



Articles

Becoming and being an applied linguist: Celebrating the seminal work of Marilda Cavalcanti

Tornando-se e sendo um/a linguista aplicado/a: celebrando o trabalho pioneiro de Marilda Cavalcanti

Kanavillil Rajagopalan^{1,2,3}

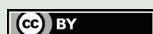
ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to offer some remarks on the important contribution of Prof. Marilda Cavalcanti to the development of the academic discipline called 'Applied Linguistics' in Brazil. It seeks to pay tribute to this great scholar and researcher for her pioneering spirit and dedication to the consolidation of the discipline in the Brazilian academic scenario, all too often in what appeared to many to be a gesture of rowing against the tide. After presenting a brief round-up of the challenges encountered by the pioneers and their tireless efforts to rid the field of the chokehold put on it by the so-called 'theoretical' linguistics, historically its 'elder sister', the text also proceeds to look at the 'north-south' stand-off that our researchers have been subjected to by their colleagues from the north, who still have difficulty in recognising that academic work of excellence can

1. Universidade Estadual de Campinas - Unicamp. Campinas – Brasil. <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3877-4936>. E-mail: rajagopalan@uol.com.br.

2. Universidade Estadual do Sudoeste da Bahia. Vitória da Conquista, Bahia – Brasil.

3. Universidade Federal do Tocantins. Palmas, Tocantins – Brasil.



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be carried out in our neck of the woods without the blessing or tutelage of whomsoever.

Keywords: *Marilda Cavalcanti; Applied Linguistics in Brazil; tension between theory and practice; tension between the North and the South; political dimension of applied research.*

RESUMO

Este trabalho tem por objetivo fazer algumas observações acerca da importante contribuição da Profa. Marilda Cavalcanti para o desenvolvimento da disciplina acadêmica chamada 'Linguística Aplicada' no Brasil. Ele presta tributo à estudiosa e pesquisadora pelo seu pioneirismo e dedicação à consolidação da disciplina no cenário acadêmico brasileiro, muitas vezes ao que parecia remando contra a maré. Após fazer um breve apanhado dos desafios encontrados pelos pioneiros no campo e de suas lutas incansáveis para livrar a área das garras da linguística dita 'teórica', historicamente sua 'irmã mais velha', o texto também discute a tensão 'norte-sul' que nossos pesquisadores têm sofrido nas mãos dos seus colegas do hemisfério norte que ainda relutam em reconhecer que trabalho acadêmico de grande valia possa ser feito em nosso quinhão sem a benção ou tutela constante de quem quer que seja. O texto termina com algumas rápidas observações sobre a dimensão política do trabalho realizado sob o rótulo de pesquisa aplicada.

Palavas-chave: *Marilda Cavalcanti; Linguística Aplicada no Brasil; tensão entre teoria e prática; tensão norte-sul; dimensão política da Linguística Aplicada.*

1. Introduction

In an interview given to the journal *Raído* in 2020, Cavalcanti (cf. Guimarães & Szundy, 2020) surveys the 30 years since the founding of the Brazilian Applied Linguistics Association (ALAB). At the outset of that interview, she recalls the early teething troubles that the then 'new kid on the block' in Brazilian academics called Applied Linguistics (hereafter, AL) had to perforce go through from its very start and especially in the 1990s, immediately following its

institutionalisation at the State University at Campinas, where she took up her teaching job and pursued a brilliant career till her retirement. She hastens to note that some of those challenges persist till to-date. “As regards the epistemologies that can be marshalled in order to face up to these challenges,” she says, “there are more avenues than one but, in my view, it is necessary to be critical, be imbued with integrity and be ethical. Furthermore, it is necessary to recognise and respect differences in diversity. For this to happen, no effort should be spared to turn the spotlight onto the social aspect of language, of discourse. In future, with an eye on the rear-view mirror, a historiography of AL may be able to come up with more definitive answers.” (Guimarães & Szundy, 2020, p. 468, my free translation)

Cavalcanti spoke from her own direct experience of involvement in the history of the association and her role as a leading exponent of the burgeoning new discipline and an activist. As the first elected President of ALAB and leading champion for promoting the field, she has borne witness to the often-camouflaged step-motherly treatment the association was meted out by many colleagues who claimed to represent the ‘nobler,’ theoretical side of the divide. The fact that things have changed substantially since then should not be taken to mean that the old prejudices have all dissipated, and that long-held suspicions are a thing of the past and not worth wasting our time about.

