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Ravi Shankar (born 1975) is a distinguished poet and founding editor of the online journal of the arts, *Drunken Boat*. He is poet-in-residence at Central Connecticut State University and has authored *Instrumentality*, published in 2004 and a finalist for the 2005 Connecticut Book Awards, and *Wanton Textiles* (2006), co-authored with Reb Livingston. He co-edited an anthology of contemporary Arab and Asian poetry in Spring 2008.

Shankar reviews poetry for the *Contemporary Poetry Review*. He has been a commentator for WFCR (Public Radio) and a judge for various poetry competitions. An editor, poet, commentator and teacher, Shankar sees all these activities as defining him and "as tributaries running into a larger body rippled with waveforms, each nourishing the other." Further details on Shankar can be seen in his profile, by clicking on his name at the top right corner.

Here, Usha Akella, yet another noted poet based in the US, engages Shankar in a lively discussion on many aspects of poetry.

### **Usha - Let's begin with basics - a bit of biography for the readers.**

**Ravi** - I've taken to adding some flourish to each biography to differentiate it from all the other calcified versions of myself that have appeared, so I'll begin with those achievements I'm proudest about: founding and editing *Drunken Boat* <http://www.drunkenboat.com>, international online journal of the arts, for the last decade; co-editing with Tina Chang and Nathalie Handal, *Language for a New Century: Contemporary Poetry from Asia, the Middle East and Beyond* (W.W. Norton & Co., 2008, see the link at the end of this para)), teaching at and co-directing the Creative Writing Department at Central Connecticut State University where I'm a tenured Associate Professor and Poet-in-Residence and writing my own books of poetry, including *Instrumentality* (Cherry Grove, 2004) my collaboration with Reb Livingston *Wanton Textiles* (No Tell Books, 2006) and the forthcoming chapbooks, *Seamless Matter* (Rain Taxi) featuring Sol LeWitt, and *Brushstroke with Body* (Finishing Line Press), and the National Poetry Review annual winning manuscript, *The Deepening Groove*, due out in 2011.

<http://books.wwnorton.com/books/Language-for-a-New-Century/>

**Usha - At what particular point in time did Poetry quite definitely call out to you? And you knew this is the horse you'd be riding.**

**Ravi** - Depending on how autobiographically archeological I'd like to be, I could point to hearing *vedas* in Sanskrit at Diaspora temples in Northern Virginia, reveling in their music without being able to penetrate their syntax or sense, else the first graphic novels I wrote as a second grader, full of the capers of Power Rabbit and Squirrel Junior across a landscape of an extraterrestrial jungle. I could (and should) point to Dr. Jacobs who taught AP English at a Science & Technology High School and introduced me to Sylvia Plath, Randall Jarrell and Wallace Stevens. Something about my innate romanticism combined with my geometric love of the precision and compression enacted in a line of poetry plumbed my psyche with a snake that aerated and unclogged a vein of inmost attention that I have cocked my ear to ever since.

**Usha - Give us a brief overview of your books. I feel Literary history is a telling unfoldment.**

**Ravi** - My first collection, *Instrumentality*, grew out of my thesis at Columbia University's MFA Program in Poetry. (Links for reviews of the book given at end of para.) Much to my delight it was named a finalist for the 2005 Connecticut Book Awards and I launched the collection at the Asia Society. The poems there marry my interest in the near-magnetic accretion of thought to shape and my abiding interests are in mortality, being, aesthetic pleasure and the darkly comic. A poem like "How the Search Ended" is a wry, nihilistic lyric with a punch line, while a poem like "Spangling the Sea" uses its couplets to dredge the very particulate explosion of life and detail that unfolds underwater [http://www.cherry-grove.com/shankar\\_poems.html](http://www.cherry-grove.com/shankar_poems.html). I also write about my own bifurcated identity in a poem like "Exile" which has been often anthologized.

