze Ball takes place each September and has been held since 1982.

Drag, excess and parody have become defining characteristics of both Sleaze and the Mardi Gras parade, which is now the highlight of the Gay and Lesbian calendar—and in recent years has attracted large crowds of spectators, including many international tourists. Indeed, the parade has tacit government support for its capacity to bring in tourist dollars, and has many large commercial sponsors, seeking to tap the lucrative Gay and Lesbian market. Given the protest-oriented roots of the parade, there has been much debate within the Gay and Lesbian community on a range of issues such as the merits of the increasingly commercial and celebratory nature of the parade and the appropriation of the event by the heterosexual community.

The 1999 ‘Hosomutra’ ball was advertised widely in the Gay and Lesbian community press, and on posters around inner city Sydney (see Fig. 1), particularly in the suburb of Newtown, which, in addition to its large gay and lesbian community, is also home to a sizeable number of Indians.

The theme of the ball, ‘Hosomutra’, presented itself as a playful appropriation of the Hindu doctrines of Kamasutra. This rather exciting and celebratory re-contextualisation of a classically heterosexual text set the tone for a night of carnivalesque consumption of the ‘exotic’. Hosomutra, the organisers claimed in their pre-party publicity, was ‘the ancient and mystical art of queer partying’, it represented ‘a lifetime of sensual exploration condensed into 10 short hours’, and offered a night in which participants could ‘position yourself wherever, however and whenever you like’. The dance venue was a site which, according to the organisers, conjured a sense of ‘lavish Eastern decadence’ (see Fig. 2).

The Sydney Showground’s Royal Hall of Industries became the ‘Royal Hall of Hindustries’, and the Horden Pavilion was transformed into the ‘Temple of Gaynesh’ a take on the Hindu Elephant God Ganesh. The venue was decorated with lavish illustrations of Lord Shiva and other deities. The centerpiece decoration on stage was a six-meter tall statue of ‘Gaynesh’ adorned with enormous breasts (see Figure 3). The post-party media release reports that partygoers ‘made offerings to Gaynesha throughout the night to appease the god of celebration with mantras and chanting to spread good karma throughout the venue’. The most prominent feature of the evening was that, through being sexualised, the traditional symbolic meanings of most of the deities were significantly distorted and misrepresented. For example the tilak (icon on the forehead of Hindu gods and goddesses), and Muthra (hand-gestures and objects held) were replaced with queer symbols and erotic objects (see Figure 1).
Figure 1. Sleaze Ball posters.
Figure 2. The main dance hall at Homosutra, with Lotus centrepiece.

The response from the Hindu community

It was inevitable that the Homosutra ball, with its liberal use of religious imagery, would cause offence to some. A few days following the Homosutra ball, the Australian arm of a Hindu organisation, the World Vaishnava Association (WVA), affiliated to the Vishwa Hindu Parishad of India, confronted the

Figure 3. The ‘Gaynesh’ and dancers.
Mardi Gras committee and the sponsors of the event. The WVA sent letters of condemnation, including demands for a public apology and for the sponsors to withdraw their sponsorship in future. However, the Mardi Gras committee offered no response. The WVA subsequently contacted various Hindu organisations in India, England and USA, alerting them to the way in which events in Sydney were unfolding. They also handed out pamphlets to Hindus at a Deepavali celebration in Fairfield, Sydney. Rather unfortunately, although not at all surprisingly in light of what was learnt about the reactive nature of religious essentialism during the Salman Rushdie affair—the WVA pamphlet attacked Homosutra in blatantly homophobic terms. It argued that ‘this offensive Sleaze Ball theme erroneously gives the impression that Hinduism promotes and accepts homosexuality, promiscuity and drug use’. It urged Hindus to stand up and act against such ‘blasphemy’ and ‘religious denigration’. To generate further publicity for this protest, an article was published in the Indian Observer (a local English language Indian newspaper). The article, headlined ‘Homosexual Activists attack Hindus’, accused the organisers of vilifying Hindu culture and attacked the event for its ‘blasphemous’ and denigrating use of Hindu deities and sacred symbols. The editor called on ‘all Indians to unite in the effort to protest against such abhorrent and disgraceful acts’. The article was accompanied by a set of instructions for readers to voice their protest against the event. This included sending letters and e-mails to various sponsors, the organisers and government bodies supporting the event. Interestingly, it demanded a public apology to the Hindu community on the grounds that the event was ‘anti-religious’ and ‘anti-multicultural’. In a similar vein, Radha-Krishnadas, from the Australian School of Meditation, said in the Indian Observer, ‘it deeply saddens me that homosexual activists are engaging in such obvious hatemongering. This kind of religion bashing is anti-Hindu, anti-family, anti-Australian and anti-humanity’.

