Decolonizing a Universal Bhagavad-Gītā: Reexamining Peter Brook and Transnational Orientalism[*]

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From the late nineteenth to twentieth century, the Bhagavad-Gītā *became a transnational text influenced and molded by British colonialism and Orientalism. In this article, I argue that a particularly influential western figure, Peter Brook, adapted and represented the* Gītā *for a transnational audience in ways that expanded a neocolonial and Orientalist interpretive horizon for its contemporary reception. This essay examines how Brook's particular approach to and universalist representation of the* Gītā *reveal an important decolonial paradox: the extension of colonial relations into artistic and scholarly exchanges when attempting to enhance a text's cross-cultural intelligibility. I advance this argument by critically exploring Brook's universalist claims and ethical reflections on war, showing how his neocolonial vision of order—along with his impulse for control and speedy consumption of "performance capital"—ultimately undercut his universalizing aspirations. Finally, this examination elucidates a positive strategy for addressing the decolonial paradox in a contemporary Indian setting.*

Key words: aesthetics; Indian political thought; *Bhagavad-Gītā*; decolonial thought; Orientalism; Peter Brook

The *Bhagavad-Gītā* remains one of the most renowned texts in Indian philosophical thought, and over the past two and a half centuries it has fueled an array of Orientalist, neocolonial, and nationalist projects in India and abroad. This essay examines a western interpreter of the *Gītā*, Peter Brook, explaining how his Orientalist and neocolonial representation of the text developed within a problematic era of textual reception and interpretation for the *Gītā*.[1] Specifically, I argue that Brook's universalist reading of the *Gītā* obscures the role he plays in expanding an Orientalist and neocolonialist interpretive horizon for the text's international reception in recent decades. Brook's universalism and theatrical transnationalism also help him publicize and make the *Gītā* more familiar to a global audience, elucidating what I call a "decolonial paradox." This paradox entails extending colonial relations into artistic or scholarly exchanges as one attempts to enhance a text's cross-cultural intelligibility. While Brook attempts to heighten such intercultural knowledge by appealing to issues of shared concern across national boundaries, this essay argues that Brook represents the *Gītā* as universally significant at the cost of expanding Orientalist and neocolonial interpretive horizons for the text. To support this argument, I provide a biographical analysis of Brook indicating how his neocolonial vision of order, along with his impulse for control and speedy consumption of "performance capital," ultimately undercut his universalizing aspirations.[2]

Brook's universalist aspirations partly derive from his desire to reach a global audience as an eminent international theater and film director. Brook's professional status, unique intercultural

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approach to theater, and passion for transcending cultural barriers justify aiming a critical lens at the aesthetic space of performing art, because within this space Brook has arguably crafted the most globally accessible representation of the *Gītā* since the early twentieth century. Since Brook's strategies for interpreting the *Gītā* have expanded Orientalist and colonizing discourses, critiquing these strategies can strengthen efforts at Indian decolonization.

Beginning in the early twentieth century, the *Gītā* was increasingly viewed, both domestically and internationally, as seminal for Hindu religious and philosophical thought. Not only was the *Gītā* the first Sanskrit text translated into English for a transnational audience, but as Rosane Rocher explains, "the privileging of the *Gītā* and *Vedānta* by the British was to have a profound impact on India itself [as] Hindus from Rammohan Roy to Gandhi came to adopt and adapt the appreciation that the British orientalists had of their scriptures. Hindus came to view the *Gītā* as the Hindu text par excellence" (Rocher 1993: 228).[3] How Brook interprets and privileges the *Gītā* as the paradigmatic text of "Hinduism" thus magnifies dimensions of the decolonial paradox mentioned above. On the one hand, novel representation of a text may enhance its cross-cultural intelligibility and facilitate ways of addressing issues of international concern. On the other hand, this representation can simultaneously expand and reinforce the very colonizing interpretive horizon that generated the text's purported cultural significance in the first place. The question thus stands: can we non-coercively pursue universal intelligibility and normative value, while adequately acknowledging colonial history in India and dismantling projects that continue colonial and Orientalist legacies?

We can address this paradox by taking a two-pronged approach focusing on critique and context. The first aim is to critique universalist approaches that neglect colonizing hermeneutic spaces for textual reception, which is the central aim of this essay. Although Brook's *Gītā* espouses a dubious universalism that neglects such spaces, it also provides an imperfect yet serviceable ladder for moving toward greater cross-cultural understanding. The second aim is to evaluate the historical context in which authors composed texts.[4] The latter aim can help deparochialize the history of political thought and develop decolonial frameworks by epistemically de-centering Anglo-American thought. In the *Gītā*'s case, attending to context would include not only its modern reception but also the various authorial interests driving its composition.

To advance my argument, I begin by providing a brief genealogy of how the *Gītā* became a transnational text shaped through colonialist and Orientalist discourses, which resulted in a problematic context for the text's international reception. In the following section, I analyze Brook's context—sometimes referred to as "horizon"—as it guides his interpretation of the text for an international audience in ways that perniciously expand an Orientalist and neocolonial framework. In this regard, critiquing the space of performing art and theatrical representation helps bolster efforts at Indian decolonization. The conclusion revisits the decolonial paradox in the light of Brook, explaining how scholars can negotiate the dilemmas the paradox presents for those seeking to enhance cross-cultural intelligibility without extending colonial relations into artistic or scholarly exchanges.

