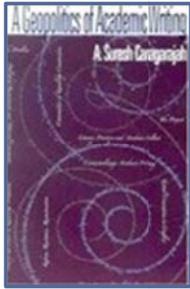


## Deconstructing the international marketplace of ideas

*A Sri Lankan professor's book discusses the problems that non-Western scholars face in academic publishing*

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[The Geopolitics of Academic Writing](#)  
A. Suresh Canagarajah  
University of Pittsburgh Press, 2002

One of the largest obstacles to fair globalization is the free exchange of ideas. Unfortunately, western media outlets dominate the marketplace of ideas, unconsciously enforcing their writing conventions and intellectual norms. Although some scholars toiling in linguistics have tried to bring attention to how differently knowledge is exchanged outside of the West, little attention has been paid to their work, either inside their discipline or out. This is a real loss because some of the work is terrific.

One of the best such works is *The Geopolitics of Academic Writing*, which reviews the practices of western scholarly journals and university publishers, "exposing the inequalities in the way academic knowledge is constructed and legitimized." In a fascinating mix of personal anecdote and scholarly research, the Sri Lankan professor of literature and composition A. Suresh Canagarajah describes the challenges facing scholars from the "periphery" -- Asia, Africa, and Latin America -- in getting their work into "center" journals and books -- published and edited by Europeans and Americans. His analysis of how such scholars fall afoul of EuroAmerican conventions is insightful and important.

As one of his first examples, Canagarajah details his own process of getting his first article published in a U.S. journal. The sheer number of economic constraints he labored under will be familiar to many non-western authors. Canagarajah knew the titles of relevant scholarly articles but had no way of getting them in Sri Lanka. He had to abandon the first draft of his article when fleeing his war-torn village in Jaffna and later had to purchase paper on the black market to type up the new draft. The expense of shipping the three copies that the journal required was enormous. Yet, American editors informed him that he must resubmit the essay on white paper in print from a laser printer -- both requirements were impossible for him to fulfill. In fact, Canagarajah debated handwriting his submission since it would be clearer than the ink from his university's ancient typewriter.

The deeper obstacles, however, were the editors' expectations that he would write in a certain discourse, make a certain kind of argument, and structure his essay in a particular style, one that was not "Sri Lankan" but EuroAmerican. To illustrate his point, Canagarajah reproduces his first U.S. readers' reviews and deconstructs their perspectives on his work. He does not castigate them; he just shows how radically the reviewers' opinions differed from those of his own intellectual tradition. He revised the article according to their suggestions, drastically reducing the personal commentary and political statements. The published article then circulated among his colleagues at his Sri Lankan university, who thought the article was anemic, boring, and arrogant, pointing to the very passages he had added or changed for the EuroAmerican reviewers. Canagarajah's subsequent analysis of center and periphery perspectives on good

writing is unique, rich with observations about writing style and structure. It illuminates how periphery scholars might think about writing for center journals while retaining their own voices.

[Canagarajah](#), who now teaches at Baruch College in New York, is particularly eloquent about the unfair mining of periphery scholars' thoughts. He starts the book with a front-page New York Times story from April, 1997 that declares five EuroAmerican professors had "discovered" a species of dinosaur in China. The story does mention the Chinese farmer who found the bones; he was educated enough to know what they were and smart enough to sell them to the local university. But his name and the date he found them goes unmentioned. The article also doesn't mention the names of the Chinese professors who had been studying the bones before the U.S. scholars came along! Rather, the New York Times article suggests that the westerners deserved the credit for a discovery they heard about from the Chinese at a conference.

Canagarajah gives more personal examples, as well, describing Sri Lankan scholars whose careers suffered after their ideas were borrowed by EuroAmerican scholars who were visiting the country for a few weeks. Not only do center scholars become famous for ideas they take from periphery cultures and periphery scholars, but center journals force periphery scholars to cite these center scholars as the innovators of those same ideas.

While many have written about EuroAmerican intellectual imperialism, most of their books are theoretical. Few have Canagarajah's vividness, which makes the disjuncture real through the biographies of his colleagues and friends, through detailed descriptions of Sri Lankan university department talks and debates and through his own lived experience. Most academic books are not beautifully written. His is. It is a triumph over the depersonalization and casual citation that mars so much center scholarship.

The real question, then, is why you haven't heard of this book and why it hasn't won the awards that it deserves? I know about this book only because I came across it at the library two months ago while searching for another book entirely. Perhaps we can have some sense for why his scholarship might be overlooked if we look to the few reviews of Canagarajah's book. The two scholars, [James Salvo](#) (PDF) and [Melissa Hussain](#), who give positive reviews of the book are constrained by the theoretical language of the center. They do not bring in their own experiences or those of their friends, and they cannot afford to be memorably enthusiastic. The one scholar who gives a negative review seems like a caricature of the center scholars that Canagarajah analyzes: self-involved and defensive. [Kenneth R. Hall](#)'s dismissal of Canagarajah's book as repetitive is an example of the center's condescension to alternative structural conventions.

So, let me step out of the EuroAmerican academic straitjacket here. *The Geopolitics of Academic Writing* is a book unlike any you have ever read. Anyone interested in globalization and higher education should read it. Canagarajah's book is the first that I have read that captures the real difficulties periphery scholars have in bringing their incredible research to light, the first comfort I have found for scholars on the periphery who endure so much to publish their rich research. So, if you are a periphery scholar, read this book for the affirmation and knowledge it will bring you. If you are a center editor, read it to learn how you can make yourself and your journal more open to the extraordinary diversity of thought and expression that marks the twenty-first century. You owe it to yourself.

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