Although the largest and most co-ordinated response has been from the WVA, there has also been some comment from other community representatives. For example, a somewhat less vitriolic and essentialist critique came from the secretary of Hindu Satsang Sabha, who said simply—‘This is not nice. We revere these gods. Leave us alone to practice our religion in peace and dignity’. In addition, Pandit Jagdish, the president of Hindu Dharam Sabha, added that the organisers ‘shouldn’t be playing with religion. Their interpretation is wrong. Ganesha is not gay’. A rather more subdued institutional perspective came from Dr A. Balasubramaniam, Chair of the Hindu Council of Australia, in a letter to the president of the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras committee. Dr Balasubramaniam expressed his concern that some people in every religion will take offence at any perceived opportunity—and stated that the council does not endorse the view of such people. David McLachlan (president of the Mardi Gras committee), in a private letter of response to Dr Balasubramaniam which was written on behalf of the Sydney Gay & Lesbian Mardi Gras board, expressed regret at any offence caused. Significantly, he adds:

It was never our intention to blaspheme the Hindu religion, but merely to use iconic Indian imagery as a basis for decoration and costume—as we have done with many
cultures in the past—and following consultation with Indian members of the gay and lesbian community.

As an organisation, we have an enshrined commitment to multiculturalism, the rights of indigenous peoples, and the rights of lesbian and gay people, of all cultures and religious backgrounds.'

To date, the Mardi Gras Committee have yet to offer any general public response to the protests. Instead, a small article headlined ‘Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence Slam Sleazy Protest’, was published in the 4 November issue of the Sydney Star Observer. Here, David McLachlan wrote that Mardi Gras ‘consulted widely with the community before adopting the Homosutra theme to ensure cultural sensitivity and avoid caricature’. McLachlan is quoted as saying ‘we are very alive to those issues. I am sorry they are offended by it, but I don’t apologise for it’. After reading this article, we ourselves wrote to David McLachlan asking for a more detailed response—but have yet to receive a reply. The ‘Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence’ also rejected the calls for apology, claiming that Hindu practices have historically celebrated symbols of sexuality. ‘Sister Mary’ further pointed out that there are ‘a number of references to homosexuality in Hindu sacred art and sculptures. They include the portrayal of sexual practices between women and between men’. In a more recent letter of response to the World Vaishnava Association, the ‘Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence’ asked: ‘What makes you think that Ganesh is not a homosexual?’ The sisters, somewhat sarcastically, went on to suggest that ‘Mardi Gras will keep the image (of Gaynesh) safe until the next Ganesh Chathurti and take it along to throw in the sea with the smaller household Ganeshes’.

While these exchanges went on, the WVA was actively galvanising the support of Hindu organisations and communities against the Homosutra ball. The WVA subsequently launched an international organisation called the Alliance Against Religious Vilification (AARV) which, functioning mainly through a website, is linked to other Hindu organisations overseas. Significantly, the AARV includes a large variety of groups representing the outwardly homophobic Christian Right, from the USA, Australia and New Zealand. This transnational protest movement triggered a large demonstration outside the Australian High Commission in New Delhi on the 14 November 1999. The Australian newspaper reports that there were 600 ‘holy men’ at the protest, belonging to a militant group linked to the right-wing Hindu party – BJP. The Asian Age, a Hindu publication distributed in India, the US, and Britain, was also flooded with letters of condemnation.

Back in Australia, a small community meeting of about sixty people was held in Sydney on the 4 December 1999, with speakers including the head of WVA, Indian community leaders, and representatives of various conservative Christian political and religious groups. The purpose of this unlikely grouping was to discuss a plan of action. On display at the meeting were photographs and other circulars relating to the ball. The non-Hindu supporters at the meeting pledged their allegiance to the protest, lamented their common predicament, and stressed the need for solidarity and a collective effort to combat religious vilification and blasphemy. The meeting became increasingly heated, oscillating between ex-
expressions of hurt at the religious vilification that Homosutra represented to Hindus and expressions of outright homophobia. There were also frequent references to feelings that ‘the Gay and Lesbian community have all the rights, and we have none’, and that ‘Hindu religious tradition is in danger of being corrupted and our children will lose faith in Hinduism’. Some of the speakers argued that ‘Hindus all over the world are standing up in protest against this event and it is time we in Sydney, Australia did the same’. It was announced that Hindus in London were holding a protest on the 10 December and a date was fixed for a Sydney protest. On 18 December, a small protest was held in Sydney. It began outside the offices of Mardi Gras sponsor Qantas, and moved on to Government House. Mardi Gras Sponsors, Qantas and Tooheys, have subsequently made brief public apologies, which have been published on the AARV website.

Analysing the community response

As the debate unfolded, claims of the homophobia of the protesters figured strongly. It is not our intention here to weigh into the dispute over whether or not Hinduism or the protesters are homophobic. Of course, some of the rather vitriolic homophobia that has arisen is of obvious concern. However, this has had the effect of redirecting the public dispute towards the ethics of homosexuality within Hinduism—with the ensuing effect that the two sides have been polarised into defensive positions, which has displaced some rather more central questions to do with how we live with multicultural differences in a more intelligent and open way. Interestingly, both sides have explicitly mobilised the discourse of multiculturalism in different ways. This raises some critical questions about the differences between multiculturalism as lived practice and multiculturalism as official rhetoric. We will return to this discussion later in the paper.