(Links for reviews - <http://raintaxi.org/online/2005summer/shankar.shtml> and <http://www.djelloulmarbrook.com/2009/10/06/the-elegant-poetry-of-ravi-shankar/> )

*Wanton Textiles* is a completely different animal. I wrote that collaboratively with Reb Livingston and it occurred as a series of postcards, some corporeal, others electronic, all charged with the spark of loss under the overlay of infatuation and it is truly a third thing, outside Reb and I and I'm grateful for its existence and her considerable energies. My latest project, *Seamless Matter*, coming out with Rain Taxi Books and with a cover by late American artist Sol LeWitt, is a serial work, four tercets that respond to existence in all its resplendence, natural, artificial, postmodern pastorals that have more to do with the act of perception, how it ineluctably alters what's perceived. *Brushstroke with Body* due out with Finishing Line Books encompasses my ekphrastic work and lyrics of voyage. And finally the entire manuscript just won the National Poetry Review contest and will be due out in 2011.

I'd be remiss if I didn't end with the volume of which I'm proudest. *Language for a New Century: Contemporary Poetry from Asia, the Middle East and Beyond* (W.W. Norton & Co., 2008) is something that adds to the edifice, which is more a gelatinous heap, of our canon. The journey of seven years, the shared editorial lives shared with Tina Chang and Nathalie Handal, stretched out over the chasms of sleepovers in one another's house and stark arguments that always ended in coffee and kinship. It's one of those volumes that will

define my career and with over 450 poets from 61 different countries writing in 40 odd languages, it presents an alternate view of contemporary culture, one that veers from stereotype or adherence to received forms, into a panoply of voices, of concerns, that have at root a shared humanness that we felt compelled to impart to the world. Viva *Language!*

**Usha - What are your impressions of emerging trends in contemporary American poetry?**

**Ravi** - To that I'd turn to the anthology that I've been reveling in these last few months. Cole Swenson and David St. John's *American Hybrid* whose very premise is one to which I've hewn my own poetic utterance and trajectory. We live in a remarkably fertile time in American poetry, probably a richer time quantitatively than any that has come before, in spite of the dwindled larger public attention on the wild speciation of verse. There are more small presses, letter presses, collaborations between artists, locally organized performances even while the notion that a contemporary poet might have graced the cover of *Life* magazine like Marianne Moore grows ever more unlikely. When a poet like Elizabeth Alexander, herself a writer of riffs, sonnets, elegies, collaged histories that retexture narrative, is called on to read a poem at Barack Obama's Inauguration and when that poem calls on a "love with no need to pre-empt grievance," we are in good shape.

What I appreciate about the valence of the poems in *American Hybrid* and the poems we publish at Drunken Boat is that nothing is off limits, we are post-post-avant and neo-confessional, the rigid courtyards of the schools have exposed their inner sponginess and the world of poetics is large enough to encompass us all: spoken word, formalist and flarfist. Irrespective of aesthetic origination, I respond to poems that are intelligent, that embody some of the characteristics in Swenson lists in the aforementioned, "Today's hybrid poem might engage such conventional approaches as narrative that presume a stable first person, yet complicate it by disrupting the linear temporal path or by scrambling the normal syntactical sequence...hybrid poems often honor the avant-garde mandate to renew the forms and expand the boundaries of poetry—thereby increasing the expressive potential of language itself—while also remaining committed to the emotional spectra of lived experience."

**Usha - Are there enough opportunities and platforms for the South Asian poet? Do you think there is a need for distinguishing that voice? Why is this still not a voice represented in mainstream American anthologies?**

**Ravi** - In one word, no. In many words, I'd come to the same doorstep of a conclusion, even while I would wax rhapsodic about the Asian American Writers Workshop, Kundiman, *Manoa*, the sadly defunct ArtWallah Festival. These efforts are largely created from within and dependent on the changing winds in the grant-giving atmosphere. There's some sense that because *Slum Dog* won an Oscar, Adiga's *White Tiger* and Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* the Booker, Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* the Pulitzer, that we live in a fecund time, an explosion of Indian English writing, we're the next "hot" thing and yet that idea floating in the zeitgeist comes from a vacuum (which nature abhors) where there were few if any Asian voices. The ones named as superstars stand in metonymically for the idea that Asian writing is everywhere. Yet if you look proportionally at a publishing house's roster you'll find that's simply not the case.