2. The afterlife of old prejudices

As a matter of fact, despite all talk of major changes in the way of characterizing the nature of AL and its epistemological credentials, the idea that the line that separates ‘pure’ theory from practice accruing from it is what is at stake has proved to be resistant to all discussions that seek to dispel and bury the topic once and for all. Suffice it to take a glance at the Wikipedia entry on ‘applied science’ (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Applied_science) where one reads: “Applied science is the use of existing scientific knowledge to practical goals, like *technology* or inventions.” And, if one were to type out the term ‘applied science’ in a Google search, one is immediately greeted by the following explanatory definition that puts more meat on the bone. Here’s what it says:

Applied science is a discipline that is used to apply existing scientific knowledge to develop more practical applications, for example: technology or inventions. In natural science, basic science (or pure science) is used to develop information to explain phenomena in the natural world. (accessed on February 10, 2021)

The key expression here is ‘existing scientific knowledge.’ The so-called ‘more practical applications’ are supposed to follow therefrom. According to such a division of labour, those entrusted with the latter task have no role to play whatsoever in the creation or development of the former. Rather, the implication is that the so-called ‘scientific knowledge’ comes ready-made and that all that one needs to do is to ‘apply’ it to the specific task at hand. One takes care of the all the tough, ‘cerebral’ part of the job. The other, attends to the more humdrum, mechanical, menial part of putting the theory to work!

3. The urgent need to reframe the old narrative

It is time to put an end to this all-too-familiar and anachronistic narrative and the innumerable ways in which the core idea that it promotes creeps back, along with all its unsavoury connotations, into common parlance and imagination.

Before everything else, it is important to register that scholars on both sides of the divide have, wittingly or otherwise, contributed to the standoff and its pernicious effects. After all, as the saying has it, it takes two to tango! In its early days, it was not uncommon to come across young scholars who justified their preference for AL by declaring their abhorrence of theory and mocking its aridity and other-worldliness. They saw AL as an escape from theory. With all their enthusiasm in highlighting their interest in the work-a-day world of actual, lived experiences, the advocates of this radical defence of AL unwittingly ended up playing into the hands of those who chided them for precisely their self-confessed lack of seriousness and scientific rigour or, for that matter, their apparent eagerness to cut corners in doing research, by eschewing hard-nosed investigative groundwork.

In a paper published as early as 1998, Cavalcanti made the following remark:

I like to think of AL as having a broad sense with no direct ligament to Linguistics, but as an area where one does theory in applied science. By the way, it is important to emphasise that theorisation is an essential component of applied research. While traversing boundaries, one doesn't "buy" a theory simply for the reason that it belongs to another field. There is a lengthy stage of appreciation, discussion and moves to modify, if need be. (Cavalcanti, 1998, p. 209, my translation)

Worth highlighting here are two portions of the above quote: 'an area where one does theory in applied science' and 'theorisation is an essential component of applied research.' For, what Cavalcanti is aiming to do here is to dispel, once and for all, any lingering suspicion on the part of some outsiders that AL is an academic field which rejects theory *tout court*. Instead, she insists — and I am in full agreement with her on this — that AL is obliged to craft its own theoretical baggage best suited to tackling the sort of problems it is interested in addressing, given that these are all real-world problems, involving men and women of flesh and blood, all with their own aspirations, frustrations, desires and moments of angst and what have you. Its practitioners are not averse to the idea of looking to Linguistics for useful tips every once in a while, but this doesn't mean kowtowing to its dictates or adhering to its strict code of do's and don'ts.

Coincidence or not, this also reminds us of the period when AL practitioners saw themselves as primarily, if not solely, concerned with language teaching. By drawing attention to language education as their primary concern, these early AL enthusiasts were indirectly declaring to one and all that theirs was a field of interest that had precious little to do with that of General or Theoretical Linguistics and had no interest whatsoever in studying language for its own sake, dissecting it to their hearts' content and contemplating it in awe and wonder. Or, if you like, that they were perfectly happy taking over from where their theoretically inclined cousins had left off, if only for the reason that it would set their field of activity distinctly apart from that of the latter. In 1978, Bernard Spolsky made an attempt to free the discipline of all the unwholesome baggage often associated with its qualifier "applied"

by proposing to rename it “educational linguistics” (see Spolsky, 1978). Now, to begin with, the very attempt to find a new appellation betrays the widespread sensation that the word ‘applied’ is ill-begotten from the very start and reveals a deep desire to dump it for good, once and for all. But the actual execution of that desire turned out to be easier said than done.