At this point however, we would like to speculate on what motivated Hindus who were offended by Homosutra to voice this anxiety in such homophobic terms, and why, in this instance, there was such a readiness in Australia to develop links with Christian fundamentalist groups. For diasporic Hindus living in Australia as members of a minority group, encountering the distortion of Hindu religious imagery amounted to a crisis about the spiritual authority of Hinduism and its dissipation in an increasingly secular, global and westernised world. As Bhabha puts it ‘blasphemy is not merely a misrepresentation of the sacred by the secular; it is a moment when the subject-matter or the content of a cultural tradition is being overwhelmed, or alienated, in the act of translation’.

Of course, this is a rather a slippery experience where it is very difficult to pin down just what, in concrete terms, is so unacceptable. It is not too big a leap of logic to suggest that perhaps for Hindus in Australia, the objection to Homosutra was not terribly well understood or well defined. Rather—and this came out in a number of the discussions and observations made at the community meeting—the event brought about a general sense of disquiet and unease at the casual way in which the unquestionably sacred could be appropriated by another marginalized community. It would have been very difficult for Hindu leaders to argue
against appropriations such as Homosutra in any manner which could easily provide a rallying point for their community. The homophobia of the Christian Right, however, offered this group of Hindus in Sydney a language and position from which to speak.

In contexts where people feel voiceless and politically marginalised, it is not uncommon for odd (and in this instance, rather unfortunate) alliances to develop as a means through which to claim a public voice. In this way, the homophobic objections to Homosutra by Hindus in Sydney perhaps represent, in part, a need for political expediency, a need to take up a concrete political position—in this case, one which had been previously, and powerfully, defined. In other words, we are arguing that the homophobic objections to Homosutra amongst the Sydney Hindu community served as a kind of funnel through which was channelled more general and less defined anxieties about cultural and religious loss. In this configuration, we can see that the homophobic response may well be a secondary, or symptomatic response to Homosutra. Indeed, several Hindus at the community meeting in Sydney were clearly uncomfortable with the homophobic terms of the debate.

Sexuality, Hinduism and the politics of transgression

It is peculiar to note that, when we presented an earlier version of this paper at a Cultural Studies conference in Sydney, the post-paper discussion fell back into a debate on the merits of Homosutra as a political statement about sexuality within Hinduism.26 There was very little concern or discussion about the central focus of our paper, which we had intended as a means to highlight both the question of sensitive and respectful intercommunal interaction within a multicultural society, and the relative power dynamics at play in this act of neo-Orientalist consumption. Few in the audience empathised or engaged with the anxiety this event caused some Hindus, nor was there any attempt to see the incident from a Hindu perspective. Indeed, in a manner not dissimilar to reactions to the Salman Rushdie affair, the liberal democratic right to free speech and expression dominated the discussion.

Nonetheless, it is worth noting that some members of the audience argued that it is precisely through such borrowings and misunderstandings that multiculturalism is transformed and renegotiated. For them, in spite of what it reveals about the hegemony of certain groups and practices, such a moment opens the possibility for debates to unfold. Although we would like to share this intellectual optimism and in principle would wish to interpret Homosutra in a more celebratory way—as a potential space to create a kind of ‘accidental politics’, with the use of camp and kitsch as a means of political critique on homophobia in Hinduism—the crux of the matter is that the organisers of the event had no overt political intent and made no effort whatsoever to enter into a debate with the Hindu communities or to offer any social commentary on their intentions and the effects thereof. Homosutra’s use, without elaboration, of the Lingam and Yoni as names for the male and female dance rooms respectively, is an interesting case in point. While within Hinduism they are not read literally as representing genitalia, the Homosutra publicity agents made explicitly sexual use
of the terms. Paradoxically, their unreflective invocation of this highly discursive imagery, replicates the very heterosexist, dichotomised and phallocentric nature of gender construction within Hinduism.

Furthermore, it is clear that the organisers of Homosutra paid very little attention to the broader political effects of their parody. Although the organisers claim they consulted gay and lesbian Hindus in Sydney over the theme of the party, did they ever consider that, for gay and lesbian Hindus in India, the events in Sydney would raise important questions about how they should negotiate both their religious and sexual identities? These concerns are raised in a letter sent by a representative of a gay rights organisation in India to Gay Today, an American gay and lesbian community publication. The letter reads in part:

[if the news of Homosutra reaches the mainstream Indian media] … it will have a negative impact on the nascent gay movement here. We are barely finding our bearings … and this blatant ‘in your face act’ has shaken many of my friends who feel we will end up as scapegoats of Hindu fanatics because of an event with which we have absolutely no connection. We don’t know what to do, remember most gays in India are just finding the strength to peep out of the closet.