I definitely think there's value in preserving the particularized inflections of the Asian American experience in literature. There's the sense that once codified, jammed in Amy Tan as it were, there's little hope of circumventing caricature but that's myopic I think. Each writer's experience is specific. I think we're finally seeing some penetration of the Asian American writers into the "canon" but it's slow going and long overdue. I point to alternate anthologies, like the forthcoming *Writing the Lines of our Hands* (University of Arkansas Press) and edited by Minal Hajratwala, Summi Kaipa, Neelanjana Banerjee and Pireeni Sundaralingam as a place to begin to immerse ourselves in the richness of Asian American letters. As I found out, personally and painfully, racial profiling persists and as long as such personal and institutional impediments to equality remain, the act of writing remains a political one and so yes, I think that voice needs to be distinguished. Certainly not extinguished.

**Usha - Drunken Boat was launched about ten years ago. It is moot to ask the relevance of online publishing so instead I'll ask you about the future direction of the journal.**

**Ravi** - I would say to look back at our decade in existence the current issue is the best guide because in addition to culling a selection of "Best Of..." it also looks forward at the future of electronic literature. *Drunken Boat* has actually morphed considerably in terms of its organizational structure. Managing Editor Leslie McGrath has taken a larger role in helping shape the content of our issue and will be primarily responsible for the forthcoming Issue#11. We have a terrific staff who are helping us be more responsive to our contributors and I continue to cast the roving eye, hoping to reel the next revelation. We have a folio on Eugene O'Neill and theater coming up as well as on "life in a time of contraction," responses to the economic downturn. We plan to have working artists help curate folios and help with design, have a greater social and cultural turn of attention, and will be coming out more frequently moving forward (biannually) just as we will continue to maintain and update our blog. *Drunken Boat* is also moving out into the world of materiality with the forthcoming publication of *Radha Says*, Reetika Vazirani's posthumous book of poems. We will be looking at publishing an audio CD or multimedia DVD next and remain committed to publishing the best of all forms of representation.

**Usha - Describe your aesthetic philosophy? A poem, elementally, requires what?**

**Ravi** - I've always been interested in poems that are faceted like cut glass and under the molecular pressure of an atom - compact, dense lyrics that have nothing superfluous in the syntax, each stanza a taut steel string pulled along the fretboard of a miniature linguistic guitar. A poem speaks to the unspoken, is that detonation in the synapses that contains the shrapnel of ontological purpose, is the right, real path from words to wakefulness. I stop and process, experience this space I move through, an eye, ever-roving, a sentient being that deflects off others, some who bend the self like light in a prism, but dispassionate, in the mine of vernacular with a pick-axe and a little light on my head, I want that mineral that is not me or that is so irreducibly me that it is everywhere at once. A poem requires that degree of vulnerability to unfurl.

**Usha - What is your creative process?**

**Ravi** - The rhythm of creativity is not circadian so I have to say my process attenuates in time and place, bearing little in common with each other phase save a shadow-resemblance. So when I write prose, I'm sitting in my office for hours at a go, trying to push through a snow bank with sentences, but when I write poetry, the lightning bolt strikes and I jot furious notes on a cocktail napkin. Then there's the reading that helps sustain the process, the ideas that occur when I'm reading Coetzee's essays or listening to Junot Diaz in my car. Finally there's the amazing time I've been lucky enough to be granted at writer's colonies around the world, which have allowed me weeks at a time insulated from civilization, indeed from most quotidian responsibilities so that I can delve into revision and generation. Those places like the MacDowell Colony, Blue Mountain Center, Jentel Foundation are pearls. There's where most of my manuscripts have been given birth or been delivered. Between projects I collaborate with other writers and artists to be jolted outside of my own mind.