1 Genealogy of a Colonial-Orientalist Hermeneutic Horizon

Unique historical events and circumstances emerged in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that pushed individuals to reappropriate the *Gītā*'s meaning in novel ways. Mishka Sinha provides a helpful history of the *Gītā*'s transnational encounters from 1785 to 1945, drawing on Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics to develop the idea of a third horizon of interpretation (Sinha 2013).[5] The text and interpreter constitute the first two interpretive horizons, as "each informs and articulates the other" in what Gadamer calls a "fusion of horizons" (Sinha 2013: 26). In this context, Sinha

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recommends acknowledging a third interpretive horizon: "a historical consciousness, present within both interpreter and text, of previous interpretations and their contexts, which affect and are retrospectively affected by each new interpretation of the Gita" (Sinha 2013: 26). She then explains how this third horizon of "reception" for the *Gītā* includes an important period between 1880 and 1910, during which time new interpreters imbued the text with qualities that influenced its reception by subsequent interpreters (Sinha 2013: 26). One of these qualities—universal applicability—plays a central role in Brook's interpretation of the *Gītā*, as well as the larger epic (*Mahābhārata*) of which the *Gītā* is a small part. What develops is "the assumption of universal relevance and the production of transcultural significance through collaborative and contrapuntal engagements between Indian and Western translators" (Sinha 2013: 26). I will build on Sinha's analysis, arguing that efforts to decolonize the *Gītā* must critically reflect on how Orientalism and neocolonialism have shaped transnational audiences' introduction to the *Gītā*.

To further contextualize my argument, I begin with a summary of relevant pre-colonial and colonialist interpretations of the *Gītā* from Sanskrit to English and Indic vernaculars. The earliest pre-colonial interpreters include Śaṅkara (ca. 700 CE, Advaita Vedānta or non-dualist) and Rāmānuja (ca. 11th–12th century CE, Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta or qualified non-dualist). By the medieval period, Madhva's (12th–13th century CE) Dvaita (dualist) interpretation of the *Gītā* departs most significantly from these earlier Vedānta readings. Due to the syncretic nature of the *Gītā*, elements of each philosophical interpretation can be located in the text. Modern interpretative frameworks deviating from these medieval ones would not arise until the late eighteenth century, when transnational interpretations of the *Gītā* emerge in the context of British colonialism. In 1785, Governor General of Bengal Warren Hastings asked the English East India Company to publish the first English translation of the *Gītā* by Charles Wilkins, one of the earliest western Orientalists. In a transhistorical bibliography of the *Gītā*, Richard Davis explains Hasting's motivations: "The broad issue was how the British were best to govern the new colonial territories on the subcontinent they had acquired […] The *Bhagavad Gita* and other classical works translated from Sanskrit were taken as evidence for forming British judgments about contemporary India," and this early group of British Orientalists believed that "active British engagement in learning about India would aid the colonial enterprise by conciliating differences between rulers and ruled" (Davis 2015: 93). Conciliating these differences would remain a pervasive theme in universalist readings extending well into the twentieth century. Following Wilkins' translation in 1785, within the next two hundred years the *Gītā* became the most widely translated and recognizable Indian text across the globe. The text influenced an array of groups that included Orientalists, Theosophists, American Transcendentalists, Hindu philosophers, and Indian nationalists, as well as their respective luminaries.

Before turning to Brook's universalist representation, I must explain two key steps in how this universalist quality arose as central to the *Gītā*'s transnational genealogy. First, the Orientalist Max Müller included Kashinath Trimbak Telang's translation of the *Gītā* as part of the eighth volume of the Sacred Books of the East Series.[6] As Sinha points out, "Müller's choice of the term 'sacred books' had a special significance for the inclusion of the Gita in the series," and since it was now represented within "a highly ambitious academic, cultural, and political publishing process[,] [it] became part of a new transnational, established and authorized canon that could foundationally define what constituted an internationally recognized sacred tradition" (Sinha 2013: 33, 35–6). Sinha concludes that this dialogic interaction between an influential westerner (Müller) and Indian translator (Telang) gave the *Gītā* a "new universal sanction" (Sinha 2013: 36). Second, Edwin Arnold's impactful translation, *The Song Celestial* (1885), treated the text as an aesthetic object and a "book for a spiritual truth-seeker, irrespective of religion or culture" (Sinha 2013: 37). As we shall see, the text's purported value as an aesthetic object containing transcultural truths would appeal to Brook as a theater director. Brook thus

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approaches the *Gītā* within this context and interpretive horizon, attempting to expand the text's audience at the cost of extending colonial relations into his intercultural artistic exchanges.

2 Peter Brook and Theatrical Transnationalism

In 1985, the Indian epic *Mahābhārata* made its first major appearance on an international stage as *Le Mahabharata*, a French play written by Jean-Claude Carrière, directed and produced by the acclaimed English director, Peter Brook. Lasting around nine hours, the play was first staged in a limestone quarry at the Avignon Theater Festival, outside Avignon, France, but also toured the world for four years and was staged in both French and English from 1987–89. The play was later adapted as a three-hour film and six-hour mini-series, making it accessible to an even broader international audience. Brook's theatrical production arguably represents the boldest attempt by a westerner to make the epic, including the *Gītā*, intelligible to a global audience. As Alf Hiltebeitel asks: "What, then, should we think of the fact that the Brook *Mahabharata* will be at least for some time the way most Americans are introduced to India's 'great epic'?" (Hiltebeitel 1992: 132).[7] In a telling statement of his own intention to expand the *Mahābhārata* and *Gītā*'s transnational horizon, Brook asks: "Why has nobody accused the west of cultural plundering because it reads *The Odyssey*? Why should *The Odyssey* be known and *The Mahabharata* be just totally neglected? I think the Indians, who would be the first to be sensitive to anything being taken away, don't see this [his international staging of the *Mahābhārata*] as stealing but as opening" (Brook and Britton 1991: 58).[8] I will now examine Brook's philosophical, political, and ethical motivations and his thoughts on the *Gītā* in particular, and then explore the neocolonialist and Orientalist behavior reflected in his research for the theatrical reproduction. In attempting to enhance the text's cross-cultural intelligibility, I will also explain how his neocolonial vision of order and impulse for control undercut his universalizing aspirations.

