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Composition Forum 37, Fall 2017

Review of Nichole E. Stanford's *Good God but You Smart!: Language Prejudice and Upwardly Mobile Cajuns*

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Amanda Sladek

Stanford, Nichole E. *Good God but You Smart!: Language Prejudice and Upwardly Mobile Cajuns*. Utah State UP, 2016. 303 pp.

I began reading Nichole E. Stanford's *Good God but You Smart!* as I graded the final projects from my English for Academic Purposes course. Knowing that the course attracted a high percentage of multilingual writers, I'd attempted a translanguaging approach and encouraged students to code-mesh to whatever extent they chose. While most of my students responded positively and code-meshed freely in their literacy narratives, I found that most students didn't extend it to their other projects. Despite my attempts to honor students' diverse language resources, the more "academic" projects seemed to trigger linguistic insecurity. Several students said that they weren't "good" at academic writing in English, and all but one eventually asked me to mark their "nonstandard" usage. I understood their reasoning, of course, as "correct" English is valued in other courses and the job market. Still, as someone who grew up speaking a dialect close to the one expected by the academy, I know I can never truly understand the positions that many of my students find themselves in.

For me, that is what makes works like Stanford's so illuminating. Stanford, a Cajun scholar, provides an account of how attitudes toward Cajun English (CE) perpetuate and are perpetuated by an economic system designed to maintain unequal power relations. While non-Cajun Americans are interested in what they see as Cajun culture, Stanford explains that most misunderstand what "Cajun" means, conflating the terms "Cajun, Creole, Louisiana, and New Orleans" (57). While Cajuns themselves are an ethnically diverse group determined primarily by cultural identification, modern-day Cajun culture was established by the descendants of Acadians who settled in South Louisiana (36-7). Despite increasing interest in certain aspects of Cajun culture, Cajuns themselves are still subjected to stereotyping, misunderstanding, and discrimination. Reality shows like The History Channel's [Swamp People](#) and CMT's [Party Down South](#) often portray Cajuns as drunks, hillbillies, fools, or sex objects.

As explained in Stanford's introduction, this stereotyping extends to bias against speakers of CE, leading many Cajuns to censor CE features from their speech to achieve professional success. Throughout her book, Stanford skillfully combines memoir, family history, archival research, and survey data to explain to a general audience how Louisiana's history of linguistic and cultural discrimination has led to current attitudes toward Cajun culture and CE. This is perhaps most evident in the introduction, which interweaves literature review and literacy narrative. Stanford situates her text in the history of language issues in composition pedagogy, including [Students' Right to Their Own Language](#) and more recent code-meshing pedagogies. Because this is the first book-length study of CE in rhetoric and composition, these connections establish the text's significance for non-specialists and provide useful context for the rest of the book.

The first chapter examines stereotypes surrounding Cajun culture and language. Though CE emerged as an identity marker during the "Cajun Renaissance" of the 1970s, most speakers still censor Cajun features from their speech due to widespread public perceptions of the dialect. Stanford describes this complex dynamic in economic terms:

... Cajun ways of speaking aren't worth much in this economy. The pop culture representations of Cajuns ... reveal hegemonic attitudes toward Cajuns as—well—not exactly CEO material. ... So trying not to sound Cajun, especially in high-stakes situations like job interviews and writing exams, winds up being the responsible thing to do, like dressing nice and being punctual. (47)

Though CE is a source of cultural pride, speakers have internalized many of the stereotypes associated with Cajuns,

or at least comply with standardized English when necessary. She theorizes this using Pierre Bourdieu's idea of the "legitimate language," which likens language to currency. With the right amount of linguistic capital, a person can "buy" education, a prestigious job, and other markers of economic success. However, the legitimate language, "like paper money, only has value because we believe in it and comply with it," even if this compliance isn't completely voluntary (48). This theoretical framework aligns with the way upwardly mobile speakers of CE view their own language, and Stanford does an admirable job of explaining Bourdieu's complex theories to a general readership.