Part of the reason why Spolsky’s efforts to rebrand the field didn’t pay off the way it was hoped to was that it forced the scope of the research as well as the possibilities of its future development into a disciplinary straightjacket. This is so because, as more and more researchers joined the ranks of the emerging field, it soon struck many of them that what was most urgently need was to break free of the very epistemological gridlock that had been placed on investigative pathways and the uncritical manner in which many had hitherto come to accept them.

Long before the clarion call for unfettered INdisciplinarity (Moita Lopes, 2006a) became the order of the day, there were clear, albeit sporadic, signs that arbitrarily imposed restrictions on what to investigate and how (and how not) to go about investigating it only helped stymie research by means that in turn only stifled the growth of the very discipline. In other words, it seems true to say that the field of AL has always been characterised by a certain spirit of waywardness and refusal to toe the line just because that was how it is supposed to be done (by the powers that be!). Many had been itching to do a cartwheel if only to proclaim to one and all that they would no longer be restrained by ‘the norms of good scientific behaviour’ dreamed up by those who had ulterior motives of their own.

4. Why just tweaking the old narrative won’t to do the job!

In her 2020 interview referred to at the beginning of this paper, Cavalcanti (p. 466) reminisces about the early days when AL was still on the lookout for ‘an agenda of research and action’ all its own and, after an initial stage of almost exclusive attention to language learning/teaching and teacher education, there came a stage marked by “an interest in expanding the scope of the studies” and “conceiving of AL

as a point of interface with other areas of knowledge, be they other language-related ones, but even more importantly, social sciences, anthropology, history, human and social geography, among others.” No doubt something along these lines is just what may rightly be considered a distinguishing trait of AL’s development as an academic discipline over the years. But the way it is being described here has an unintended consequence: it papers over what forces were at work behind the curtains – forces that finally led to the discipline going overboard with respect to its initially erected fences. I do not mean this to be a major lapse on the part of the interviewee; far from it. As I will seek to show below, the way we frame things often projects images that far outstrip our communicative intentions, often unbeknownst to ourselves. Choice of words such as “an interest in expanding the scope of the studies” may lead someone to think that the decision to look for fresh pastures was a matter of broadening one’s viewpoint out of sheer curiosity or a spirit of adventure at best, or out of pure diletantism at worst.

The real inside story, I suggest, couldn’t be more diverse than that. It runs roughly along the following lines. As AL progressed along the path it had chosen to follow, it soon became evident that a good part of many of the founding assumptions of the disciplinary matrix – namely, theoretical linguistics – that it had initially opted for were a stumbling block rather than a helpful guide to the conduct of their research. This means that the search for new epistemologies and working tools, as well as new disciplinary matrices, was not a matter of mere choice or personal (or collective) preference; rather, it was matter of absolute necessity. I will illustrate the case I am making by exploring at some length an important issue raised by Cavalacanti during that interview.

Early on in that interview, Cavalcanti is queried about an idea she defended in an article she wrote in 1986 wherein she made no secret of her choice of viewing research in AL as socially informed linguistic practice. Cavalcanti’s response mostly centred around the pressures from hard-core linguists and their objections to AL choosing to cut off all institutional ties with its “parent” discipline and hence, presumably mark its own territory as a form of pressing its case as an independent discipline. So far, so good. But what gets passed over in silence here is that the call for seeing language as a socially-inscribed practice was not just a choice among many alternative (and, by implication, equally

valid) routes that were available. Were it so, it would be no more than just one of the many ways, all of which lead to Rome, as the saying goes. Rather, as I believe, it stemmed from a sense of utter desperation with the highhandedness with which their theory-first cousins had imposed their favourite parlour-game of contemplating language in total isolation from the rest of the world and the ‘worldliness’ accompanying the phenomenon that many thought was only a nasty distraction.

5. Interest in the real world and the need for new tools to deal with it

What really interests the practitioner of AL is the real world, the one of lived reality. Life here is a far cry from what it looks like when contemplated from the Olympian heights of highfalutin theory. Unlike the case of its worldly counterpart, here a solitary speaker can claim total ownership of a language closed unto itself that they can go on speaking infinitely and *ad nauseam*. Furthermore, in this dream-world the inhabitants behave like pre-programmed robots and potential conflicts of interest, if and when they arise, are defused by boy-scout-like mutual cooperation and all the rest.