**Usha - Editor, Poet, Commentator, Teacher- you wear many hats. Is it possible to be completely authentic to your aesthetic in each of these roles?**

**Ravi** - What I think of as aesthetic is what the bowerbird thinks of nest. It's in the cobbling together of bits of bone and button that a life worth living emerges and I'm glad to contribute my energies to the process of imaginative realisms and global literatures. I am a tireless advocate for poetry because the vocal art shapes my deepest intention. I write therefore to engage in a community of writers, I edit because I look out from my narrow vantage to see the sprawl of the possible, I use criticism as a vehicle to expose and to authenticate my experience and I teach to give back, to help spur the process of which aesthetic conversation, which is intrinsically moral and foundational. All of these activities have defined me and I see them as tributaries running into a larger body rippled with waveforms, each nourishing the other, moving silt and sediment so each piece can green translucently in the sun.

**Usha - Give us some insight into teaching poetry? Has your aesthetic changed in the past decade? How does one teach an incredibly ephemeral impulse which is poetry?**

**Ravi** - Great question. I'm deeply invested in teaching and have found it unlike a laboratory or the archer's range. There is no proof to prove, no one center to pierce, no formula through whose application the sum can be ineluctably done. Instead I'm helping cultivate awareness in my students, to crib Mallarmé, to help unclog our word-clogged reality. That's the first step. To have them stop and listen, to unsheath what they think they know, in order to expose what facts are and why they are different from music. I'm helping them train their inner ear, to gain traction on their own emotional baggage so that the words are like crampons and rappel rings that help each student scale their own subjective boulder, mapping the terrain so specifically that it becomes universal. I have to differentiate poetry from rap lyrics and blues songs, because we don't have the turntable or the plaintive guitar to help us - we only have the beat of the words from which the sense can't be beat from completely. As I have grown as a poet, I've come to recognize the use of generative and restrictive exercises when one starts out writing, but I've also come to value the improvisational value of spontaneous writing as a means to begin to enter a subject only to

depart from it to get to what you truly should be writing about. These processes can happen in the classroom and I think be constructively applied to someone's work without altering the fundamental reason they might be writing.

**Usha - I was interested by one of your essays on abstraction vs the concrete in [poets.org](http://poets.org). Have you found your mechanics of reconciliation?**

**Ravi** - Yes—not to discriminate but to use the archetype and concept alongside image as they're needed in a given poem. My larger point in writing that piece was to offer a counter-argument in the very legitimate discourse concerning the utility of concrete language to poetry, the doctrine of "to show, don't tell" whose clichéd message I impart to my own students. I agree with both Larry Levis who writes, "The image draws on, comes out of, the "world of the senses" and, therefore, originates in a world that passes, that is passing, every moment. Could it be, then, that every image, as image, has this quality of poignancy and vulnerability since it occurs, and occurs so wholeheartedly, in time?" and with Gaston Bachelard who writes "poetic images of matter do not spring from our instinctual depths, but instead arise in the 'intermediate zone' between the unconscious and the rational consciousness, at the threshold of rational thought, of objective knowledge about the world; in other words, it is at once a becoming of expression, and a becoming of our being" and yet I think there are some crucial primordial moments when the image will not suffice, where abstraction or the philosophical thinking through an embodied ideation is the only thing that will get to the heart of the matter. My personal bias against Williams and for Rilke was exposed in that essay but lost in that equation is my core belief that poetry when it authentically emerges from a mind, scathed or whole, presents an image of self irreducible to the mechanistic, to the purely descriptive. Poetry at root is for me spiritual, in the sense that opposes the view of culture defined by Georg Simmel: "We speak of culture whenever life produces certain forms in which it expresses and realizes itself... But although these forms arise out of the life process, because of their unique constellation they do not share the restless rhythm of life, its ascent and descent, its constant renewal, its incessant divisions and reunifications... They acquire fixed identities, a logic and lawfulness of their own; this new rigidity inevitably places them at a distance from the spiritual dynamic which created them." Poetry bursts that rigidity to refresh the spiritual dynamic.