Stanford furthers her economic argument in the second chapter. Here, she integrates Bourdieu's legitimate language with a history of language standardization and a thorough, accessible explanation of standardization's linkage to language instruction. As she explains, the pejorative term "Cajun" emerged after the Civil War to refer to Acadians who did not assimilate into the mainstream southern economy, relying instead on community and kinship networks (109-10). Industrialization eventually drove Cajuns to adopt "American" economic values, including the interrelated desires for material wealth and linguistic capital. This assimilation, she notes, was largely completed by the 1920s, when post-WWI nationalism led to French being banned in schools and Cajuns internalizing the belief that their language was inferior (116).

Chapter Three takes a deep dive into this French ban and its effects on Cajun culture. While there is not much information on this period, Stanford combines archival research and family history to demonstrate how anti-Cajun language attitudes were normalized in schools. Some of the most memorable passages of the book come from Stanford's archival sources, as participants describe the harsh and often cruel punishments they endured for speaking French in the classroom. For example, one woman explains that, because she spoke no English when she began school, "I had no idea how to ask to go to the bath facilities. Therefore my biggest punishment was that I had to return to infancy and use my clothes. I was spanked by the teacher, then by my parents for doing this terrible deed" (151). Stanford presents these accounts with little interpretation or analysis, letting the survivors speak for themselves (147-55). While this is a powerful and rhetorically effective choice, her decision to standardize spelling and grammar in these passages (she explains her rationale on pages 146-47) can unfortunately be read as filtering their words through the legitimate language, a practice she otherwise avoids.

The fourth and fifth chapters shift focus back to the present moment, and to institutions and attitudes that uphold language prejudice. The fourth centers on the classroom, though Stanford emphasizes that linguistically tolerant pedagogy isn't enough in an educational context designed to maintain class structure. She supports this point with an illuminating analysis of how educational trends have historically emerged to meet the needs of the changing economy. This chapter also presents the results of a survey Stanford conducted to assess Louisiana writing instructors' views toward CE, concluding that most surveyed instructors have positive views of CE and advocate some sort of code switching pedagogy (see Appendix for her complete survey and all participants' unedited responses).

I found Stanford's discussion of code switching to be one of her most compelling arguments. She acknowledges that "code switching" has different meanings in linguistics and education, proposing the term "code censoring" to replace what composition scholars have come to call "code switching" in educational contexts: "Educational code switching is the exact opposite of linguistic code switching because it requires absolute compartmentalization of language. ... The point is to eradicate illegitimate languages completely from classroom writing" (186). As someone who works in both composition and language studies, I find Stanford's term to be a more useful description of what many "code switching" pedagogies require of students, and one that clarifies cross-disciplinary misunderstandings. She persuasively argues that code censoring accommodates audience prejudice, teaching students to avoid discrimination rather than to communicate effectively (186). She advocates a translingual pedagogy like the one advocated by Suresh Canagarajah in *Translingual Practice*. However, she emphasizes that translingual pedagogies, like all pedagogies, can serve oppressive sociopolitical purposes and must therefore be taught critically (210-11).

The fifth and final chapter begins by unpacking several myths that lead to language discrimination, such as the belief that everyone has equal access to the prestige dialect (218-21) and that a national language is necessary for national unity (223-25). Stanford argues that to achieve language equality, these myths must first be dismantled. While language scholars and educators have a particular responsibility to work toward this, Stanford also provides strategies that the general population can use to help combat language prejudice. Anyone can begin by simply starting a dialogue about language issues, allowing people to form their own conclusions. I appreciate that Stanford's proposed courses of action extend beyond the realm of pedagogy because, as she consistently points out, language prejudice reaches far beyond the school system. Devoting the final chapter to strategies anyone can implement is therefore an effective move.