In the actual world of lived reality, the Olympian principle of ‘one size fits all’ simply is of no use. Practice is highly context-sensitive. When you are dealing with actual people in actual situations and at specific critical moments along a time path, it is imperative that researchers take into account not just what they can bring to bear on the case in hand from their past experiences from similar cases but also the idiosyncrasies that mark the new case under the microscope. As a matter of fact, wisdom developed from past experience may at best serve as a guide but even here there is a real danger of past experiences skewing the researchers’ expectations and effectively putting blinkers on their capacity to see things in their entirety. The researcher in AL therefore needs to be attentive to the nuances and specificities of every new case if they wish to make their investigation bear any worth-while fruit. That’s where the crucial issue of regionalizing AL research in all the four corners of the world comes in.

6. Regionalisation and the ‘struggle within a struggle’

Once again, the interview given by Cavalcanti throws important light on what is at stake. Cavalcanti is prodded (p. 468) by her interviewers in the afore-mentioned paper to say where she stood in relation to this vital question. After conceding the existence of occasional and sporadic contacts with scholars from neighbouring countries like Peru, Colombia, Chile and so forth, Cavalcanti is quick to point out that “[i]n all these cases, AL, in and of itself, assumed as such, was not there on the side of Latin Americans. It was under the shadow of areas like Education and Linguistics.” This has been a recurrent lamentation in Cavalcanti’s writings on the issue, as her 2004 paper in the *AILA Review* reveals – a paper that the present writer cited in support of his claim (Rajagopalan, 2005, p. 1) that such a thing as a distinctive Latin American identity was and probably still is a project yet to be realized (despite all the overwhelming eagerness for postulating one).

And Cavalcanti is absolutely right in suggesting that, in matters of academic research, Latin America is still, by and large, unceremoniously sidelined and given short shrift by their European and American colleagues who often make no secret of their belief that it is they who rule the roost and have the right to do so. A glaring example of this is the scandalous book *A History of Applied Linguistics*, written by de Bot (2015). In a not-so-laudatory review that I wrote of the book, I felt it was inappropriate for me beat around the bush and instead opted to get straight to the heart of the matter.

The author [i.e. de Bot], it must be conceded to his credit, doesn’t mince matters and makes a clean breast of his decision to restrict the field: “The overwhelming majority [of the informants] is from the United States, there is a sizable number of British and Canadian informants, but small numbers from other countries like Sweden, PRC, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Israel, the Netherlands, Austria, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and Spain. There are no informants from South/Middle America and the southern and eastern part of Europe, apart from Spain.” (p. 10). Such fine-grained and painstaking cherry picking is to be profoundly lamented. What is even more striking is the author’s own frank admission that “[t]he sample is probably not representative for the current AL population” and, furthermore, “[w]hole parts of the world are not represented.” To confound matters, de Bot hastens

to add: “This may or may not be a problem.” (p.23) Being slanted one way or another when recounting the story of an academic discipline is, up to a point, understandable; it may, in fact, be even deemed unavoidable. But recognizing that one is and doing nothing to make amends for it or ameliorate its baleful effects is by no means excusable. (Rajagopalan, 2016, p. 137)

(N. B.: Lest the reader of this paper, uninformed of a critical detail, be misled by the use of the word ‘informants’ by the author of the book under review, I hasten to note that the word refers to working researchers in AL from different parts of the world and it is de Bot’s stated intention to write a history of the discipline as told by its own practitioners, his ‘informants’.) Going back to de Bot’s choice of his ‘informants,’ what such blatant cases of downright discrimination tells us is that AL scholars in Latin America (as well as those in Asia and Africa) are faced with a curious ‘double whammy’ when it comes to making their voices heard: ‘curious’ because they need to get involved in a long-drawn-out, two-staged struggle that often leaves a bitter taste in their mouth, not once, but twice. First, defending their own option to pursue applied research, instead of its “pure” counterpart considered more ‘serious’ and ‘nobler’ by many. Second, defending their need to forge their own tools and finding their own singular pathways best suited to grappling with a reality that is unique to their history and position in the world. A struggle within another, much broader struggle! Perhaps a more picturesque way to describe these twin challenges would be to evoke the image of the famous Russian nesting dolls – you prise open one and – lo and behold! – there’s another one awaiting its turn to reveal an unsuspected surprise!