Universalism and Limited Horizons

The most important set of "universal" questions driving Brook's vision of the *Mahābhārata* stem from the *Gītā* and the ethical dilemma Arjuna articulates: do political leaders and soldiers reflect critically on their political responsibilities in times of crisis, and what are the stakes of such reflection in an age witnessing the threat of nuclear warfare and new technologies of combat? In fact, one can read Brook's entire production as motivated by specific historical and political concerns. During an interview, Brook explains that he first heard part of the story of the *Mahābhārata* in 1966 while directing an anti-Vietnam War play. During rehearsals a young Indian writer had approached Brook and presented him with a six-page play on the *Gītā* (Schechner et al. 1986: 58).[9] After reading it, he explains: "What struck me immediately as I read the play was […] the dramatic situation: a soldier going into battle and stopping dead in his tracks, saying, 'Why should I fight?' This struck me so much I thought, 'This is true, this is how I must start the play about Vietnam'" (Schechner et al. 1986: 58). Brook later dropped this idea but admits the *Gītā* stuck with him. After the encounter, Brook prodded a Sanskrit scholar and friend of his about the *Gītā* "to tell us who that warrior was, who he was fighting, and why he couldn't fight," which involved multiple conversations over the course of three months (Schechner et al. 1986: 58).

Brook's intercultural inquiry continued in a later production titled *Battlefield*, which premiered in 2015 at the Young Vic in London but was also the first of his *Mahābhārata* productions to be staged in India. Tellingly, this reproduction of a smaller set of scenes at the end of the epic's war exhibits Brook's fixation with the *Mbh*, *Gītā*, and context of war. In this production he explores what he takes

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to be the universal ethical and political dilemmas presented to the Pāṇḍava victors. As before, we have access to Brook's personal views and motives expressed in an interview with him and his fellow playwrights.[10] Discussing the interview and Brook's commentary, Saumya Ancheri writes: "Animated by the epic's reflection of today's brutal conflicts, *Battlefield* observes Yudhisthira and the blind, defeated king Dhritarashtra asking tough questions about their responsibility for the war that has decimated their families and allies" (Ancheri 2016). Brook's concerns are political in nature, as he states in the play's dossier: "In the Mahabharata, they at least have the strength to ask these questions […]. Our real audience is Obama, Hollande, Putin and all the presidents. The question is how do they see their opponents in this day and age" (Ancheri 2016). He explains that people are "angry, disgusted, furious" as they watch how political leaders behave, contending that theater provides a cathartic space for ethical and political reflection: "[I]n the theatre, one can live through all that and leave more confident, braver, believing that one can face up to life. […] Theatre is the possibility to live, for an hour or two, in a space of concentration with the audience, a shared experience so that each may leave nourished by his own thoughts" (Ancheri 2016). In contrast to Brook, I argue that theater does not serve exclusively as a cathartic space but also as a potential colonized/-ing aesthetic space, wherein a director can perpetuate and expand a problematic interpretive horizon of reception for a broader audience of spectators. Nevertheless, Brook continues to find Arjuna's question to Krishna about why he should fight the war to be a paradigm of political responsibility and reflection, omitting it in his original production in 1966 only because "none of the world's leaders possessed the courage and vision to question themselves so deeply" (Ancheri 2016). Clearly, then, his *Mahabharata*, *Battlefield*, and depiction of the *Gītā* are all driven by an abiding human concern with conflict, war, and the responsibilities associated with political decision-making on a global scale.

In an interview with Jonathan Kalb, one not only sees the *Gītā*'s importance for Brook but also his universalizing aspirations and why he believes the text is globally significant.[11] When asked if he looks back at his epic reproduction, he surprisingly says "no," but later states the one thing to which he does return is the *Gītā* "because it's the pearl at the heart of *The Mahabharata*," later claiming its wisdom parallels that found in every great tradition, Christianity, Judaism, and Islam among them (Brook and Kalb 2010: 64). Not only does he claim the *Gītā* reveals the *Mahābhārata*'s essential meaning, but he also draws a Christian parallel in claiming the *Gītā* relates to the *Mahābhārata* in the same way the Sermon on the Mount relates to the Christian Bible (Brook and Kalb 2010: 64). In a statement concerning the *Gītā*'s universality and the issue of colonialism, Brook suggests questions concerning cultural appropriation are irrelevant due to the *Gītā*'s transnational destiny:

> Here [the *Mbh* and *Gītā*] is a work that doesn't belong to India. It is a great heritage of India, but it has meaning for others. […] But these works have a meaning not for Indian, or for white people, but for this being called Man. *The Mahabharata* belongs to mankind. So if it can find an echo we do it. If you call that stealing from you, then I can understand your reaction. It's absolutely true that Western colonialism has stolen from every culture it's touched. But that doesn't apply to *The Mahabharata* following its destiny, which is to become recognized throughout the world. (Brook and Kalb 2010: 70)

What could help draw an unfamiliar audience into this so-called destiny? Brook explains how he depicted the *Gītā* in his original play, approaching it "as if it were a secret teaching" comprehensible only to Arjuna (Brook and Kalb 2010: 65). Brook believed the secretive nature and effect of seeing Krishna murmuring something to Arjuna may have a rhetorical effect on spectators and leave them asking more about what Krishna said, and how "if that's real, and if it's intense enough, there is one simple answer for yourself: get the *Bhagavad-Gita* and start reading it" (Brook and Kalb 2010: 65).