These wider concerns aside, it is our contention that, in the end, although Homosutra may have relativised Hinduism (Kamasutra – Homosutra; Ganesh – Gaynesh) by giving it a queer twist, it neither problematised heterosexist discourses within Hinduism, nor challenged orthodox Hindu practices. In many ways, the organisers of Homosutra, both through their unreflective cultural borrowing and their unapologetic silence and avoidance of any public dialogue about its effects, have ironically contributed to a vicious circle of hatred and, regrettfully, to a deepening of homophobia which is self-evident in the odd alliances that Homosutra produced. We shouldn’t be at all surprised if, at future Mardi Gras parades, we see a Hindu contingent marching in protest along with Fred Nile of the Australian Christian right.

The ethics of cultural appropriation

In the following discussion, we would like to both unpack and explore some of the very important ethical questions surrounding intercommunal practices within Australian multiculturalism and the power relations at play within this particular neo-Orientalist consumption of ‘Otherness’, which Homosutra raises.

From our reading, it appears that the boundaries of popular consumption and the ‘sacred’, as it were, have been collapsed through the ritual of performance and appropriation of religious iconography. This may be categorised as kind of postmodern phenomena whereby popular cultural practices are intensively involved in cultural borrowings, nostalgic re-appropriations and pastiches of different styles owing to the fact that there are fewer ‘innovations’ to move to because of the speed and diversity of images presented, and no newly ‘discovered’ cultures and societies to primitivise or exoticise. In one sense, the cultural borrowings in Homosutra can be seen to cut across previously separated conceptual domains such as from religion to popular culture, from high culture
to low culture, from the specialised to the everyday. Given all these factors, Homosutra was merely a celebration of queer identity. It was not a carefully nuanced attempt to mount an attack on homophobia in Hinduism. Rather, the event can be interpreted as politically perverse: in the end, it consisted of nothing more than a neo-Orientalist aestheticisation of Hindu spirituality for the specific purpose of celebrating and consuming the ‘exotic’. This transgression of the boundary between the ‘sacred’ and the ‘popular’ becomes even more contentious because it perpetuates the stereotype that the ‘Orient’ is a space of liberation, a place of escape from the rationalist tendencies of the west. Indeed, as Gandhi points out, the Orient’s ‘liberated alterity’ held a particular fascination in much nineteenth-century homosexual literature.\textsuperscript{30} In the words of Edward Said, ‘The orient seems still to suggest not only fecundity but sexual promise (and threat), untiring sensuality, unlimited desire [and] deep generative energies’.\textsuperscript{31}

In this sense of course, Homosutra clearly represents a cultural consumption of the exotic which privileges the aesthetic, rather than engaging (sympathetically, or otherwise) with the spiritual dimensions of Hinduism. Indeed, as we noted above, the president of Mardi Gras quite clearly stated that the use of iconic Indian imagery was solely for decoration and costume (see Figure 4). Thus, the use of Hindu imagery and icons was purely decorative in purpose; these images were mobilised, merely, as a means of symbolic and performative self-elaboration, which, to quote Spivak, represents yet another instance where the margin is at the service of the [shifting and contextual] centre.\textsuperscript{32}

Throughout, the organisers of the ball displayed a startling degree of cultural insensitivity and as a result, the overall effect of Homosutra is that it was an act of symbolic colonisation through which the spiritual context of Hinduism was displaced. Furthermore, if we accept that religion is frequently experienced as an extension of self and identity, the act of divorcing religious symbols from their spiritual context in this manner has the effect of dissociating Hinduism from the

\textbf{Figure 4.} Female dancers.
people who practice it and who experience their identities through it in very real ways.

In a different context, Helena Gulash, a prominent Gubbi Gubbi activist, argues that New Age appropriations of Aboriginal culture, amount to a ‘continuation of colonial practices’. In her words it is ‘like they want everything. They took what they could see immediately, the land, and that. But it’s just gone on and on and on. The artefacts – [it’s] like they want to take our soul’. Gulash’s comments highlight an important dimension of the Homosutra debate. Like other colonisers, the subjects who partake in these kinds of appropriations display an incredible degree of arrogance. In a sense, they are saying, ‘I have a right to take whatever I want – and I really don’t care if anyone is upset by it. It is my inalienable right to express myself’. And of course, even when they are practised by a group that has its own history of marginalisation and persecution, such appropriations always take place within particular power relations.