7. *Southing* as action geared towards the construction of novel knowledge-bases and techniques of troubleshooting

I take it as fair uncontroversial by now that what is most urgently needed if we, here in South America, are to make any significant headway at all in our efforts to make our research more faithful to our reality, is to start constructing a new knowledge-base, not by building on from where our European colleagues left off, but by interrogating the very premises that have undergirded crucial elements of the knowledge

base they have drawn from all along. In her entry entitled ‘Applied Linguistics in South America’ in *The Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics*, Cavalcanti (2006b, p. 370) asks rhetorically: “[...] how could one explain that many a time, it may be easier to find out about research being developed in countries which constitute South America in conferences either in the United States or in Europe rather than in South America itself?” She goes on to attribute the ‘lack of interchange’ amongst South American intelligentsia to their ‘naturalised colonial memory’ which encourages them to “look north” for inspiration and guidance.

This idea, whose germinal roots can be traced back to the movement for cultural cannibalism which sprouted in Brazil in the early decades of the 20th century and later gained full momentum through the work of Paulo Freire, amounted to a forceful exhortation to researchers to free themselves of the shackles of the familiar Eurocentric approach to knowledge formation, along with all its ancillary accoutrements. The message that scholars like Kleiman (2013), Moita Lopes (2006b), Signorini and indeed Cavalcanti, among others, were putting forward couldn’t be any clearer. They were clamouring for a thorough overhaul of the very theoretical paraphernalia with which local problems were customarily addressed. If these time-honoured theoretical orientations proved not to be helpful, well it is high time, they argued, we ditched them unceremoniously — even if it meant ruffling some feathers.

The rationale for viewing local reality without the help of borrowed lenses is simple and straightforward. First and foremost, the borrowed lenses, no matter how tried and tested they may be, distort the image thanks to built-in preprogramming. This in turn arises from the fact that viewing itself is never ‘innocent.’ That Cavalcanti has been acutely aware of this, especially in the context of fieldwork conducted amongst minorities and disadvantaged segments of the population, is evident in the following excerpt from a text she wrote addressing meta-theoretical and meta-methodological issues in AL:

[...] theoretical and methodological inquiries by the researcher raise questions that, in turn, come up against their political commitments that, in turn, open up to ethical issues. (my translation) (Cavalcanti, 2006a, p. 234)

The very word ‘theory’ has the idea of viewing or contemplation as its Greek etymological root; hence to claim that viewing is never politically ‘innocent’ is to say that all theory-building is an activity imbued with political connotations.

Going back to the notion of ‘southing,’ it becomes fairly easy to recognise that the whole issue is not simply an alternative epistemological pathway; rather, it turns out to be a political imperative as far as researchers in South America, Africa and Asia — so-called periphery — are concerned. This is so because the one route that we have been persuaded by the powers that be to traverse all along is itself politically ‘tarred’ and serves the interests of forces with ulterior motives of their own. Or, to put it even more starkly, southing is political to the hilt and a constant reminder that the very enterprise of epistemology is riddled with political, often unconfessable, interests. Not to recognise this is to play ostrich in respect of the researchers’ moral and social responsibility as well as accountability. On the other hand, anyone who consciously adopts the attitude of southing as their point of departure in their research is engaging themselves in political activism.

8. Academic research and political activism: why AL can ill afford to shy away from the latter

It is probably true to say that a dramatic change of seismic proportions that has happened over the past two or three decades in the ‘periphery’ of the world of academic research (namely, countries of South America, Africa and Asia – precisely the ones that de Bot thought it perfectly normal to leave out in his self-styled history of AL, referred to earlier on) is a gradual political awakening and an accompanying moment of ‘conscientisation’ (to use the Freirean coinage that best describes the phenomenon) of the political underpinnings of specific theoretical stances taken, especially in human and social sciences, among them AL. In the case of AL, scholars like Cavalcanti stand out among their South American colleagues as pioneers who spearheaded the movement for doing their research with a local ‘colouring,’ sensitive to the specificities and peculiarities that mark the region, as well as making sure that their findings correspond to the best interests of the

people they work with. This comes out clearly in Cavalcanti's important work amongst the indigenous communities of the north of Brazil and her continued insistence, following the ground-breaking lead of Tuhiwai Smith (1999), of doing research from an empowering, insider's outlook (cf. Cavalcanti, 2006a, p. 240-250) that attests to her readiness to abdicate one-size-fits-all approaches to theorizing top-down, but instead work one's way up from the reality on the ground along with a full appreciation of how the members of the community themselves think of what is in their best interest. For scholars like Cavalcanti and others, success in researching marginalised communities is conditional upon answering Tuhiwai Smith's exhortation to "decolonise" western methodologies with their unashamedly ethnocentric moorings.

