Labradoodle or Lion-Snake? Comics as Folkloric Tradition
Figure 1.
Nina Paley, Sita Sings the Blues (still), 2008.
Once upon a time in a faraway land, there lived a princess. She was known throughout the region for her singular beauty, and her father, the king, arranged for her to be married to a wealthy, powerful foreign prince. But the princess’s calling was a spiritual one, and what she longed for was not marriage, but independence. The princess prayed all night before the wedding, and in the morning, found that her prayers had been answered. She had grown a full beard. Her bridegroom rejected her, and the princess was ecstatic. Her father, however, was furious, and immediately had her crucified. His other six daughters spread the word about their beloved sister’s sacrifice, and the legend of Wilgefortis, patron saint of unhappily married and independent women, was born.

This tale seems obviously born of a contemporary storyteller longing to erode gender norms in this progressive era of queer and women’s rights. But while it is a story in the 2008 graphic novel Castle Waiting, by Linda Medley, it is also a re-presentation of the medieval legend of Wilgefortis, once worshipped throughout Western Europe. Castle Waiting is not unique in its fusion of old and new; comics often deal with pressing social issues of our times while simultaneously evoking time-honored fables, folktales, and epics.

Much contemporary scholarship has focused on the form of comics as an outgrowth of mass media and communications, which are the products of industrialization and Westernization.\(^1\) Taken in this context, graphic narratives from around the world are intrinsically wedded to modernism, the West, whiteness, militarism, superheroes, and colonialism. And yet comics are the successors of much older oral, or pict-oral, folkloric traditions from around the world. Pict-oral is a word I use to describe performative and oral traditions that combine the use of spoken word with the display of pictures. By looking at comics through this historic and transnational lens, more chimeric possibilities come into view.

Chimeras are combination creatures that appear awkward, even monstrous. They are frequently shunted to the margins (of pages or of polite society) because their presence makes people uncomfortable. Though hybrids and chimeras might seem conceptually similar—they are even sometimes conflated—distinct differences exist between the two. Unlike the more presentable hybrid—a labradoodle, for example—the chimera shows up with its snake tail, goat body, and lion head, and nobody knows quite which part to speak to. The kaleidoscopic compositing of different cultures is often understood as a contemporary and futuristic phenomenon, yet chimeras remind us that cultures have always been multihued and multifaceted products of migrations, wars, and spiritual-religious transmogrifications.

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Curiosity for and appreciation of unfamiliar (or vaguely familiar) cultural icons and stories, if approached chimerically, allow for new combinations across time and cultures. Though theorist Homi K. Bhabha evokes the hybrid as an ambivalent, enunciative space, I argue that the notion of hybridity still does not address the problem of global capitalism's consumption and appropriation of ideas, practices, and cultures. Hybridization tends to subsume one idea or cultural icon into a more dominant one, whereas chimerism allows both to coexist, however awkwardly and disturbingly. Chimerism evokes "contemporaneously coexisting stories," to use feminist geographer Doreen Massey's phrase describing a postcolonialist sense of space and history. She writes, "The imagination of globalization as a historical queue does not recognize the simultaneous coexistence of other histories with characteristics that are distinct (which does not imply unconnected) and futures which may be so, too."  

I am juxtaposing two images (figs. 1, 2) with which I hope to elucidate the difference between hybrids and chimeras as these concepts apply to comics. Both are from contemporary works that reference the Hindu epic the \textit{Ramayana}. Figure 1 is a scene from Midwestern American creator Nina Paley’s \textit{Sita Sings the Blues}, an animated film that started as a cartoon. Sita languishes upon an ottoman, cleavage barely constrained by her tight pink blouse. She looks, in fact, very similar to Betty Boop, with the oversized round head and popping, fringed eyes, her body a configuration of circles and simple shapes. Paley’s Sita appears to be white, and Hanuman, a monkey-human deity who plays a powerful role in Hinduism, has morphed into a large, lavender gorilla, replete with banana. In the animated film, Paley gives Sita the voice of a Euro-American woman, supplied by jazz singer Annette Hanshaw. Paley has created hybrid figures here by appropriating Hindu lore and assigning Sita and Hanuman characteristics distinct to the Western comics tradition. In this instance, the creator’s white, Western, contemporary voice and vision dominate, while the ancient Indian epic recedes and becomes quite secondary. Other parts of Paley’s film are more chimeric, and include references to Indian art. But her version of Sita stands—or lounges, in this case—in stark contrast to the image of the legendary queen shown in figure 2.