In this way, the organisers of Homosutra express a kind of colonial ‘right to take’ mentality which is not at all dissimilar to that of earlier European anthropologists who would collect ‘interesting artefacts’ from ‘Other’ cultures. As has been well documented by writers such as James Clifford, appropriating ‘exotic artefacts’ in this way de-historicises and displaces their cultural, historical and inter-subjective contexts of meaning. Removed from their original contexts, cultural artefacts become ‘empty signifiers’, void of all spiritual content, and symbolise instead, only the ‘exotic’. In this case, the Hindu religious imagery at Homosutra represented even more than the ‘exotic’. Their actual re-invention meant that they became a source for rediscovering and celebrating Gay and Lesbian sexuality and sexual fantasy. They were no longer merely ‘empty signifiers’ but were transformed into powerful symbols through which Gay and Lesbian identities were being articulated. While this may have been a liberatory experience for some of those who were present at this articulation, one result of this new trajectory of signification has been the destabilisation of the legitimacy and spiritual authority of Hinduism. While it is true that the question of spirituality and the sacred are frequently overlooked in debates over the intersections of religion and artistic and expressive freedom, Homosutra’s relativisation of Hinduism has a particularly bitter edge: although conceived as an expression of nascent identity for one marginalised group, it has the effect of undermining the particular historical narratives through which Hindus in the diaspora live and experience their cultural identities.

As Stuart Hall points out, identity is always constructed within, not outside, representation. In this way, identity is not something that is excavated. Rather, it should be seen as a re-telling of the past. As he says, ‘identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past’. Therefore, to create a displacement of the spiritual, cultural and inter-subjective meanings of these religious icons in the way that the organisers of the ball chose to do, is to displace the individuals who experience their identities in and through this system of meaning. To displace an individual’s capacity to re-tell their own past (rather than to excavate it), is paramount to robbing a subject of their identity. It is not at all surprising,
therefore, that these kinds of denigrating and insensitive appropriations evoke essentialist responses—as subjects, as an act of survival, work to reinforce their identities. As Arjun Appadurai puts it, ‘where once improvisation was snatched out of the glacial undertow of habitus, habitus now has to be painstakingly reinforced in the face of life-worlds that are frequently in flux’. Indeed, one of the most common refrains in the Indian community press and at the protest meeting in Sydney, was the dismay at the possibility that the younger generation will no longer understand what the Hindu Gods represent. With a sense of deeply felt loss, one audience member at the community meeting expressed his concern that ‘our children, when we’re gone, will have no-one to explain the meaning of our religion to them. They will have the wrong understanding of our Gods—if all that is left is these distorted images of Ganesh’. Underlying this statement (and there were many others like it) is a feeling that living as a diasporic minority group means that a sense of collective and individual identity is constantly under threat, and has to be actively reinforced. This person is clearly anxious that his religion and culture may die with him. His words express an urgency to maintain a connection with the past. But this is not merely nostalgia. The past is important for this person as a means of living his present identity, and for ensuring a path for that identity into the future. Faced with the potential danger of its distortion and possible disappearance, and compounded by the ‘in-between’ minority status of the migrant, it is not surprising that Hindus in Sydney resorted to the deliberate mobilisation of religious tradition and continuity.

**Homosutra in the context of Australian multiculturalism**

In this section we will explore the conditions of possibility which allowed this act of appropriation to take place, and furthermore, will ask why the gay and lesbian community acted so naively, and why they seemed to miss the opportunity for a productively empathic engagement with a quite different minority group.

If we take up Hall’s argument on identity, and think about this particular appropriation as it is articulated within contemporary Australian multiculturalism, it is possible to explore the question in a way that moves us beyond the narrow framework of ‘freedom of expression versus censorship’. Although we ostensibly live in a liberal democracy which imposes limits on some kinds of free expression (for example the recent anti-vilification laws), quite clearly these limits are defined by the majority culture. In this sense, the question must attempt to uncover the discursive terms of reference for this debate. In what ways, then, has the contemporary version of ‘official multiculturalism’ framed the actions of the groups involved?

On the topic of Australia’s ‘official’ multiculturalism, some very interesting interventions have come from authors such as Ien Ang, John Stratton and Ghassan Hage. In different ways, their work highlights the fact that ‘official’ multiculturalism, resting as it does on the ‘unity in diversity’ model, requires the suppression of the incommensurable limits of cultural difference in order to achieve the ‘imagined community of multicultural Australia’. As Ang argues,
state-sponsored multiculturalism can be seen not as a policy to foster cultural differences, but on the contrary, to direct them into safe channels. By ‘safe channels’, Ang is referring to the fact that in Australia, multiculturalism and cultural difference is frequently experienced at the level of the ‘aesthetic’—through food, dance, dress, and interesting exotic artefacts, rather than through a day-to-day engagement with, and openness to, the plurality and porosity of ‘real live Others’. Australian multiculturalism, from this perspective, operates within a very shallow discourse of ‘enrichment’. As Hage argues, this creates an opposition between the ‘enriched’ and the ‘enriching’, thus positioning the ‘enriched’, that is, those belonging to the dominant culture, as touring subjects, at the centre of the Australian cultural map.38

As we pointed out earlier, both sides in the debate on Homosutra have explicitly mobilised the discourse of multiculturalism in different ways. The Mardi Gras committee defended their actions on the grounds that they were ‘committed to multiculturalism’ and ‘avoided caricature’ in their use of iconic Hindu imagery. Implicit in their response was the idea that multiculturalism equates to a celebration of ‘ethnic diversity’, and that the fact that they saw Hindu-ness as a positive image to appropriate meant, in their view, that they were supporting ‘ethnic difference’ and multiculturalism. The Indian protesters, on the other hand, claimed that the Sleaze Ball had in fact ‘defiled’ the very basis of multiculturalism. Their protests that the Sleaze Ball was ‘bigoted, anti-religious and anti-multicultural’ highlight their very different reading of the event.