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Brook thus believes the *Mahābhārata*, and the *Gītā* as the pearl within it, have a transnational destiny he can help fulfill.

In the same interview, Brook invokes colonialism and language of "horizons" when questioned about interpretive legitimacy and intercultural learning. Kalb asks Brook about potential authorities westerners should respect when attempting to understand and represent the "Other." Brook responds: "I think there's one very simple thing to understand: in whatever situation we are in, we must recognize that our horizons are limited" (Brook and Kalb 2010: 70). This statement evokes Sinha's earlier claim regarding a third hermeneutic horizon of reception, since Brook's conception of horizons of meaning and universalism (discussed more below) involve attempts to make this Hindu text and culture more familiar to westerners. I will therefore examine how Brook's artistic process displays an emerging neocolonial vision that fails to acknowledge these hermeneutic limitations, which further undermines his universalist interpretation.

To start, Brook views intercultural learning partly in spatial terms, with an image of a single globe and limited visual field that any culture places on someone. For example, an individual's or community's visual field is always limited and influenced by the cultural and historical prejudices that serve as preconditions for their understanding of the world and unfamiliar traditions. A major aim in overcoming these limitations, according to Brook, is to travel and interact with the Other as respectfully as possible so that instead of stealing from another, meaning can flow more freely without hierarchical power relations skewing the interaction in a way that subordinates one of the interlocutors (Brook and Kalb 2010: 70–1). We can now view this position through the critical-theoretical lens of Gadamerian hermeneutics and the fusion of horizons. Brook initially seems to acknowledge the Orientalist and colonialist prejudices at work in such endeavors, stating: "Sometimes, for a million political reasons, ingrained political and social reasons, somebody wants to say: 'you're stealing from us.' And if you're white you can't help carrying on your back all the background of years of exploitation" (Brook and Kalb 2010: 71). Therefore, he admits that problematic prejudices may be inevitable for many western interpreters. As Gadamer explains:

> Sensitivity involves neither 'neutrality' with respect to content nor the extinction of one's self, but the foregrounding and appropriation of one's own fore-meanings and prejudices. The important thing is to be aware of one's own bias, so that the text can present itself in all its otherness and thus assert its own truth against one's own fore-meanings. (Gadamer 2004: 271–2)[12]

Here Brook claims a sincere attempt to foreground his cultural prejudices and recent colonial history, as well as an awareness of biases involved in westerners' engagements with texts such as the *Gītā*. However, we can ask if Brook allows the text "to present itself in all its otherness and assert its own truth," which Gadamer suggests is an appropriate hermeneutic move. Without making this move, Brook would engage in what James Tully (drawing on Gadamer) identifies as "false" rather than "genuine" dialogue (Tully 2016: 52–5). Brook's reflections also evoke Sinha's third horizon, and as such, the case requires closer analysis: in what ways do we see neocolonialism and Orientalism inflected in Brook's thought and behavior within this third horizon of historical consciousness, and how do his actions expand colonial relations on the transnational level?

Embodying and Expanding Neocolonialism

As I argue at the outset, Brook extends colonial relations into his artistic exchanges, and we can see this extension in both his intercultural theory and theatrical reproductions of the *Mahābhārata* and *Gītā*.

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Critiques of Brook revolve not only around how he represented the *Mahābhārata* and its central characters but also how he conducted his research, highlighting the decolonial paradox of enhancing cultural comprehension while expanding neocolonial relations of power. The first major critique of Brook appeared in *The Drama Review* as an interview between Phillip Zarrilli, Probir Guha, and Deborah Neff.[13] In the interview, Guha, an Indian theater director, explains his experiences with Brook as they toured parts of India to observe performances involving scenes from the *Mahābhārata*. Guha specially arranged for Brook and his company to view performances of the epic in various Indian states and local villages. Providing an account of Brook's deeply questionable behavior during his field research, Guha's commentary raises a number of ethical issues. For example, at Brook's request, Guha arranged Chhau (classical Indian dance) programs to observe in villages of West Bengal (Zarrilli 1986: 93). As Guha points out, "It's important to mention that these performances were arranged in the off-season, out of time with the ritual calendar. They were specially commissioned and arranged" (Zarrilli 1986: 93). Brook's frequent, unsolicited involvement in these performances exposes neocolonialist impulses, shedding doubt on his ability to allow the Indian material "to present itself in all its otherness and thus assert its own truth."

