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Book Review of *Language Incompetence: Learning to Communicate through Cancer, Disability, and Anomalous Embodiment* by Suresh Canagarajah. London: Routledge, 2022

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Suresh Canagarajah's (2022) book *Language Incompetence* explores the intersections of disability and language, especially as they relate to areas like religion, race, and geopolitics. While Canagarajah's own experiences with disability springing from cancer run as a throughline in the book, providing insights into the various topics covered, his central focus is not this cancer journey. The work is an "academic cancer memoir" (p. 85), which allows him not just to reflect but to theorize. The book combines multiple genres as well, including academic theory, autoethnography, and other scholars' published journal entries and blog posts.

One of Canagarajah's main theorizations occurs in relation to disability and religion. Canagarajah introduces the topic by discussing five tropes that Thomas Couser (2001) maps regarding disability – triumph over adversity, rhetoric of horror, spiritual compensation, rhetoric of nostalgia, and rhetoric of emancipation. Briefly put, triumph over adversity involves the temptation to present oneself as heroically triumphing over hardship, for instance by demonstrating how the disabled condition has brought about other capabilities. Rhetoric of horror dramatizes the pain that accompanies disability, perhaps to receive sympathy or admiration. In the spiritual compensation view, one spiritually advances despite, or through, discomfort, so they can overlook their impairment. One might have a narrative of sublimation or transcendence. There can also be new states of existence like mindfulness and fresh appreciation for nature. Rhetoric of nostalgia prompts one to reflect on their past before the disability's onset and despair over what has been lost due to the disability. Here too, desire for sympathy and admiration might occur. Notably, for Couser, these first four tropes are all ableist because they all in some way uphold ability as the preferred norm; but the fifth trope works against an ableist ideology. It represents an acceptance and even embracing of disability, with the condition regarded as part of life and as providing fresh insights.

While Canagarajah thoughtfully observes that though Couser distinguishes between the first four tropes and the fifth, the line between trope one and trope five is very thin (emancipatory rhetoric can carry sentiments of triumph over adversity), Canagarajah's discussion about the third trope – spiritual compensation – carries special relevance for this review. As noted, the spiritual compensation view holds that a person describes themselves as having spiritually advanced

despite or through discomfort in a way that enables them to overlook their impairment. And in a chapter on “Anomalous Embodiment and Religious Disability Rhetoric”, Canagarajah delves into this argument with regard to Christianity. He starts by considering how religion has been viewed in disability scholarship so far, and notes that some DS histories list the “moral model” as one of the earliest discourses on disability. In this model, conversations regarding religion and morality are used to explain disability as divine punishment for one’s immorality. Wilson and Lewiecki-Wilson (2001), for example, examine the connection made in some Christian settings between disability and sin. They state that “[t]he Christian rhetorical tradition demonizes the disabled... casting disability as corporeal testimony of sin and punishment” (as cited in Canagarajah, 2022, p. 93).

Canagarajah, however, complicates these connections made between disability and faith. He comments that his own spirituality did not begin after his cancer diagnosis as “compensation” or “solace” but was always a part of his life, though it certainly took a new turn following the diagnosis. He describes how faith relates to disability differently for different people, and how even spiritual compensation can shape the upheld rhetoric of emancipation by helping one embrace disability. He also describes his own Christian practices springing from his Sri Lankan upbringing, to illustrate the varying relationships to religion different disabled individuals have. He notes that this upbringing was rooted in social justice, environmental stewardship, relational ethics, and loving through sacrificial doing – tenets that are in fact discussed in DS scholarship as well. He elaborates on how, for instance, a radical relational ethic informs the Christian worldview. The motive behind Christ’s crucifixion was not self-glorification but giving oneself to others. Similarly, Christian history is filled with examples of people embracing persecution or mortality because of love for others or resistance towards injustice. Furthermore, Christian conceptions of sociality involve collaborative effort, as do many disability frameworks. The Trinity, for example, involves a working together as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The church itself is required to function like the human body, with different parts uniting for the whole. As Canagarajah illustrates, disability and faith are then hardly inconsistent.

