



INTERVIEW

A Glimpse behind the Scenes of Poetry's Exophonic Issue with Editor and Poet Srikanth Reddy

by Lisa Schantl



Srikanth Reddy is a poet, literary editor, and book critic. A teacher at the University of Chicago since 2003, he is also the author of various poetry collections, the latest of which, *Underworld Lit* (Wave Books, 2020), was a finalist for the Griffin International Poetry Prize, the T.S. Eliot Four Quartets Prize, and a 2020 TLS Book of the Year. Currently, he serves as the poetry editor of *The Paris Review*, and co-edits the Phoenix Poets book series at the University of Chicago Press.

In 2022, Srikanth guest-edited three special issues for *Poetry Magazine*, among them one entitled “Exophony.” Filled to the brim with non-native language poems, I was immediately intrigued by the issue and the astonishing poets that inhabit its pages. We talked about the particularities of this issue, his views on exophonic writing and publishing, and his own relation to craft in an expansively interconnected world. This is the edited core of our conversation.

Lisa Schantl: How did the exophonic issue of *Poetry Magazine* come about?

Srikanth Reddy: Coming on board as a guest editor at *Poetry Magazine* — a high-profile journal that reaches so many readers around the world — felt like such a rare opportunity. We did three special issues together: The first was an issue celebrating the work of the first Black woman on the editorial staff of *Poetry Magazine*, Margaret Danner — a remarkable poet in her own right who is unsung in many ways.

The second issue was on exophonic poets. My original idea was to think about contemporary American poetry as a chorus of immigrant and migrant voices. But what I found was that there’s a much larger story to be told beyond the borders of the United States and that, in many ways, literary history on a global scale is a story of exophonic writing. It became an international issue with all kinds of interesting transnational configurations.

The third issue, which we called “Make It Old,” is about poetry in translation from the ancient world all the way up to the 19th century. The idea was to think about ways of foregrounding non-Western poetries that might not be part of mainstream awareness.

Lisa: It’s interesting that these three separate issues all share the idea of bringing something to the fore that has not yet been so much talked about.

Srikanth: Yes, in some ways, that’s just what’s exciting about literary publishing — finding a story that hasn’t been told. The story of exophonic writing is one that people seem to

respond to and find interesting. It's oftentimes a story of displacement or migration and adaptation, or even assimilation. For me, however, the most exciting thing about exophonic writing is its formal dimension — how writers who arrive at English as a literary language later in their lives bring their own cultural heritage or forms to English-language writing. They may view this language from a remove that “native speakers” don't, and so language itself becomes more of a productively resistant material to work with.

Lisa: How did you go about the editorial process for *Poetry Magazine's* exophonic issue?

Srikanth: *Poetry* has an editorial staff who are full-time employees of the magazine. At the time when I was there, they were Lindsay Garbutt, Fred Sasaki, Holly Amos, and Angela Flores. We all worked together on the issues, and we discussed the selections.

For “Exophony,” we received about 300 submissions from all over the world. That was a wonderful wealth of material, but it also wasn't too overwhelming — we could actually spend time with the work, and curate the issue in ways that we thought meaningful.



Srikanth Reddy © Kaitlyn Shea

Lisa: Were the chosen poems copy-edited much?

Srikanth: The ethos of *Poetry Magazine* is to not presume to edit a poet's work very intensively, to be an open space for literary communities, and this means not trying to shape those voices but letting those voices be what they want to be.

With exophonic writing in particular the role of the editor is in some ways not to try to assimilate the work into literary conventions. Exophonic writing has its own identity. If you try and “fix” things to make it more conventional in English, you might also sand off the edges of what makes it distinctive and exciting.

Lisa: The diversity represented in the issue is impressive. I was also intrigued by some writers who were born in the U.S., and yet identified as exophonic writers.

Srikanth: Those were some of the most interesting and surprising finds. For example, Jeffrey Angles, who is probably the foremost translator of modern and contemporary Japanese poetry in America, has written a book of poetry in Japanese. This book won the most prestigious prize for Japanese poetry, which is quite an accomplishment — he was the first foreigner to win it. That was a reversal of the narrative that I had expected of writing from immigrant or migrant writers.

There are all kinds of writers who have adopted a literary tradition and a literary language not so much out of necessity, but because they *elect* to explore that other language. The story of exophony has many different histories.

Lisa: Some of the included poems were translated into English specifically for this issue. Where do you see the connection between exophonic writing and (self-)translation?

Srikanth: Oftentimes, when poets talk about writing in a language that isn't their first, they use metaphors of translation to talk about finding words to express themselves in their second, third, or fourth language. That also shows how translation is just a metaphor for creativity writ large. I think of a poet like Paul Celan who is working in multiple languages and registers — for him it's also about the making of a poem as a work of translation, of pain into sound, of self into other. The Otherness of language becomes luminous in the work of these writers in ways that poets who write in their first language also achieve, of course — such as Emily Dickinson or Gertrude Stein. Something about exophony is ethnographically, historically and aesthetically its own story, but it also sheds light on the art of poetry from its origins.

Lisa: Did you encounter something in the editorial process that came as a total surprise?

Srikanth: Almost everything we found and everything we published was a surprise. Finding poets writing in Arabic in Sweden and finding Jeffrey Angles here, in the Midwest, writing poetry in Japanese, and learning about poets and translators like Öykü Tekten, or being in touch with a transnational literary editor like David Shook, who is very actively scanning the horizon, just made me feel like I saw into the engine room of what's driving a lot of poetic activity around the world and how communities are formed in all sorts of surprising ways. These are poets, but they are also editors and translators who are really focused on promoting border-crossing writing. I feel hope for poetry; I was so happy to learn that there

are people out there who really devote themselves to it.

Lisa: In your introduction to “Exophony,” you say that Telugu was not really spoken at home because of the desire to assimilate to the English language and the U.S. culture. Has your editorial work changed how you view the role of your parents’ first language?

Srikanth: I was the first of my family born in the U.S. My parents were from the South of India, from an area called Andhra Pradesh. At college, I got to the point where I could speak and understand conversational Telugu, but Telugu poetry never became legible to me in all its nuance.

I think editing the issue on exophony shifted the ground for me in my understanding of my own relationship to the English language. Much of my childhood was shaped by an almost desperate desire to master this language, to feel some sense of belonging — with my immigrant family background — in a suburb of Chicago that was largely Irish-Catholic. Of course, one never achieves mastery of a language, but that was something I really wanted because of my parents’ lack of fluency. That’s probably not an uncommon story of how some people become writers, especially exophonic writers.

Lisa: You also state that the representation of exophonic writers in the English-language publishing scene is on the rise. Would you say that this impacts how the “gatekeepers” of this scene view the English language and who has access to it?

Srikanth: Things are changing in all kinds of different ways. In one way, Jhumpa Lahiri, who is engaged in an extended exophonic experiment in Italian, or the Mexican-American poet Mónica de la Torre, who writes poetry in English and translates Latin American poetry, expand people’s sense of what a writer can do and how conceptual boundaries can be pushed. The more voices we have like that entering into the awareness of different reading publics, the more a nativist or a nationalist sense of language begins to loosen. In the United States, the political situation has taken a hard turn toward populism and linguistic nationalism, but I think once that monolithic culture starts to unravel, it’s kind of almost impossible to stop.

There are more and more magazines, scholars and writers thinking about exophony — globally. With digital and online publishing, we can now see so much that we couldn’t see before. People communicate across borders and histories, and more and more exciting things are going to be happening. I have a lot of hope for the growth of people’s awareness and

understanding that literature almost always already is exophonic, and has been so from the beginning.