The difference in response, we would like to argue, comes back to how we conceptualise multiculturalism. The Mardi Gras organisers appear to envision multiculturalism as an abstract ideology which encourages the enrichment of mainstream culture while the Indian protesters experience it as lived practice, which allows them to maintain their own cultural identities. To the Indian protesters, then, the appropriation of Hindu imagery at Homosutra represented more than just the borrowing of ‘colourful aesthetics’. Instead, it was a blatant act of blasphemy and vilification.

Put simply, ‘official’ multiculturalism, as it popularly operates in Australia, has two fundamental values. The first is to allow individuals of different ethnic backgrounds to maintain their own cultural practices and traditions. The second value derives from the belief that allowing this practice of ethnic difference enriches the multicultural society, so that the society will ultimately benefit from the ‘fruits’ of its diverse cultures. As Homosutra and its fall-out demonstrate, however, while there are times when these two sets of values nest comfortably together, there are certain contexts in which the relationship between the two become problematic.

Ultimately, we are arguing that it is the very framework of official multiculturalism, with its shallow emphasis on an ‘aesthetic’ engagement with cultural difference, which allows events such as Homosutra to ‘empty’ the iconography of religions such as Hinduism of all their human and spiritual content, and then to make use of them to weave a ‘carnival of exotica’ in which one group enriches and interpolates its own sense of identity at the expense of the other.

Official Multiculturalism in Australia works within a liberal democratic
framework, which rests on certain universal values, including the right to freedom of expression. It is this right which underpins the idea that different ethnic groups have the right to express their culture. However, it may be argued that since the idea of freedom of speech is considered to be universal, whereas ethnicity is considered to be relative, and subject to these universal laws, in situations where the expression of ethnicity (or ‘ethnic’ religion) conflicts with the universal right of free expression, the former is ultimately subject to the latter.

In this way, debates over ‘freedom of artistic expression’, such as those which were invoked by the Homosutra organisers, often mask the power relations within which they take place. Moreover, the classic liberal ‘veil of ignorance’ which is invoked in situations like this, means that those who choose to frame the debate in terms of ‘freedom of expression’ are allowed to display both an arrogance, and an ignorance of the very real ways in which many people’s identities are experienced in and through religion and religious practices.

This has two effects. In this case, its primary result was to abstract Hindu culture from the people who practice it. This symbolic violence contributes to the dominance of neo-Orientalist discourses which essentialise non-western subjects, displacing their power to represent themselves as the multi-dimensional, situated and lived identities that they are. In this way, practising Hindus living under diasporic conditions in Australia were rendered ‘invisible and nameless’—a term coined by Cornel West in reference to the diasporic black subject. 39 What makes the Homosutra incident most troubling, however, is the fact that, even in the face of ongoing homophobia from the wider community, the Mardi Gras organisers, perhaps feeling empowered by their own marginal status, chose to mobilise this non-western symbolic system to find an ‘alternative space’ for the Gay and Lesbian community. Although they were working in the name of ‘tolerance and the celebration of diversity and difference’, the artistic elite who created ‘Homosutra’ in the end served only to mask another set of power relations—those between the western and ‘Oriental subject’, and succeeded, subsequently in marginalising an even more powerless and voiceless group than themselves.

Given the relative power and cultural capital (in the context of Australia) of the two opposing groups in this debate, we can see that this particular appropriation is operating on very dubious territory indeed. During the discussions which followed our initial presentation of this paper, somebody asked us if we would be as upset if the ball had appropriated Christian imagery. Our reply was that in the context of contemporary Australia, the appropriation of Christian imagery would have been far less problematic, since appropriation always takes place within particular power matrices. In the context of Australia, Indian Hindus already occupy a marginal space, and for the most part, have little access to mechanisms of self representation in the wider public sphere, whereas a kind of secular Christianity has for the most part, retained its ideological hegemonic status. Furthermore, Christianity exists and is represented as ‘us’, not just in Australia, but also in the western-dominated Euro-American international mediascape. Put differently—in Australia, appropriations of Christian imagery, even in a context such as Mardi Gras, would not threaten the hegemony of secular

156
Christianity and those who identify with it.\textsuperscript{40} Diasporic Indian Hindus, however, through the very act of migration to a place so culturally different, occupy a persistently ambivalent position in relation not only to their own cultural identities, but also to those of the host culture. Busia articulates this relationship most poignantly:

When you are born in a Land where everyone seems made in your likeness, you do not, as a group, have to learn strategies of self-affirmation and self-love to counter the opposing, culturally dominant force of mirrors in which you don’t figure, have no reflection, or are given images of yourself which do not in anyway reflect the selves you see inside.\textsuperscript{41}

To us, this phrase most aptly captures the distressing irony of the Homosutra debate, since it reflects the lives of both groups of people. Yet, the one group, as a means of affirming and exploring their own frequently marginalised self-identity, robbed the Other group of the power to re-articulate their own.