Moyna Chitrakar’s Sita, from the graphic narrative \textit{Sita’s Ramayana}, is sienna-skinned and moderately proportioned, reflecting Chitrakar’s Patua scroll-painting background rather than Western comics standards. Chitrakar portrays Sita as a feeling, moving, and articulate woman. This Queen Sita does not crouch in an Orientalist’s fantasy setting but is depicted throughout the book, as she is here, most often engulphed by elements of earth, fire, water, air, or framed by...
trees against flat, brightly colored backgrounds. While Chitrakar and her co-creator, Samhita Arni, draw on ancient traditions to depict and narrate this story, they also clearly engage their contemporary artistic visions and make use of the graphic narrative format. In this way, both time-honored traditions and present-day practices and voices are plainly in view at the same time.

The chimeric combining of historic and contemporary voices reveals bygone versions of stories and styles of storytelling, and it brings to life different forms of literacy and semantics. Sita’s Ramayana acquaints readers unfamiliar with Patua scroll painting and Hindu culture with a story and imagery that emerged over hundreds of years. Similarly, in Castle Waiting, Medley draws on fairy tales and legends that came forward over centuries of European storytelling. In this work, she also overtly alludes to earlier styles of literacy and narration.

In figure 3, Medley has documented the recording of the legend of Wilgefortis: “Monks in every land dutifully recorded those legends. Nejmah acquired a new name in every new land and language, Wilgeforte—or ‘Holy Face’ among them.” It is easy to imagine that the monk she has drawn here looks much like Medley herself (probably sans the hair cut and robe), sitting at her drawing table. Medley’s and the monk’s roles are intimately linked. They are both historians, in the fifteenth-century French sense of the word, *historiens*, or “tellers of stories.” This depiction alludes to a time before printed, text-based forms of literacy dominated and displaced oral and pict-oral forms of (hi)storytelling. Nuns and monks recorded stories such as this one in drawings and words. For example, in the Benedictine convent of St. Walburg in Eichstätt, south of Nürnberg, Germany, an anonymous nun known today only as the Kümmernis painter produced a group of single-leaf drawings of the legendary saint (fig. 4).

Medley’s re-presentation of this time-honored tale is in line with oral and folkloric traditions, in which narrators draw on repositories of collectively held stories and images. I argue that graphic narratives are tied very closely to oral traditions. The unique voice of the storyteller in oral traditions is also something that the comics I examine here directly allude to, in that they literally picture the narrators of the stories.

The convention of speech bubbles tends to capture the storyteller’s vernacular and speech patterns. Speech in comics often includes such particularities as pauses (expressed by a blank speech bubble or an ellipsis), copious capitalization for emphasis, and vocalizations in addition to speech. Furthermore, the bubbles themselves have a vocabulary that adds to this expressiveness, from

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**Figure 4.**

**Figure 5.**

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dripping icicles when the speaker’s tone is chilly, to explosive, cloudy, or timidly scribbled boundaries. Finally, each speech bubble typically has a tail attached, which points directly to the figure uttering the words contained in the bubble, thus symbolically reattaching the portrayal of vocality to the representation of the speaker’s body. In figure 5, the nun recounting the story of Wilgefortis says, “Well, I’ll try to keep it interesting, then!” The bolding of the word interesting lets readers “hear” her intonation, which, along with the tilt and turn of her head and smiling eyes and mouth, subtly but distinctively alters the meaning of her statement.