Brook first fails to understand how the performers altered the ritual framework at his request, and thus fails to appreciate how the performance's ritual significance elucidates a particular network of meaning. This network is a ritualistic one, wherein rituals are performed yearly according to a seasonal calendar (Zarrilli 1986: 97). Overlooking this fact displays a deep misapprehension of different temporalities, particularly a distinction between cyclical, earth-centered time and linear, human-centered time. Time and ritual space are key elements of the deep, organizing structure of oral cultures that authored the *Mahābhārata* and *Gītā*. In what follows, I supplement my critique by drawing upon insights from Don Thomas Deere and his theory of "the spacing of decolonial aesthetics," which builds on the work of Rodolfo Kusch and Enrique Dussel regarding the aesthetic dimensions of decolonial thought.[14] These points regarding time and ritual space then provide a platform for assessing the following behavior manifested in Brook's interactions with his Indian interlocutors: first, Brook's belief that he could control performances as resources-on-demand per his own (human-centric) directorial custom; second, his desire to speedily consume as much information and "performance capital" in the shortest amount of time possible; third, his unwillingness to exchange information and respectfully acknowledge native modes of performance.

Subject/Object Power Relations

Not only did performers alter their ritual framework, but Brook frequently exerted the power of his reputation and financial resources to control and subordinate native performers and performances, thus undercutting his universalizing aspirations. In one example, Zarrilli and Neff point out how Brook and his crew arrived late to a performance, and upon arrival got out of their cars and stated, "'We want to see all the preparations now'. [And] as soon as the performance was 'over', although the ritual process was *not* complete, Brook's group quickly left. […] It was still raining, and they apparently wanted to get back to their hotel. […] They were constantly in a hurry" (Zarrilli 1986: 97). The rain disrupted and abbreviated substantial portions of the performance due to performing in the rainy season rather than the appropriate staging in the dry season. Brook's demands thus failed to appreciate many ritual details that involved more than just the performance but also preliminary rituals, all of which were "held at a special temple appropriate to the deity propitiated in the ritual and with complete ritual accoutrements, including a tremendously elaborate floor drawing. […] The ritual itself lasted for a considerable time after their departure, and was of course the most auspicious and important part of the entire process" (Zarrilli 1986: 97). This context escaped Brook because he presumed a different

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(linear) temporality and inhabited a historical consciousness that was capitalist and neocolonial in orientation. For Brook, this performance was nothing more than an aesthetic resource for his consumption. He was a "paying customer," and he wanted to get what he desired when he desired it—on his schedule, not the earth/seasonal schedule or out of respect for the deity. Brook thus treated the performers as objectified subordinates and not as equals possessing potentially unanticipated yet valuable ideas. This behavior exhibits Deere's argument about the coloniality of space, as Brook attempts to control the performance within "a cartographic grid that attempts to capture subjects and spaces in advance on its coordinate plane," thus contrasting with a decolonial aesthetics that would alternatively "open onto the richness of embodied and cosmic spaces" (Deere 2020: 90). This behavior elucidates neocolonial aspects of the third hermeneutic horizon within which Brook operates. Two further examples support this point.

First, *Mbh* scholar Alf Hiltebeitel describes how he helped Brook observe *terukkuttu* scenes from the *Mbh*.[15] Hiltebeitel relates how his contact and friend, C. T. Rajan, made arrangements for and accompanied Brook to view *terukkuttu*, which also involved assembling local villagers so that a crowd was present for the performance (Hiltebeitel 1992: 135). The performance was supposed to be staged late in the evening to set the dramatic mood—crucial not only for the staging but also for the performers' personal preparation. Nevertheless, "Peter Brook wanted to stage [it] earlier. […] So there the trouble started. The artists preferred late timings, whereas Peter Brook preferred early timings. […] Anyway, for my [Rajan's] sake, or for Professor Alf Hiltebeitel's sake, they [agreed]" (Hiltebeitel 1992: 135). Hiltebeitel's reputation and the respect he had garnered among the performers during his own fieldwork over many years served as the consumptive "currency" for Brook getting what he wanted. Second, once he received his preferred time and the performance began, "immediately Peter Brook invented, asked, started raising questions, loudly, which the crowd didn't agree [with]. Then the artists also didn't like that" (Hiltebeitel 1992: 135). Rajan paused the scene to calm Brook, trying to explain to him that he should watch the scene in its entirety before commenting. Rajan asked Brook to speak directly with him for clarification or translation during the performance, and to speak to his company members for notes so as not to be disruptive and disrespectful (Hiltebeitel 1992: 136). But Brook resisted. Apparently, Brook "was not for that […] he is not following the norm of the drama […] while the drama is going on, he is asking to stop it suddenly. 'Stop stop stop,' he says. When the artists come with a song, and when the musical instruments are going on, he says, 'No, stop it. I don't want this'" (Hiltebeitel 1992: 136). Not only did this behavior disrupt the performance and cause a scene, but it angered Rajan and the audience. Needless to say, such behavior damaged the reputation of both Rajan and Hiltebeitel, as the latter had vouched for Brook, and created justifiable grounds for the villagers to be skeptical of future foreigners and scholars coming to study native modes of performing the stories from the epic, including scenes or characters from the *Gītā*.