9. A parting note on the politics of all applied research worth the name

Perhaps it is only fitting that we conclude this paper celebrating Marilda Cavalcanti's exemplary contribution to the growth of AL, particularly in Brazil but also in the world at large, by taking some time to expatiate upon AL and its political ramifications or, simply, the 'politics of AL.' While scholars claiming to do "pure" theory have long debated among themselves whether or not their work has or should have any political dimension at all or whether or not it is worthwhile even talking about the topic, those doing work in so-called "applied" areas have no such option but to admit straightaway that theirs is an activity that is shot through with choices and decisions of an incontrovertibly political nature.

In AL, this is all the more clamant if only for the reason that it involves language which is, let us remind ourselves, itself a slippery object that does not exist as a palpable entity in the world of sensory experiences, a truism all too often overlooked even by some linguists. For the truth of the matter is that language only exists as such by one's decision to talk about it in the first place or by *linguaging* about it (to use that term due to the Chilean biologist Humberto Maturana). The process invariably precedes the product.

Nonetheless, in Nigel Love's words, "The main trend in modern linguistics has been to take the products of these processes as *realia*, and to retroject them on to languagers as the basis for their languaging activities" (Love, 2017, p. 113). By contrast, the researcher in AL has no such ontological legerdemain to seek refuge in inasmuch as they are not interested in language as an end in itself, but only insofar it opens a window into real-life issues of social inequalities and injustices and how they are constantly fomented in and through language.

The point raised in the foregoing paragraph has major implications for the choices that the AL researchers make when alternative approaches to conceiving of the very phenomenon of language present themselves. For instance, the million-dollar question of whether or not language should be conceived of as primarily a mental object and only subsequently as having a secondary role in the formation and maintenance of social ties or whether, that sequence should be seen as precisely the other way around. For an AL researcher, the answer to that question — an exhilarating brain-teaser to the theory-obsessed linguist — turns out to be a no-brainer.

When, for instance, AL researchers like Cavalcanti insist on viewing the phenomenon of deafness as a 'socio-anthropological reality' (cf. Kumada, Cavalcanti & Silva, 2019), they are pointing to the possibility of a more fair-minded and congenial way of looking at the lot of hearing-impaired people in educational context and denouncing prevailing practices of downplaying their legitimate grievances by denying them their claims to full-fledged multilinguality (thanks to a frequently-adopted deficit view of sign language). Here, as elsewhere, their embrace of language as a social practice is of utmost significance; far from constituting merely one of several alternative routes to their stated goal (chosen on, say, a coin-toss), their decision is consequential and has a direct bearing on the conclusions they are able to reach. The answer to the question 'Could they have reached the same goal if they had started with a working definition of deafness as a biological reality' is anybody's guess.

One important takeaway from the discussion above is that AL is not a field of inquiry that is averse to theory or totally bereft thereof as a matter of principle, contrary to what some have been ill-advisedly led to think. Rather, what AL is just not interested in doing is engaging with theory for its own sake, as though it were an exciting parlour game

with no ulterior motive. Theory, for AL, is a means to an end; not an end in itself. Recall Cavalcanti's assertion that "theorisation is an essential component of applied research" (Cavalcanti, 1998, p. 209) that I cited earlier on in this paper. That said, if one were to insist that all practice necessarily revolves around some theory or another (whether or not, made explicit or recognized as such), so be it (Rajagopalan, 1998). After all there is another sense in which any practice can be theorized, if one means by that term simply the very possibility of rationalising the process involved (which is what we are presently engaged in). It is important to point out this is not the same thing as saying that, without the prior availability of a theory, there would be no viable practice — in my view, a completely flawed argument that many nevertheless seem to hold and assume to be a corollary of that 'wider net' definition, something I have referred to elsewhere as a 'Socratic curse' – cf. Rajagopalan, 2003, 2019).

As Cavalcanti has insisted all along what makes research in AL stand out, is the readiness with which the field-worker is willing to go the extra mile of empathising with the lot of those whose life they closely monitor, of putting themselves in the shoes of the people amongst whom they conduct their studies and whose cause they wholeheartedly take up. As she recalls her own experience of working with disadvantaged indigenous people in far-flung regions of Brazil, it "opened the possibility of hearing and seeing things from someone else's perspective, or of realising in actual practice the idea of alterity" (Cavalcanti, 2006a, p. 249) – something later characterized by her, in the footsteps of Tuhiwai Smith (1999) as the "insider perspective" resulting in "reflexive practice."

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Conflict of interest

I declare that I have no affiliations or involvement with institutions that may have financial or non-financial interests with the subject matter discussed in the article.

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