

Reply to Canagarajah

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***A caveat or two
on awareness and
agency***

Canagarajah's comments are very opportune indeed, in that they foreground the dangers of positing hybridity as an antidote to linguistic imperialism (LI)—which it is not. Those who raise the bogey of LI are sounding an alarm call and issuing a call to action, a battle-cry, if you like. The claim of hybridity is, on the other hand, an empirical claim about what is taking place under our very noses, whether we are willing to recognize it or not. Regarding the one as 'pitted' against the other, as Canagarajah does, can be highly misleading.

Canagarajah claims that 'linguistic and cultural hybridity have always been there in non-western communities'. I agree, but find no reason for excluding the western communities from the generalization. Besides, I am unable to see how such a statement will invalidate my claim that hybridity has become more visible, and hence more difficult to ignore in the post-World War II scenario, marked by mass migrations, on the one hand, and growing cultural contact and miscegenation on the other.

If hybridity and heterogeneity are facts of the matter, and amply recognized as such, how do we characterize the theoretical fiction called homogeneity, as well as such powerful myths as language, nation, people, etc.? My answer is that these are banners or flags of allegiance behind which politicians can rally crowds when it suits their purposes. Those who insist that hybridity is increasingly becoming the rule rather than the exception are not thereby making a political claim. Though political consequences do follow from such a claim.

Sure enough, the claim of hybridity pulls the carpet from beneath the feet of LI, and does so by calling for a thorough conceptual overhaul leading to the invalidation of LI's basic premises. But it is unfair to accuse the upholders of LH of advocating inaction or conformism. They have nothing against the revolt of the oppressed. All that they claim is: do embrace the cause of the minorities, and empower those who you believe have been on the seamy side of the deal. But, for heaven's sake, don't preach the gospel by promising an egalitarian distribution of the cake that will make everybody happy. Viewing language as an arena of permanent conflict entails that there will always be losers as well as winners.

I have no quarrel with Canagarajah's plea for a more conscious and conscientious role for the classroom teacher. I consider it salutary. I would hasten to add, though, that whether we are aware of this or not, our very presence has always had a political dimension. We are either

serving the cause of the maintenance of the status quo or, helping to subvert it. What we must not forget is that under no circumstances are we dealing with discrete or enduring entities, but with ones that are protean, shifting, and mutating constantly.

As teachers, we ought to constantly remind ourselves of our political roles, and of our power to influence the way things are. But we ought to stop short of claiming that the adversarial stance is to be commended just because it helps undermine the system. An obstinately defiant stance falls into the logical trap of assimilating some of the very traits of the order of things it seeks to overthrow. Both are underwritten by the logic of 'US vs. THEM', which is what LH calls into question.