Brook's artistic exchanges thus embody a colonialist epistemology that reflects a subject-object orientation and undermines his universalist intentions. Again, this stance contrasts with what Deere calls a non-objectifying mode of thinking that would not "separate an exterior world of objects […] from an interior world of understanding. Nor does it separate thought from the rhythm, movement, affect, and space of the body. There is a weaving of knowledge between cosmos and community" (Deere 2020: 91). The community's performance—its rhythm, movement, affect, and space of the body—are all treated as mere aesthetic objects to be controlled. In his observations of native performances, the performers not only serve as Brook's observational subjects but are actively transformed into theatrical *objects* that he tries to stage, pause, and (re)arrange at his subjective will. This epistemology effectively severs Brook from the community and its own spatial-temporal orientation to the world. The *Gītā*'s performance and native understanding is embedded in *life*, or these communities' lifeworlds, which stand prior to the abstracted subject-centered reason upon which

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Brook relies, thus keeping him at a subject-object distance. In so doing, Brook's approach embodies an insight from Kusch's decolonial work, which distinguishes between Spanish concepts of *ser* and *estar*, as Deere explains: "The world of *ser* is tied to the enterprising subject—the one who is able to manipulate the world of objects around them for their own control and gain," whereas "*estar* points to a non-essentialist mode of inhabiting the world […] with affective dimensions [and a] mode of being that does not search to control or to tame the cosmos but rather to find points of stability and relation" (Deere 2020: 92).[16] In Brook's behavior we see a distinct lack of such relationality and a potent example of this colonizing world of *ser*, as he attempts to "tame the cosmos" he confronts in arranging performances out of season. His behavior thus demonstrates an impulse to tame or dominate cyclical time by foisting it into a linear temporal structure he can control.

Speedy Consumption, "Performance Capital," and Non-Reciprocity

As the analysis above shows, Brook's desire for control manifested as a lack of respect for different conceptions of time in the performance, and his need for speedy consumption created additional issues. In one instance, Brook spent the day traveling rapidly from village to village, desperately trying to accrue as much performance capital as possible in a short timeframe. As Brook's company arrived at their lodgings around three o'clock in the morning, Rajan explains that Brook immediately argued with the hotel's receptionist, claiming that he had reserved rooms via telegram while the hotel said they had not received them (Hiltebeitel 1992: 137). Brook then threatened the clerk, claiming, "I can talk to Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. Come on. You, you oblige. [O]therwise I'll complain to [the] Prime Minister," and when the clerk asked if Brook could contact his own President, he replied, "Yes, I can talk [to this person]" (Hiltebeitel 1992: 138). Bandying his political connections and influence, Brook threatened the clerk in ways that exhibited clear neocolonial assumptions. He acted as if he were the master-director and the clerk his subject, even claiming that Indira Gandhi was somehow under his influence or political power—that is, under the power of a white, British male. As Zarrilli laments, "These are the residues, the droppings, the repercussions of our presence as 'foreigners'. Are we trying to build long-lasting networks of relationships, or just going in, getting what we want, and leaving as quickly as possible" (Zarrilli 1986: 99). This neocolonial and capitalist-extractive model, exhibited forcefully by Brook, must be the object of sustained critical reflection by non-native students of the *Mahābhārata* and *Gītā*, or anyone attempting to learn from native sources of knowledge.

Further displaying a neocolonialist and capitalist-extractive model of value, in his interview Brook says he paid for the performance, so he believed he had every right to do whatever he wanted with it. This scenario shows how he views such interactions as mere monetary exchanges, with money being the abstract form of exchange, rather than a situation where value is qualitative in nature. He believed he could justifiably exchange his money for their time and cultural resources but failed to understand this was not how *they* understood the situation and that their conception of value differed from his own. As Guha and others point out, Brook's Indian interlocutors sought reciprocity in the form of qualitative exchanges in cultural knowledge and experience (Zarrilli 1986: 96). Rather, money was simply exchanged for performance capital, leading to what Guha calls "cultural piracy" wherein Indians are "exploited culturally, [and] we don't want to be guinea pigs for experiments" (Zarrilli 1986: 98). This behavior exposes a clear case of neocolonialist exploitation, leading Zarrilli to ask: "When this happens, what makes it any different from political or military colonialism? […] extracting pieces of lived culture" (Zarrilli 1986: 97–8). Brook clearly overestimates the financial component of the exchange, later commenting in an interview: "I think cultural piracy is what English have done without hesitation over a hundred years in India, which is to take their objects and *without paying for them* put them in British museums. That is piracy" (ed. Williams 1991: 57–8; emphasis added). What might

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explain such thinking and behavior on Brook's part? One potential answer presents itself: his universalist reading of the epic, and of the *Gītā* in particular.

Universalism Revisited

Brook assumes that at our core, each person possesses a universal, non-idiosyncratic self. For example, he says that he does not like the idea of mixing cultures and making a "cultural salad" (Schechner et al. 1986: 55). Why so? Brook has a deeper commitment that precludes the possibility of intentionally mixing cultures *ex novo*: he could not mix cultures in any deep sense because "[e]ach human being [already] carries within her/him all the continents, but each only knows one of them" (Schechner et al. 1986: 54). Each of us has the makings of a cultural salad already within us, providing a universal potential or inherent capacity for every human being to connect with and understand all others. Individuals are initially limited only because of their upbringing in, and familiarity with, one particular "continent." Maria Shevtsova makes a similar point, contending that Brook presents a sort of aesthetic neo-Platonism: "Brook's universalism is a metaphysical quest for transparent truth, for a truth that can be true anywhere and everywhere, regardless of time and space and cultural differences. His objective in the theatre, then, is to find an aesthetics capable of maximum communicability across social and cultural barriers" (Shevtsova 1997: 99).[17] Such interpretations of Brook elucidate his chief aim: to tap into a universal base to erode cultural barriers. He attempts to achieve this aim by internationalizing his cast—a distinctive mark of his aesthetic approach—while locating and presenting what he takes to be the most universally accessible themes within the *Gītā* and *Mahābhārata*. This method exposes Brook's desire to transcend as many boundaries as possible to access what he sees as deeply human truths that supersede cultural difference and context. While we might possess knowledge of ourselves and home cultures, initially ignorant of "the Other," we possess a common humanity that can apparently be unearthed by locating the universal and engaging in "cultural synthesis" or syncretism (Schechner et al. 1986: 54).