\textbf{Conclusion}

The Gay and Lesbian annual Sleaze Ball, the second biggest event on the Sydney Mardi Gras calendar, is basically a dance and gala night. The Homosutra theme, conceived as a means to convey the spirit of celebration which marks this event, was meant simply to set the mood and occasion for the evening. However, it has also exposed a disturbing blind spot within the rubric of Australian multiculturalism to do with the far-reaching consequences of certain kinds of cultural appropriation. As we have demonstrated through our analysis, the question of ‘cultural harmony’ in Australia is too readily assumed. In reality, cultural difference is always subjugated to the discourses and ideals of official multiculturalism, and the boundaries of ‘tolerance’ are not negotiated in lived practice; rather, they are discursively imposed from ‘above’.

We do not wish to propose a ‘hands off’ approach to cultural appropriation, nor are we sanctioning out-of-bound markers for intercommunal practice. However, we certainly want to stress that in situations such as the one we’ve discussed here, there is a need to be socially responsible and sensitive towards cultural differences. The ‘borrowing’ of religious and cultural symbolic systems is more likely to increase as we become more comfortable and deeply acquainted with the conveniences and safety net provided by our liberal democratic multicultural system. However, ‘cultural tourists’, such as those taking part in Homosutra, require a particularly essentialised subject on which to gaze—a subject which is both hyper-spiritualised and hyper-spectacularised.\textsuperscript{42} As we have argued, this in the end silences the ‘Other’, whose access to their own self-narratives are displaced. To live in a multicultural society in a way that extends beyond ‘ethnic aesthetics’, means living intercommunally, implying a dialogue that runs far deeper than surface images of exotic difference: but this more radical version of multiculturalism is a rather more difficult prospect than one which presupposes an easy to-and-fro as cultures casually intermingle. Ultimately, of course, it is not easy to negotiate, particularly at the more incommensurable limits of difference. Yet this is precisely why these limits need
to be confronted on both sides, with an awareness of the power dynamics at play, and from a perspective of reciprocity, dialogue, sensitivity and responsibility.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Ien Ang, Mandy Thomas, Sharon Chalmers and our colleagues—Ricardo Peach, Ray Langenbach, David Kelly, Tanja Dreher and Alan Holland—at the Institute for Cultural Research for sharing with us their ideas and critical comments both on the Homosutra Sleaze Ball and our paper. Thanks are also due to Vanessa Farr for comments on the final version of this paper. Finally we would like to express our thanks to the Postcolonial Studies editors and referees for their valuable comments.

Notes


5 The party publicity states that Gaynesh is ‘big, he’s blue and he’s bouncy for an elephant. … He has the best costume jewellery every made. He is the remover of obstacles, the cutter of the bonds of ignorance and is also known as The Lord of Happy Manifestations. Yes, it’s that Hindu (sic) superstar Ganesh, and the Hordern is his shrine for Homostura. Make an offering (sweets, flowers or interpretive dance) and then manifest happily in an explosion of carnal queer karma’. (ibid)

6 Ibid.

7 The deity images on the posters seem to be distorted fusions of a range of Hindu gods. For example, the male half of the poster (Figure 1) takes the traditional bodily stance of Lord Vishnu, but is wearing the snake around his neck, which is normally associated with Lord Shiva. Traditionally Muthra represent the particular deity’s virtues and characteristics. For example, Lord Vishnu, the preserver god of the Trinity, has four hands. The first holds a conch shell (sankha) indicating spread of the divine sound ‘Om’; one holds a discus (chakra), a reminder of the wheel of time, and to lead a good life; one holds a lotus (Padma) which is an example of glorious existence and the fourth hand holds a mace (gada) indicating the power and the punishing capacity of the Lord if discipline in life is ignored. In the Homosutra version, the chakra is replaced with a ‘poof’ symbol, the gada is replaced by a crystal ball with two men inside, etc. Similar changes were made to the female poster.

8 Fairfield is Sydney’s most ethnically diverse suburb.


10 Ibid.


12 As quoted in a letter from David McLachlan, to Dr A. Balasubramaniam, dated 26 November 1999.


14 A. Hall, ‘Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence slam Sleazy protest’, *Sydney Star Observer* (Sydney), 4 November 1999, p. 4. NB: *The Sydney Star Observer* is one of the main gay and lesbian community newspapers in Sydney.

