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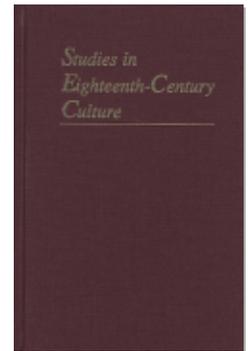
Tribute to Srinivas Aravamudan

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# Tribute to Srinivas Aravamudan

FELICITY NUSSBAUM

Srinivas Aravamudan was a vital, revisionary force for eighteenth-century studies and a powerful voice that always questioned the assumptions of the field and offered stimulating critique of texts that we thought we knew.

He was Professor of English Literature and Romance Studies at Duke University. After studying at the University of Madras and Purdue University, he earned his Ph.D. from Cornell University (1991) and taught at the University of Utah and the University of Washington before moving to Duke in Fall 2000.

His pioneering and innovative essays have appeared in multifarious journals including *ELH*, *Social Text*, *Novel*, *Diacritics*, *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, *Anthropological Forum*, *South Atlantic Quarterly*, and others. His field-changing book, *Tropicopolitans: Colonialism and Agency, 1688–1804* (Duke Univ. Press, 1999), won the outstanding first book prize of the Modern Language Association in 2000. This was followed by *Guru English: South Asian Religion in a Cosmopolitan Language*, Princeton Univ. Press, 2006 and Penguin India in 2007. He has also edited *Slavery, Abolition and Emancipation: Writings of the British Romantic Period*, (vol. 6, Pickering and Chatto, 1999).

His most recent book, a magisterial study of the French and British Oriental tale, *Enlightenment Orientalism: Resisting the Rise of the Novel*,

(Univ. of Chicago Press, 2012) was the winner of both the Kenshur Prize (Center for Eighteenth-Century Studies at Indiana University) and the Study of Narrative George and Barbara Perkins Prize. His edition of William Earle's romance *Obi: or, The History of Three-Finger'd Jack* (Broadview, 2005), with accompanying texts of culture for Broadview, has become canonical in courses on slavery and antislavery. The list of his publications goes on, including a special issue of *PMLA* on War. At the time of his untimely death, he was at work on a monograph on sovereignty and anachronism.

Even Srinivas' introductions and reviews call out for our attention—whether it is his treatment of West African religious ways of knowing; or the literary treatments of war; or exoticism as it resists colonialism and commodity culture; or the alignment between the East and West Indies; or a response to anthropologists Jean and John Comaroff's "Theory from the South."

Srinivas' first book *Tropicopolitans* set a high standard. A theoretically sophisticated and agile treatment, the book identified in eighteenth-century texts the capacity of "the colonized subject who exists both as fictive construct of colonial tropology and actual resident of tropical space," at once the "object of representation and agent of resistance"—to resist domination.<sup>1</sup> Srinivas described his approach as seeking to dislodge texts from familiar reading formations to envision a new Enlightenment in which "global theorists give way to local intellectuals, metropolitan readers are trumped by their colonial cousins, and cosmopolitans yield to tropicopolitans."<sup>2</sup> The book has had a lasting effect and is required reading for anyone interested in the global eighteenth century.

Contesting national realism and challenging traditional histories of the novel, *Enlightenment Orientalism: Resisting the Rise of the Novel* exposes the importance of Oriental tales to British and French fiction. As the Kenshur Prize Committee wrote, the book "undertakes a vast project of recovery" while it questions the rise of the novel narrative and "unsettles" the "field to the point that it...sconceptual apparatus will never be the same." And in awarding him the International Society for the Study of Narrative's Perkins Prize, the judges praised *Enlightenment Orientalism* (as they might well have said of his other books) for helping readers "delight in now forgotten texts and genres that were once wildly popular." There we are led to reconsider what we know of the Enlightenment, as well as reconfigure the history of narrative. His provocative and illuminating work required scholars not only to rethink the history of the novel, but also to recognize that the seeming frivolity of the Oriental tale must move from the margins of that history to its very center.

As the president of ASECS at the time of his death, Srinivas exemplified its interdisciplinarity as a specialist in British literature, French literature, and postcolonial literature. Throughout his work, Srinivas questioned traditional intellectual histories and explored the porousness of national boundaries and genres. As the former Dean of the Humanities, the former Director of Duke's Franklin Humanities Institute, and President of the Consortium of Humanities Institutes, he spearheaded a five-year initiative redefining the role of the humanities in undergraduate education as necessary to understanding cultural similarities and differences, and teaching us how to think and act in innovative ways. His bold approaches to research, teaching, and institutional life engaged many disciplines in meaningful exchanges.

On a personal note, I was lucky enough to count Srinivas as a friend and trusted colleague, and I've had great affection for him since the days when he was a graduate student at Cornell and I taught at Syracuse University. We shared work and exchanged ideas throughout our careers. With subtlety yet flair, intellectual toughness combined with uncommon kindness, Srinivas always embodied the best characteristics of the world citizens he conceives of in his work—at ease in cultures around the world, and drawing from his deep and broad erudition in history, politics, theory, literature, and culture to help us re-vision the past and imagine the future. His lecture, “From Enlightenment to Anthropocene,” characteristically relocates the past as it informs the present and anticipates the future.

## NOTES

1. Srinivas Aravamudan, *Tropicopolitans: Colonialism and Agency, 1688–1804* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 4.
2. *Tropicopolitans*, 331.