

# Laura S. Desmond

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## EDUCATION

University of Chicago (Chicago, IL)  
Ph.D., History of Religions, expected March 2008

Dissertation: *Disciplining Pleasure: The Erotic Science of the Kāmasūtra*  
Advisor: Wendy Doniger (University of Chicago)  
Readers: Bruce Lincoln (University of Chicago), Sheldon Pollock (Columbia University)

Tilak Maharashtra Vidyapeeth (Pune, India)  
Research scholar, 2002–2003

University of Chicago (Chicago, IL)  
M.A., History of Religions, 1996

St. Lawrence University (Canton, NY)  
B.A., *summa cum laude*, Religious Studies, 1992

## FELLOWSHIPS, HONORS AND AWARDS

Martin Marty Center Dissertation Fellowship, University of Chicago Divinity School, 2006–2007

Mellon Dissertation Research Fellowship, “New Perspectives on the Disciplines,”  
Franke Institute for the Humanities, University of Chicago, 2005–2006

Committee on South Asian Studies Fellowship, University of Chicago, 2001–2002, 2003–2004

American Institute of Indian Studies Junior Dissertation Research Fellowship, 2002–2003

Fulbright-Hayes Doctoral Dissertation Research Abroad Fellowship Alternate, 2002–2003

Century Fellowship, University of Chicago, 1994–1998

Phi Beta Kappa

St. Lawrence University Religious Studies Department Honorary

St. Lawrence University Irving Bacheller Society (English Department Honorary)

## DOCTORAL EXAMINATIONS

History of Religions: *History of the Discipline*

History of Religions: *Discourse, Practice, Ideology, Power: Critical Approaches to the Study of Religion*

History of Religions: *Hinduism*

Psychology and Sociology of Religion: *Theoretical Perspectives on Religion*

## TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Beloit College (Beloit, WI)

Instructor, 2007-2008

Courses: *Oral and Classical Epics of South Asia; Religious Traditions of India; Understanding Religious Traditions in a Global Context; Goddesses, Ancient and Modern; Science, Magic and Religion*

University of Chicago (Chicago, IL)

Teaching Assistant, 2007

*Hinduism: A Chronicle*

Central Michigan University (Mt. Pleasant, MI)

Adjunct Professor, 2000–2002

Courses: *Religious Traditions of India; Women and Religion; Goddesses; Hindu Art*

St. Lawrence University (Canton, NY)

Teaching Assistant, 1991–1992

*Introduction to Religious Studies*

## PUBLICATIONS

“Bodies and Pleasures”?: the body as an object of kāmāśāstric knowledge.” In *The International Journal of Hindu Studies*. Forthcoming, 2007.

“Kāmasūtra; Vātsyāyana and commentaries.” In *The Encyclopedia of Erotic Literature*. NY: Routledge, 2006.

"Hierarchy." In *The Encyclopedia of Women in World Religion*. NY: Macmillan, 1999.

## PRESENTATIONS

“Religion and Sexuality: A Conversation with Wendy Doniger and Daniel Boyarin.” American Academy of Religion, Annual Meeting, 2006.

“Objects of Knowledge and the Subject of Pleasure: *kāma* and other *purushārtha*-s.” University of Chicago South Asia Graduate Student Conference, 2006.

“The Question of O: Orgasm as an Object of Shastric Knowledge.” University of Wisconsin Conference on South Asia, 2003.

“Is there an Indian History of Sexuality?: Thoughts on Foucault and the *Kāmasūtra*.” Address to Central Michigan University Chapter of Phi Alpha Theta (History Honors Society), Central Michigan University, 2002.

“Just like a river flowing down into the ocean?: strategic constructions of class and gender in *Manusmṛti*.” Religion and Social Theory Workshop, University of Chicago, 1995.

## ACADEMIC ADMINISTRATIVE EXPERIENCE

Program Assistant, Mellon Project, “New Perspectives on the Disciplines,” Franke Institute for the Humanities, University of Chicago, 2004–2005. Worked with faculty steering committee and Franke Institute staff to administer the Project’s series of lectures, workshops, and conferences.

Co-ordinator, Religion and Social Theory Workshop, University of Chicago, 1995–1996. Organized program for bi-weekly meeting of faculty-graduate student workshop.

Acting Collections Manager, Richard F. Brush Art Gallery, St. Lawrence University, 1992–1993. Maintained University collection of 6500+ works of art; Developed exhibitions, campus displays and educational programs; Trained and supervised student interns; Prepared press releases and publicity; Devised long-term automation strategies for university art collection; Researched, created, and implemented operational policies, procedures, and forms.

## TEACHING COMPETENCE

*Religions of South Asia; Hinduism; Theories and Methods in the Study of Religions; World Religions; Introduction to Religious Studies; Sex, Gender and Power in the History of Religions; Science, Magic and Religion; Religion and the Erotic; South Asian Visual Culture; Indian Epics; Bodies, Sex and Pleasure in Pre-Modern South Asia; Making a Hindu Person; Goddesses, Ancient and Modern; Religion and Visual Culture; Women and Religion; Sanskrit.*

## WORKS IN PROGRESS

*Making an Impression: Bodily and Psychic Marks in South Asia and Beyond*

According to South Asian physiognomical and psychological theories, human subjects are “marked” in ways both visible and invisible. The physical marks are indicators of what is otherwise invisible: the nature, character, and sometimes destiny, of the individual so marked. Psychic marks exist to be “activated” by transformative ritual and aesthetic experiences. This project investigates the relationship between what is seen and what is hidden, and concludes with a comparison to non-South Asian physiognomical theories and practices drawn from philosophical, scientific, literary, psychological and pop-cultural sources.

*“Fringe Sciences” in the Classical Sanskrit World*

While venerable Sanskrit sciences such as medicine, astronomy, mathematics, and grammar have been the object of Indological research, little attention has been given to their peer disciplines, sciences that do not easily correspond to modern fields of knowledge, or that would today be assigned to the realm of magic (in the reality of which we don’t believe). This project seeks to bring to light the place of “fringe sciences” such as gemology, oneiromancy, physiognomy, divination and perfumery in the classical Sanskrit world, and to provide a fuller picture of the range of knowledge practices available to the men and women who made that world.

*To Avert the Gaze: Ornamentation and the Dangers of Beauty*

Drawing from a range of South Asian materials including temple architecture, the history of clothing and coiffure, classical philosophy, contemporary TV commercials, and ethnographic accounts, this project examines the role and function of beauty and adornment as it has developed and changed throughout South Asian history. I take as my hypothesis that ornamentation can serve to draw the dangerous gaze away from that which is ornamented onto the ornamentation itself.

## RESEARCH LANGUAGES

Primary: Sanskrit

Secondary: French, German, Latin

## REFERENCES

### **Wendy Doniger**

Mircea Eliade Distinguished Service Professor of the History of Religions  
University of Chicago Divinity School  
Swift Hall 207  
1025 E. 58th St.  
Chicago, IL 60637  
773-702-8239  
don8@midway.uchicago.edu

### **Sheldon Pollock**

William B. Ransford Professor of Sanskrit & Indian Studies  
Middle East and Asian Languages and Cultures  
Columbia University  
626 Kent Hall MC3928  
1140 Amsterdam Ave.  
New York, NY 10027  
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### **Andy Rotman**

Assistant Professor  
Religion Department  
Smith College  
Pierce Hall no.4  
Northampton, MA 01063  
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