H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

A. Suresh Canagarajah. *A Geopolitics of Academic Writing.* Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2002. x + 305 pp. $27.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8229-5794-2.

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Published on H-Africa (December, 2003)

At the outset the author poses a direct challenge to the academic reviewer, that a negative review of his book by a Western scholar would be a confirmation of the academic bias that his book addresses. I admit that in my first reading I came away with a generally negative impression; this was an article extended into a three-hundred-page book, filled with infuriating redundancy, too many personal anecdotes, and drawn-out discourse. In my second reading, and based on my own subsequent experiences as a professor and research scholar in an Indonesian university, I believe this book has much to offer on several levels. It is worth quoting the author's concluding statement:

"This book is not one more complaint by the materially underprivileged seeking set-asides. This is not a plea to overlook excellence in order to provide greater representation for periphery scholars in center publications. This is rather an attempt to deconstruct the bases of 'excellence' in publishing scholarship and knowledge construction ... [to] reconstruct knowledge ... in more egalitarian and enriching terms." (p. 288)

His book treads a fine line between what he claims he is doing and what he asserts he is not.

The author's lament is that non-Western academics have a very difficult time having their work published in the best English-language journals. This, he argues, is above all the product of the geopolitics and egotism of academia. Non-Western scholars without a connection to a Western graduate school also find it difficult because journals and their reviewers quickly dismiss scholarship when it is poorly expressed in academic English, do not always consider the otherwise academic merit of a writing because of the poor writing, and are not willing to work with the non-Western manuscript submissions that require extensive editorial change. The consequence is the academic community's loss, that there is only intellectual exchange among Western scholars instead of truly global dialogue.

At the start non-West-based scholars are at a disadvantage, not only because of their weak English capacity, but because they are not always up-to-date on the latest disciplinary jargon. They do not have ready access to the most recent cutting-edge books or articles (even those journals available on the Internet charge my colleagues $12.00 to download any single article). Most of the journals in their disciplines are not on-line, and subscriptions are too expensive to afford either personally or by most non-Western schools–institutions that can barely meet the expense of running a quality university. Researchers in the sciences have inadequate laboratory facilities. And non-Western scholars have to face certain systemic, cultural, political, and nationalist agendas that are frequently inconsistent with those of the West.

In overview, the author views the academic industry as a "contact zone" that can either isolate, imperialize, or better serve as the source of exchange among international scholars from diverse sociocultural backgrounds, "who must not only negotiate their own differing knowledge systems but increasingly deal with texts from different discursive traditions. Although the meeting of cultures and discourses takes place under asymmetrical power relations (as the discourses of the dominant group are privileged and often institutionalized), the interaction in the contact zone gives birth to hybrid forms of knowledge, texts, and discourses that may resist homogeneity and domination" (p. 27).

While I am not willing to agree with one of the book-cover estimations that this volume "will stand as a landmark for decades to come," I do believe that if one is willing to spend some time with this text it has much to offer. It is a rich (if not overdone) anecdotal ethnography of non-Western writing that addresses the

inequalities in academic publishing. More importantly, it raises interesting issues relative to how academic knowledge ("power-knowledge") is constructed and legitimized within our global community.

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Citation: Kenneth R. Hall. Review of Canagarajah, A. Suresh, *A Geopolitics of Academic Writing*. H-Africa, H-Net Reviews. December, 2003.

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