While itinerant storytellers mediated oral tales, and medieval nuns and monks drew and wrote, other storytellers’ pictoral traditions around the world incorporated paintings and songs. As mentioned earlier, Sita’s Ramayana cocreator Chitrakar is a celebrated Patua scroll painter from West Bengal, India. The Sanskrit Chitr means “image,” and akar means “shape.” Thus, this artist’s last name identifies her as one from a caste of “image-makers.” In this tradition, the artists paint scrolls depicting narratives that are often based on mythology and history. Precisely because the storytellers have adapted their works over time to reflect contemporary social issues, this indigenous West Bengali art form has survived to the present day. The Patua artists travel from village to village, singing the accompanying stories, as the painted scrolls are slowly unfurled. Traditionally women sang the narratives while men created the visuals, but this has changed. Also, the form has become more visual and less oral over the last few decades in response to the twentieth-century propagation of folkloric studies in Bengal, which created a market for painted scrolls, collected by the Bengali educated class and tourists. But in order for the stories and the tradition to stay alive and meaningful, they need voice or text in some form.

The graphic narrative format, to which Chitrakar has adapted her scroll-painting style, brings oral and pictorial elements back together (fig. 6). Both need the contemporary storyteller’s voice in order to animate them. Both are time-based, in that panels are revealed sequentially, demanding that their listeners/readers “translate” the spaces between with their own unique capacity for multilayered and multisensory comprehension.

Chitrakar and her collaborator, writer/translator/adapter Arni, are not the first to retell the Ramayana, one of the most important works of Hindu culture. The Hindu epic has been told and retold to encompass many regional variations. The Ramayana has been re-presented so often, and in so many different material styles, that there are stories told about how many times this story has been told. Given the verdant and diverse nature of this epic, it seems that its retelling in
Arni and Chitrakar are not the first creators (or the second, after Paley) to retell the *Ramayana* from a feminist point of view. They are building upon the sixteenth-century retelling by Bengali poet Chandrabati, one of the few (known) female narrators of the epic. She criticized some of the hero Rama’s actions and told the story from the point of view of his wife, Queen Sita. Chandrabati’s work reflects even older women’s folkloric traditions. Contemporary scholar Nabaneeta Dev Sen argues that Chandrabati likely collected regional ballads sung by women, and in turn wove them together to create her telling of the *Ramayana*. Dev Sen’s deduction follows from her comparison of Chandrabati’s epic poem with the oral repertoire of women in the region, still in use today. According to Dev Sen, commonly heard in these songs are phrases like, “Women, share Sita’s grief among yourselves,” and, “She distributed her sorrow in Sita’s skin.” In Arni and Chitrakar’s Sita’s *Ramayana*, the Demon King Ravana, who has fallen in love with the queen, abducts Sita. She refuses to return his affection and waits for many years for her husband, Rama, to come and rescue her. Rama wages a bloody, terrible war against Ravana’s kingdom. Sita is horrified by the environmental and carnal destruction caused by this war, and she mourns for all of the dead, the widowed, and the orphaned. When Rama eventually comes for Sita, he is cold toward her, because he believes that she has given in to Ravana’s demands and is no longer “pure.” Sita learns that he has fought the terrible war not for her, but to preserve his own honor. She is disgust with him. Sita is so outraged at Rama’s behavior and his lack of faith in her that she tells his brother Lakshmana to build a pyre. In figure 7, Sita is engulfed in bright crimson, yellow, orange, and black flames. Chitrakar’s brush strokes are emphatic, fiery, and barely restrained as they halo Sita’s tranquil figure. With her eyes raised and palms pressed together, she appears to be praying. As the flames rage unrestrained around her, Sita serenely voices her disappointment and anger about Rama’s treatment of her: “I thought the end of the war had meant freedom for me. I had hoped for love, I had hoped for justice. That was not to be.” Instead of love, I found suspicion. Instead of justice, I met with false accusation and distrust.” In desperation, she asks, “Where could I go? What could I do?” And so she sees no other option than to step into the flames: “I stepped into the flames of the tall pyre that Lakshmana had built. But I felt nothing. The fire refused to touch me.” Sita sees the fire as her only option. Theorist Gayatri Spivak notes a profound irony in locating a woman’s free will in self-immolation, whether in the act of *sari* or *jauhar*. “Chitrakar and Arni’s Sita questions Rama’s relentless war and points out the injustices she is faced with, including Rama’s constant doubting of her chastity and his repeated testing of her purity. Perhaps the flames of the pyre depicted here are also the flames of her suppressed anger. Chitrakar frequently fills an entire page with one vibrant image, as she does here, rather than constructing several image panels, broken by gutters. This keeps the comic closer to her *Patau* scroll style of depicting story. One result of this is that the spaces between text and speech boxes are not empty, but flooded with color. This has the effect of causing readers to step right into the flames in order to negotiate the story. There are no gutters in which to find reprieve between panels. Arni’s use of the first person, speaking as Sita, further adds a personalized sense of urgency, of being in Sita’s skin.” In negotiating between text boxes, readers step with Sita into the belly of the inferno, reflecting with her about this injustice and her lack of choices. “Where could I go? What could I do?” she implores. This refrain echoes the voices of storytellers and songstresses over several centuries, while also reflecting the voices of many contemporary marginalized women who are suffering from a lack of viable options. In the chimeric retellings of collectively known tales, the storytellers negotiate between preserving the stories on the one hand, and adding something in order to keep them fresh and relevant on the other. Amruta Patil, an Indian graphic novelist, is currently creating a graphic narrative retelling of another ancient Hindu epic, the *Mahabharata*. In her foreword to the first of this three-volume publication, Adi Parva, Patil writes, Cosmic tales are like fish tanks in their need for continuous aeration. Without the air of time and context continually bubbling through them, they are dead habitat, a crypt of code and guesswork, an oppressively “heavy” environment accessible only to academics and people with cumbersome diving equipment and breathing apparatus. The copper of an age-old story is polished with each good retelling—it glows warm and beautiful.
Figure 7.