Such mapping of the connections between disability and faith also involves examining different versions of Christianity. Canagarajah observes that while

northern hemispheric Christian preachings might emphasize a view of disability in relation to sin, scriptural evidence says otherwise. He points out, for example, that though Wilson and Lewiecki-Wilson (2001) cite the Book of Job where Job treats his personal affliction as divine punishment, this interpretation is Job's *friends'*. God himself rejects such an understanding, instead calling Job and his friends to embrace uncertainty and vulnerability as part of their faith. Canagarajah also extends these examples to Christ's own life on earth, filled with suffering, spent in a "social and material environment... [with] conditions of extreme powerlessness" (p. 94). While this argument runs the risk of relegating disability to a pitiable state, Canagarajah is careful to note that Christ's pain was also productive. It brought about salvation for humankind. Moreover, the view that disability is a part of life normalizes the experience, including its aspects of limit and vulnerability. Coming back to his Sri Lankan upbringing, Canagarajah also notes how being socialized in a multi-religious community, growing up in situations of war and poverty, and being mindful of a history of colonization, have all helped him embrace a Christianity that treats imperfection, pain, and giving of self as generative. Canagarajah thus demonstrates meeting points, instead of oft-quoted oppositions, between disability frameworks and Christian thought.

In illustrating how Christianity reflects some of DS' key tenets, Canagarajah gives an example from the Global North as well, through the life of his colleague and friend John Roe. Sadly, by the time Canagarajah writes, Roe has passed on from cancer. But Roe's life and work exemplify the kind of approach Canagarajah describes Christianity as making possible: an approach which embodies both disability and religious orientations. Roe's (2017) thoughts as he contemplates hospice care, for example, represent "not 'giving up'... not 'the end is nigh'... not 'just let nature take its course'... [but] living your best life now" (as cited in Canagarajah, 2022, p. 98). It is a faith that courageously embraces disability and mortality. Moreover, Roe displays this courage by openly discussing his faith, and the discomfort that comes with such a discussion, on an academic platform – one that does not often encourage conversations around religion. Roe's writings also engage potentially challenging topics like faith and environmental stewardship, and faith and sexuality. They lend key insights into scripture on diversity and non-normativity in a way that welcomes the anomalous in life. Through these approaches, Roe's

work reinforces convergences between disability and the Christian faith, providing a powerful conclusion to Canagarajah's chapter on religious disability rhetoric. While one might still wonder how these reflections relate to religions besides Christianity, the chapter contributes immensely to disability scholarship in its expert exploration of disability in relation to the Christian faith.

*Linguistic Incompetence* covers many areas regarding disability besides religion as well. The book's early chapters grapple with different models of disability apart from the previously mentioned moral model – such as the medical, social, embodiment, and geopolitical models. Canagarajah investigates the complex relationship between disability and his area of professional specialization: language (evinced through his tongue-in-cheek term: “language incompetence”). He observes that just as people with disabilities have been seen as less than due to certain “bodymind” (Price, 2011) characteristics, some linguistic practices have historically been considered less than, and continue to be viewed so in various settings. He also depicts ways these non-normative language users navigate their environments (just as disabled individuals do), through a case study of one migrant STEM scholar. He theorizes about intersectionality too. Noting his intersecting identities as a patient and a person of color in the US, he describes his experiences in a cancer ward filled mostly with White people, highlighting intersectionality's layers for both care recipients and caregivers.

The book's concluding chapter draws together arguments about disability and language “incompetence” to emphasize the power of vulnerability. Canagarajah recounts the vulnerability he felt as a humanities researcher going in to observe STEM scholars at work, and the fear he felt when remembering that a detection of cancer metastasis could halt his plans for future work. But, without romanticizing these precarities, he conveys the insights they could bring. He comments, for example, that his outsider status at these STEM meetings might have helped the scholars keep using their regular communication strategies uninhibited, which was key for his observations. He explains what cancer helps him realize about living in the moment. Thus, throughout, he demonstrates a keen sensitivity to disability's many possibilities, including the spiritual, offering an appreciation of the myriad forms life can take.