**Usha - Metaphor, Voice and Texture- briefly comment on the place these terms have in your work? (I think I just invented 'texture'!)**

**Ravi** - I love texture. And I'm absolutely interested in it. That's why endives and pine nuts are such wonderful additions to a salad and why a true pimp wouldn't be found anywhere without leather and silk. The graininess of reality is contained in the reefs and edges of words and I want to collage them all, sebaceous or tessellated. I contain multitudes, including voices and veer from the satirical to the erotic, flea to flâneur, but I feel these lyric moments are basted together. I want to conflate vernaculars and to use the rhetoric of science to delineate passion or the lexicon of the rodeo to launch a political tirade, all the while shifting my spectatorial position but not the standards of my internal paramour. And metaphor? What can I say except that it the flux capacitor that allows time travel, the tides to the moon? In all seriousness, it is foundational, perhaps the most important act poetry commits, transferring one set of behaviors to another, forging new connections that allow

for manifold interpretative models of the world, some of which might move us forward as a civilization. I try to think in terms of processes in order to better understand being.

**Usha - Who are the poets that inspire you, the ones that continually help you to rededicate yourself to poetry?**

**Ravi** - In no particular order, Sappho, Robert Haas, Anne Carson, Alfred Corn, Charles Bernstein, Kimiko Hahn, Cole Swenson, Hart Crane, Marilyn Nelson, Wallace Stevens, Wislawa Symborska, Rainer Maria Rilke, Lisa Russ Spaar, Jeet Thayil, Rod Smith, Myung Mi Kim, Nathaniel Tarn, Rukmini Bhaya Nair, Terrence Hayes, Patrick Rosal, César Vallejo, Anna Akhmatova, Charles Wright, Mahmoud Darwish, Harryette Mullen, Eminem, Denis Johnson, Alice Notley, Linton Kwesi Johnson, Kofi Anyidoho, Frank O'Hara, May Swenson, K.N. Daruwalla, Barara Guest...I could go on for at least another page but I hope the principle is clear that the stuff of nourishment is everywhere, if you know where to look.

**Usha - Is there anything else you'd like to share. Questions you'd rather have answered? Present projects? Goals? Future manuscripts?**

**Ravi** - 2010 will be a good year. I will be teaching at Eastern Mediterranean University in Northern Cyprus in the Spring and look forward to traveling in the region. I also have a number of projects coming to fruition. I have two chapbooks of poetry coming out, including *Seamless Matter* which has cover art by late American artist Sol LeWitt and *Brushstroke with Body* with original art by Sonya Sklaroff. These two chapbooks comprise my forthcoming manuscript *The Deepening Groove*, winner of the 2010 National Poetry Review award. I have an essay on the line entitled "Breathless Length" coming out in an anthology published by University of Iowa Press. Finally I'm also working on the translations of Aandaal, the 10th century Tamil poet/saint, with Priya Sarukkai Chabria and will be traveling to South India to see transcriptions of her poems preserved on palm leaves. A book with line drawings will be coming out with Zubaan. *Drunken Boat* will be going strong with a live performance at AWP in Denver, issues 11 and 12 going live and the publication and promotion of Reetika Vazirani's posthumous manuscript, *Radha Says*.

Looking into the future, I'd like to work on more prose, delving into the fallacy and facts of a post-racial America, writing travel essays and continuing commentaries on National Public Radio and elsewhere. My communal goals are that the spark of energy enacted by Obama's inauguration are not lost, deadened by the inertia of bureaucracy, but that we continue to strive towards individual liberty around the world without interfering with indigenous cultures. Perhaps that's an impossible goal but even if the star towards which we reach is too far, a lot of good can be achieved reaching towards it. In literature and in action: *ad astra*.