Figure 8.
Not only have modern comics creators like Chitrakar, Arni, and Medley used formal characteristics of time-honored traditions, but they have also drawn on collective themes and visual semiotics in the crafting of their contents. Cultural critic Marina Warner notes the difficulty of placing fairy tales in relation to society and history, as pinning down the chronologies and origins of these tales is almost impossible. The theory of diffusionism holds that stories are passed across borders from distant origins. Warner names India as an example of a major source of influential collections that have spread to the West. One result of this ambiguity of origination is that images and stories springing from ancient traditions might well seem somehow familiar, yet difficult to place.

For instance, in Sita's Ramayana, contemporary creators Chitrakar and Arni depict a mythic bird, called Jatayu, who heroically tries to intercept the demon king Ravana as he kidnaps Queen Sita (fig. 8). But Ravana slices off Jatayu's wings, and the giant bird plummets to the earth. According to legend, Jatayu and his brother Sampati held competitions when they were young to see who could fly higher. Jatayu one day flew too close to the sun, and Sampati came to his rescue, shielding his brother's body from the violent rays and losing his own wings in the process. This story sounds remarkably similar to the Greek story of Icarus and Daedalus, with the most notable difference being Sampati's sacrifice to save his brother's life. Icarus, having ignored his father Daedalus's warning not to fly too close to the sun, falls into the sea and drowns. Daedalus does not come to his rescue. The similarities and differences between these stories invite further investigation.

Perhaps it is this sense of vague familiarity that makes contemporary comics based on ancient myths—even those from outside readers' cultures of origin, as Sita's Ramayana is for Westerners—so alluring and accessible. On the one hand, some images and ideas are familiar and easily comprehensible. On the other, readers are faced with semiotic differences, compelled to investigate further in order to translate and negotiate their meanings. Readers might wonder, for instance, what the larger implications are of the willingness to sacrifice oneself for the love of a sibling, as Sampati does. Western readers might speculate how Indian notions of sacrifice are similar and different from concepts of sacrifice that are common in Western traditions. The writers/creators of these tales, too, negotiate between familiar and unfamiliar spaces to create new meaning.

