

The Lady as Proto-Ethnographer: Temple Dancers and the Indian Sublime

Jeffrey Spear, in conversation with V. Sriram
Moderator: Deborah Thiagarajan



August 4, 2020
9:00AM (EDT)

To register for this virtual event, please visit:
<https://tinyurl.com/y5a5nuta>

The Gwillim Project, which centres around the unpublished correspondence and artwork of two sisters who lived in Madras at the beginning of the nineteenth century, brings together an international network of scholars from diverse fields in order to explore the collections from multiple perspectives.

The Gwillim Project Online will host a presentation by Professor Jeffrey Spear, entitled “The Lady as Proto-Ethnographer: Temple Dancers and the Indian Sublime.” Professor Spear will be in conversation with V. Sriram, a chronicler of the social and musical history of Madras, now Chennai. Discussion will be moderated by Deborah Thiagarajan, President of the Madras Craft Foundation and former Director of DakshinaChitra Museum. The presentation will consist of two parts: The first section will establish Lady Gwillim to be, like Jane Austen, a product of the last stage of the English “Age of Reason,” and note the transitions underway in Great Britain and India that soon led to a more biased view of Hindu practices. The second section begins with a brief account of the temple dancers or devadasis Lady Gwillim saw perform before turning to her description of Hindu festivals. It concludes with her description of the car festival featuring images and dancers from the Kapaleeswarar Temple celebrating the spring festival honoring the marriage of their aspects of Śiva and Parvati.

Professor Jeffrey Spear retired from the English Department of NYU where he taught Victorian Studies including literature, visual art, and aspects of British India. His publications on Indian topics include “Knowing the Dancer: East Meets West,” with Avanthi Meduri, in *Victorian Literature and Culture* (2004), “A South Indian Gate from Gwalior to Nowhere,” in *SEL* (2008), “Was She This Name: Law Literature and the ‘Devadasi’” in the collection *The Letter of the Law: Literature Justice and the Other* (2013), “Context, Genre, Hybridity, Transculture and Double Bind: Cultural Appropriation and Sita Sings the Blues” in *ECAH Official Conference Proceedings* (2017) and WWW.Intercultural/Sita Sings The Blues to appear in the next issue of *Electra Street*.

V. Sriram is a chronicler of the social and musical history of Madras, now Chennai. He is the editor of the Madras Musings, a fortnightly that is devoted to the city's heritage. An expert on Carnatic Music and musicians, he is a contributing writer to Sruti and India Today, Madras edition.

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Jeffrey Spear,