Returning to his syncretistic motivations, the first universal dilemma Brook wants to represent concerns struggles in ethical decision-making in the face of conflict, especially war. Brook claims Krishna's character exposes tensions surrounding free choice, stating: "The problem Krishna makes us focus on is how to implement free choice within the inevitable. How is it that a work that is totally dominated by the word 'destiny' is also totally dominated by the sense of struggle. […] The *Mahabharata* says, 'We don't know why we fight these wars, they're horrible, yet we continue to fight them'" (Schechner et al. 1986: 62). Struggle and conflict inexorably arise, yet human beings must make choices in the face of such inevitabilities. This phenomenon of inevitable conflict also calls for moral circumstantialism, as Brook further states about Krishna: "If the right action is to cheat, Krishna cheats. But this is more than trickery—it is the freedom to see beyond every form of limited morality" (Schechner et al. 1986: 61). Facing dire events like war thus necessitates moral flexibility: "The myth becomes theater—a theater of war. We are faced with the truth of violence and suffering, the same war as always. The *Mahabharata* is of our time" (Schechner et al. 1986: 62). Here we again see Brook's transhistorical, universalist assumptions at work. Moreover, he believes this dilemma requires personal reflection on the part of political leaders responsible for the fate of their people. Addressing global issues concerning conflict and political leadership remains important, and Brook's universalism has the additional value of helping make the *Mahābhārata* and *Gītā* more comprehensible and relevant to a transnational audience.

While such comprehension is valuable, Brook fails to critically reflect on the "problematic history" he mentioned in the interview with Kalb. Therefore, his transnational production does not escape but perpetuates the pitfalls of colonialism and Orientalism that he inherits. While he briefly

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acknowledges this history, he does not correspondingly alter any of his research practices or theatrical productions, nor does he critically reflect on this history in any articles or a book. Due to his acclaimed international status, drawing explicit attention to historical processes of colonialism and Orientalism could have drawn many peoples' attention to how these processes assisted in constructing modern India and what constitutes a Hindu "sacred text." Such critical reflections could also have helped address the decolonial paradox by preventing the extension and deepening of colonial relations across international borders. According to David Williams, Brook nevertheless fails to account for "his production's relationship to Hindu culture in India, or teasing out the ideological repercussions of that relationship," which results in the fact that "Brook is always going to be the 'villain' in such post-colonialist readings for the simple and unavoidable fact that he represents the economic, and *ipso facto*, power and hierarchy of the west throughout the history of its relationship with Asia" (Williams 1991: 24, 25).[18] However, even commentators such as Williams fail to reflect on a deeper issue: what westerners and many Indians know about and how they conceive of "Hindu culture" in India is a direct result of colonialist and Orientalist interventions beginning in the eighteenth century. These interventions produced a hermeneutic horizon in which the *Mahābhārata*, but especially the *Gītā*, became transnational markers for what was considered a single Hindu religious tradition on the subcontinent.

Within this horizon and transnational history, I have sought to elaborate on the *Gītā*'s modern genealogy and how Brook expanded its transnational audience. Brook develops his own, unique, universalist reading of the *Gītā*, and to some degree he succeeds in making the text more intelligible to unfamiliar audiences. Moreover, he addresses important ethical issues involving political conflict and military violence on a global scale. Attempting to interpret the *Gītā* in ways that would enhance cross-cultural intelligibility and uncover the *Gītā*'s value for addressing these issues, I have also shown how Brook's universalist ontology extends an Orientalist and neocolonial interpretive horizon for the text. More specifically, Brook's universalism obscures his role in expanding a third hermeneutic horizon of reception, which emanated from colonial and Orientalist legacies that began in the eighteenth century. What can we further conclude about this western figure and his engagement with the *Gītā*, including how we might navigate the risks and rewards of the decolonial paradox when representing texts from a postcolonial nation for a transnational audience?

3 Conclusion

To begin with, we must reflect on the contextual risks and rewards in producing interpretations of the *Gītā*. Brook acknowledges his colonialist inheritance at particular moments, but other comments and his behavior in researching the *Gītā* and *Mahābhārata* betray a deep, unconscious commitment to a colonialist history that he extends in problematic ways. The transnational *Gītā* then becomes a neocolonial, Orientalist, and transnational platform for extracting value on a universal as opposed to contextualized Indian register. This is partly because western interpreters such as Brook fear that particularities or too much context would prevent the text's meaning from resonating with a transnational audience. Without such resonance, Brook assumes the *Gītā* would remain parochial and thus irrelevant for a broader audience.

This situation reinvokes the decolonial paradox, whereby one extends colonial relations into artistic or scholarly exchanges while representing another tradition to increase cross-cultural intelligibility. Is it possible to increase such intelligibility while adequately acknowledging India's history with colonialism and dismantling projects that continue legacies of colonialism and Orientalism? I argued that we should address this paradox by taking a two-pronged approach that

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focuses on critique and context. Having critiqued Brook in historical context, showing how he fits within the broader transnational genealogy of the *Gītā*, I now want to explain how focusing on critique and context can help address the decolonial paradox.