Chitrakar and Arni draw upon older forms, themes, and storytellers. Similarly, some of the stories that North American cartoonist Medley has drawn upon in Castle Waiting can be traced back to tales and narrators from the seventeenth century and sooner.

"Sleeping Beauty," the story Medley chose to begin her book, was part of popular European fairy tale collections, including the well-known Grimms' Fairytales. The Brothers Grimm collected previously published stories, as well as those transmitted to them orally by storytellers like Dorothea Viehmann. Viehmann, who lived in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, was the daughter of a Huguenot tavern keeper in Rengershausen, Germany. Growing up in her father's inn, the French- and German-speaking Viehmann would have been surrounded by the stories of many transnational travelers from faraway places. She retold these folktales to the Grimm brothers over a span of several years, shortly before her death in 1815. In their German Romanticist portrayal of her, the brothers transformed the bilingual innkeeper into a salt-of-the-earth, grandmotherly German peasant woman. The Grimms were part of a movement among scholars and writers that essentialized the peasant class to suit their quixotic ideals. By thus transforming storytellers like Viehmann into marketable hybrid products, they subsumed the voices of the actual storytellers. Viehmann did not benefit from the publication of the stories she transmitted; instead, she died ill and impoverished.

Medley's graphic narrative style is very much relatable to the centuries-old European tradition of storytelling. Her drawing style, too, is reminiscent of the work of earlier children's book illustrators, such as Walter Crane (1845–1915) and Arthur Rackham (1867–1939). In fact, a dominant character in Castle Waiting is named Rackham, and bears a cartoonish resemblance to the esteemed illustrator of popular stories, including those edited by the Grimm brothers. Medley's reinvention of well-known tales like "Sleeping Beauty," "Iron John," and "Simple Simon" is remarkable because she retells them from the perspective of those characters whose stories were left out or underdeveloped in earlier versions. In addition to re-presenting the lives of handmaidens, herbalists, wanderers, and thieves, Medley evocatively weaves the legend of Wilgefortis into the mix. This chimeric combining suggests that perhaps the fantastic and the allegorical could also be seen as historic. This uncanny mixture does not privilege one kind of telling and teller over another, but allows for simultaneous coexistence.

In figure 9, Princess Nejmah has converted to Christianity and is adamant about not getting married to the rich prince her father has selected for her. The night before the wedding, she prays that God will take away her beauty and wakes up in the morning with a full beard. Her father reacts with extreme rage and has her crucified. The last panel on this page reads, "Her last words were for her (six older) sisters. "I'll miss you," she tells them, "But now I'll be free. If ever there is a person in need—they have only to call to me, and by the power of our Lord, I
What was she to do? Where was she to go? Rather than agree to an oppressive marriage, Medley’s princess chooses to sacrifice herself. This is quite a turnabout of the Christian myth, with the princess taking the place of Jesus Christ, and offering up her own life so that her sisters can be free.

Nejmah’s sisters determined that her death should not be in vain. In figure 10, a train of figures surrounds a wooden wagon containing a wrapped cross. The right panel boundary cuts off one of the figures and the path, suggesting departure into the unknown. The terrain and people this group might encounter are left up to the reader’s imagination, though the mountainous landscape indicates potential ruggedness ahead. The upper left textbox reads, “In every land they passed through, the princesses spread the story of their martyred sister, determined that Nejmah’s miracle would not die with her.” The sisters are willing to take on great hardships in order to tell this story of liberation. A pair of figures on the left appears to witness the departure of Nejmah’s sisters. One of these figures wears a dress, a cap, and what looks like a pair of Dutch clogs. She holds a basket in each hand. The figure next to her has on knee-length pants, a cap, and holds a hoe. The clothing and implements suggest that the pair might be farmers—common people. “On the contrary, the legend only grew as it spread!”

This panel again details how myths and legends are told and retold by common folk over time, this time making direct reference to oral (and transnational) storytelling.