15 Twelve months after the initial approach, in January 2001, the Mardi Gras committee wrote to us and asked that we include the following official response from them. It is quoted verbatim here. ‘Mardi Gras would like it noted there was a range of additional facts and information, which had they been included in research for this article, would have made clear the extremist and unrepresentative nature of the Hindu response to ‘homosutra’. Further, the international groups involved in the response had linkages to known terrorist groups, verified by advice from Australian Department of Foreign Affairs. These groups had made serious security threats to Australian businesses abroad. Mardi Gras worked with the federal government to minimise any international reaction which may impact on the security of Australian citizens abroad. This
responsible action, however, impacted on our ability to fully respond on a local level to debates raised here.‘

(Email Correspondence from Mark Goggin, General Manager Mardi Gras 5/01/01)

16 The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence are a well-known drag satire group who dress as nuns. Their activities are primarily satirical, and they are known, in particular, for their protests against homophobia and the Church. Originally a drag show, they subsequently became a popular Mardi Gras attraction, and have increasingly been called upon to comment and engage in debate with the Christian homophobic Right in Australia.

Chaturti is an annual Hindu festival celebrating the birth of Ganesha. One of the rituals involves creating small statues of Ganesh out of clay, and, following prayers, the statue is ritually thrown into a river.

18 The Alliance Against Religious Vilification (AARV) was launched on the 14 November 1999. It can be found at http://www.aarv.net. The site lists the many groups involved in the alliance.

19 A point should be made here about the context of alliance in Australia between the Christian right and the Hindu protesters. Mardi Gras and the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence (see Note 15) have a long history of conflict with the Reverend Fred Nile, Australia’s most prominent Christian fundamentalist, and leader of the Christian Democrat Party. Most years Fred Nile leads prayers and protests at the beginning of the Mardi Gras parade route. For a history of this engagement, see Cabery (1995).

20 The protest in India was organised by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (Hindu World Association). This Indian based, transnational organisation was set up to re-awaken Hindu consciousness and to establish worldwide co-operation amongst Hindus. It is known to be ideologically conservative, with many political connections to Hindu nationalist groups in India. We are currently authoring a related paper, which analyses the transnational dimensions of this protest movement.

Both cited on the AARV website. Ibid.

22 Vilification is against the law in the Australian state of New South Wales. These Anti-Vilification laws make it illegal to incite others to hate, have serious contempt for, or severely ridicule an individual, or a group of people, because of their race, nationality, descent, ethnic or ethno-religious background, homosexuality, living with HIV or AIDS or are transgender. Particular reference was made by those at the protest meeting to the fact that anti-vilification laws in NSW cover sexuality and ethnicity, but not religion. From the Lawlink NSW website: www.lawlink.nsw.gov.au

23 Around 200 Hindu supporters demonstrated outside the Australian High Commission in London.

24 Approximately 100 protesters marched through the city, to state parliament and on to the offices of Qantas.


26 Synthetics: Making and Remaking of Culture, The 1999 Cultural Studies Association of Australia Annual Conference (3–5 December), University of Western Sydney Nepean.

27 The Lingam is the phallic symbol associated with Siva worship and the Yoni is the fertility symbol associated with the Goddess Shakti. Together, they loosely represent the idea of the ‘generation’ or ‘creation’ of life. Within Hinduism they are not read literally as representing genitalia.

The Homosutra publicity describes the ‘Yoni Nirvana Women’s Space’ and the ‘Lingam Lounge Men’s Space’ as a place where ‘whatever your bits, there’s a private temple for their worship at Homosutra. Your Yoni can find other Yonis with which to seek Nirvana, or your lingam can lounge with diverse other lingams. Men are classified as Rabbits, Bulls or Horses by the size of their lingams, while women are classified as Deers, Mares or Elephants by the depth of their Yonis. No matter the size, flaunt it with pride in a bizarre bazaar of same-sex permutations to tease and tantalise’. (Quoted from the Mardi Gras website. op. cit.)

28 As reported in the Indian Down Under, 13 (3), 1999, p. 38. McLachlan stated in this article that ‘people from Indian and Hindu backgrounds in the Gay community were consulted on using Hindu Temple theme, and they agreed to the use of the theme, provided it was done in a serious way. They had no concerns about using the theme the way we did it. … Imagery was used in a serious and respectful manner without any overt intention to offend/blaspheme/disrespect Hindu faith. … Using symbols of faith along with homosexuality is not necessarily offensive’.

Gay Today quoted on www.aarv.net/developments.html


32 D. Cuthbert & M. Grossman, ‘Crossing Cultures: An Interview with Helena Gulash (Gubbi Gubbi activist of Australia)’, Hecate, 32 (2), 1997, p. 11.


34 A. Appadurai, Modernity at Large, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996, p. 56.

35 Refered to in Endnote 21.


It is of course important to recognise that there is no one ‘Christianity’, just as there is no single ‘Hindu’ community in Australia. We are referring here to the hegemony of liberal secular Christianity, which has most currency in Australia. Nevertheless, the empathic alliance between the Christian fundamentalists and the Hindu protesters in this instance is certainly worth further interrogation.