First, scholars must locate and interrogate the sort of universalist approaches we have seen Brook adopt. Such approaches neglect the fact that scholars of Indian political and ethical thought work within a third hermeneutic horizon when examining and interpreting texts like the *Gītā*. This essay thus investigates how the *Gītā* has been rendered intelligible to a transnational audience in recent decades, and I believe Brook provides a helpful case for critique for the following reasons. To begin with, he presents a laudable concern with issues affecting fellow human beings across national boundaries, especially issues associated with political leadership and military violence. His attempt to either locate or construct bridges for intercultural understanding are praiseworthy and useful in a preliminary sense. These projects falter, however, by failing to address the historical contingency and hermeneutic horizon within which interpreters encounter the *Gītā*—a horizon that has been deeply affected by India's historical experiences with colonialism and Orientalism. Acknowledging this phenomenon and critically evaluating how one's interpretation is situated within this history remains a crucial step in decolonizing western engagements with Indian texts. Claiming a false universalism fails to give due justice to texts such as the *Gītā*, which have different meanings for a wide array of Indian communities over long periods of time. Hence, we must pursue a better understanding of and cultivate greater respect for such histories and contextual meanings.

This point leads me to a second. Scholars of Indian political thought should study and interpret texts such as the *Gītā* in a manner that accounts for and evaluates their historical context and discursivity. Such pursuits would complement the process of deparochializing the history of political thought by exploring the diverse histories of other cultures' or nations' political traditions, thus helping prevent western traditions and thinkers from being viewed as the ultimate referents or standards. Such pursuits would help us unpack a pluriverse of cosmological and epistemological meanings and allow for more nuanced interpretations of the *Gītā*. Moreover, such efforts might inspire innovative approaches to contemporary political or ethical problems by opening new Indic theoretical terrain.

Critique helps open such terrain by identifying interpretive pitfalls and providing what one might call a "diagnostics for avoidance" regarding the sorts of practices to avoid within this third (neocolonial, Orientalist) hermeneutic horizon. Brook proves valuable in this regard. Building on an earlier Gadamerian point, Brook helps foreground prejudices lying within the contemporary context for the *Gītā*'s reception in the twenty-first century, including neocolonial emphases on control and consumption. A contemporary infatuation for speedy consumption of one's object of study—predicated on a problematic subject/object ontology—must give way to slower, immersive approaches to the lifeworld in which texts such as the *Gītā* possess their greatest significance and meaning.

In my critique of Brook, Hindu cosmology permeated one such lifeworld that Brook overlooked entirely. The "world" of the *Gītā* is not a cartographic grid containing essentialized subjects and objects, but rather a deeply inter-relational space containing diverse beings, forces, rhythms, affects, and ritual meanings that operate within a cyclical temporality. This is a lifeworld that human beings do not *control* but rather *participate within*. This critique elucidates what one might call a "participatory" element of decolonial aesthetics. That is, a better decolonial approach to the *Gītā* would entail humble participation in the contextual lifeworld of those from whom one seeks to learn. Brook's aesthetic "part" to play would not be subject-director but rather humble experiant-actor in the lifeworld of the *Gītā* itself. Better identifying and reorienting one's place in the third hermeneutic horizon helps address issues associated with what Deere called the "spacing of decolonial aesthetics" through leveled, participatory practices of non-domination.

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Importantly, these practices would require rejecting Brook's false universalist belief that a westerner such as himself already possesses India—along with all the world's continents—within himself. This universalism reflects an internalized, abstracted form of colonialism and historical consciousness that manifests itself in an external, neocolonial manner. In believing he possesses all worldly differences within himself, he then attempts to control and elide differences he confronts outside himself. To assume that "each human being carries within her[self]/him[self] all the continents" is to close oneself off, *a priori*, from those inhabiting a different lifeworld, thus adapting a stance of colonizer before a true inter-action ever has a chance to occur. Ultimately, this approach prevents precisely the sort of cross-cultural intelligibility that Brook and others have sought to gain.

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1 In this essay, Orientalism refers generally to stereotypical representations of Asia that embody colonialist attitudes.

2 I thank an anonymous reviewer for helping me clarify this point.

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10 Saumya Ancheri, "The Mahabharata Does Not Leave You: Notes from Peter Brook's Third Play About the Epic," in Scroll.in. (2016), available at: https://scroll.in/article/803515/the-mahabharata-does-not-leave-you-notes-from-peter-brooks-third-play-about-the-epic (accessed on 8 March 18, 2019)

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12 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd revised ed., (London: Bloomsbury-Continuum, 2004).

13 Phillip Zarrilli, "The Aftermath: When Peter Brook Came to India," *The Drama Review* 30, no. 1 (1986): 92–9.

14 Don Thomas Deere, "The Spacing of Decolonial Aesthetics," *Journal of World Philosophies* 5, (Summer 2020): 89–98.

15 *Terukkuttu* is a dramatic mode of storytelling, and generally refers to a type of South Indian street theater that contains both ritual and didactic elements.

16 María Lugones and Joshua Price, "Translators Introduction," in Rodolfo Kusch, *Indigenous and Popular Thinking in América*, trans. Joshua M. Price and María Lugones (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), lvi.

17 Maria Shevtsova, "Interculturalism, Aestheticism, Orientalism: Starting from Peter Brook's *Mahabharata*," *Theatre Research International* 22, no. 2 (1997): 98–104.

18 David Williams, "Theatre of Innocence and of Experience: Peter Brook's International Centre—An Introduction," in *Peter Brook and the Mahabharata: Critical Perspectives*, ed. David Williams (New York: Routledge, 1991), 3–28.

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