Medley does not only reconstruct an existing legend, but she creates a new story to recontextualize the ancient tale. In Castle Waiting, Sister Peaceful, a Solicitine nun, tells her story to a group of fairy tale characters who live collectively in the castle that Sleeping Beauty abandoned after she met her prince. Sister Peaceful’s telling includes how she learned about the legend of Wilgefortis, years earlier, from Abbess Clarice at a Solicitine convent. Clarice, in turn, had learned about the legend from the first abbess, Estelle. Medley thus opens a window to the past, through which another window is revealed, and then another, endlessly.

By constructing an imaginative and more contemporary vernacular context for Wilgefortis, Medley gives new meaning to the legend. In figure 11, Estelle, whom Medley materializes here as the first abbess of the Solicitine order of bearded nuns, muses aloud to the saint’s icon, “I think I’m finally starting to understand, princess . . . ” Her familial tone draws readers into Estelle’s confidence. The emphasis on the word finally suggests that this realization has been some time in coming. It prompts readers to pause here and become complicit in pondering what these beards are really all about. Estelle muses, “We need to look
past what appears as normal, too, and see the ‘beards’ people wear on the inside.” These observations call normative appearances and behaviors into question. The image of crucified Nejmah is imbued with a mysterious aura, evoking a kind of liberative magic that turns normative assumptions upside-down and inside-out.

The three panels in figure 11 present three different perceptive angles. In the first, we are outside the chapel in the night, hearing Estelle’s voice; we are overhearing, and the sensation is one of intimate revelation. In the middle panel, we have entered the sanctified space, and we see both the crucifix and Estelle, as though across the room from them; the feeling is still one of intimacy, but now it seems less that we are eavesdropping, and more that we are witnessing a conversation in an intimate but public way. Finally, we see Estelle’s upturned face close up. The space around her head is black, save for a few light lines forming a scratchy halo around her head. It is almost as if we are in her head, musing with her. This invites readers to join in wondering: Who originally told the stories about Wilgefortis? What kinds of narratives were told around this legendary saint of independent and unhappily married women? What sorts of stories did sexual ambiguities evoke in pre-Enlightenment Europe? Which stories were suppressed or subverted, in the interest of whom or what? Which bodies were the voices of those tellers attached to before they were made invisible in the interest of comprador or colonizer? Though these questions might not be easy to answer, just positing them begins to crack the casing of canonical epistemologies.

Contemporary graphic narratives draw on other existing pict-oral traditions, from medieval European illuminated manuscripts to Bengali Patua scrolls. In their chimeric combining of images and words, these tales offer a conduit to forms of literacy and semantics that have historically been given short shrift by scholars.

Chitrakar, Arni, and Medley open up a series of windows through which we may glimpse more windows. The past is before us, an eerily compelling coexistence of strange, yet vaguely familiar vistas. We are invited to enter this landscape and imagine the stories and storytellers that came before. There is a conversation in progress, and we are invited to join it. The chimeric practices I have examined here reference past forms, contents, and narrators. Chimeric stories allow for all of these components—time-honored, contemporary, obscure, and popular—to simultaneously coexist. This coexistence lends visibility to storytellers and tales that are often subsumed in the interest of creating mass-appealing products. Chimeric comics stand in marked contrast to practices that assume centrality and aim to appropriate voices and visuals, thus using yet obscuring them in the manufacturing of marketable new hybrid products.
As I have read Medley’s and Chitrakar and Arni’s works, many previously conceived ideas about the folklore and fables these creators have drawn upon have taken on new meaning for me. This is partly because these creators are retelling time-honored tales with contemporary voices. But the graphic narrative format is also particularly good at bringing back to life the art, illustrations, and scroll paintings that were once vividly alive and influential. Like the stories they were attached to, these images lose their luster unless they are given new life and voice through re-presentation and retelling. By combining the textual and the visual in this pict-oral form that is so easily accessible, these creators are enlivening and bringing back into the common vernacular ideas that their forebears also favored and fomented.