What I found most engaging about *Good God but You Smart!* was Stanford's innovative blending of the personal and academic. Though she does not explicitly position her text as autoethnography, it does seem to draw on that genre, which Canagarajah argues "enables marginalized communities to publish their own culture and experiences in their

own voices, resisting the knowledge constructed about them” (“Autoethnography” 115). Indeed, Stanford’s use of personal experience and family history pushes back against dominant stereotypes of Cajun culture and language. While she carries on the language/literacy ethnography tradition established by works like Heath’s *Ways with Words*, this book distinguishes itself by offering both an academic and an insider’s perspective.

Perhaps influenced by her membership in the community, Stanford also makes a point to consistently acknowledge the agency of CE speakers, including the agency involved in conforming to standardized English. She further acknowledges this agency by addressing her text not only to academics, but to general readers, including CE speakers. I applaud this approach, as limiting discussions of language discrimination to academic circles can perpetuate discrimination by limiting access for marginalized people. Stanford’s dual focus on academic and general readers is evident throughout the text. She keeps jargon to a minimum, explains her arguments clearly, and illustrates her more complex points with concrete examples. While these aspects of the text are aimed toward her non-academic readers, they also make the book more engaging from an academic perspective.

Stanford also consistently presents the perspectives of everyday Cajuns as “expert” analyses. This is particularly evident in the third chapter, which draws on Bourdieu, historians’ accounts, and publications from the time of the French ban, but also devotes significant space to sharing former students’ stories, including the one quoted above. In fact, the chapter’s title comes from one of these students, who shares: “We were punished by writing on the blackboard 100 times: I will not speak French in school” (148). Incorporating everyday Cajuns’ personal accounts of this period further acknowledges Cajuns as experts on their own experience, a powerful stance for an academic text to take, particularly considering academia’s history of working to eradicate Cajun culture.

While Stanford’s text is well-grounded in history, theory, and composition scholarship, her points regarding language itself receive comparatively less development. For instance, Stanford describes Cajuns as an “internally colonized” community (34) and discusses colonization’s effects on the development of CE. Yet, in writing about the language use of a “postcolonial” community, she does not draw upon the considerable scholarship on postcolonial Englishes from the field of language studies. This choice is likely intentional, as Stanford expresses discomfort with the study of World Englishes (WEs). She notes that English as a lingua franca “enables the global circulation of capital, which replaces independent, subsistence economies with exploitative, export dependent economies ... ” (224). While this is true and troubling, she leaves this complex phenomenon unexplored; the study of World Englishes can, like her study of CE, shed light on how oppressive systems are maintained and highlight speaker agency in appropriating the English language. It is also important to consider global speakers’ use of English for intranational purposes. For instance, in India, English is often regarded as an equalizing language that carries less cultural baggage for internal communication than the 1,652 [native regional languages](#) (Gargesh 94). Stanford also states that she is hesitant to embrace WE study because she predicts that Englishes associated with nation-states will eventually have more prestige than internal varieties like CE because of their level of economic and military backing (224). While this reasoning makes sense, any predictions about the future of the language are by nature speculative. Without engaging with WE study, it is difficult to provide evidence to support these claims.

Assuming CE can be considered a postcolonial variety (a reasonable assumption based on what’s presented in the text), Cajuns’ status as an *internally* colonized group could have interesting implications for the study of other (global) postcolonial Englishes. For example, it would be interesting to assess the degree to which internally colonized Englishes fit Edgar W. Schneider’s [Dynamic Model](#) of postcolonial English development. These issues do not detract from Stanford’s central points regarding language prejudice and self-censoring. However, as Canagarajah notes in his introduction to Stanford’s text, CE has received limited attention compared to other Englishes, and “it is important ... to examine how the status and history of Cajun English are both similar to and different from those of other ethnic varieties” (viii). More detail about the dialect itself would facilitate these comparisons.

Overall, Stanford’s *Good God but You Smart!* is an interesting, thoughtful, and highly readable study of language use in the Cajun community. It not only helped me understand a culture I didn’t know much about, but it also enabled me to reflect on the role I and all teachers play in sorting students into the American class system. It helped me see my students’ struggles in a new light. As educators work to enact linguistically empowering pedagogies, texts like Stanford’s remind us to keep the larger picture in mind—the system upheld not only by schools, but by families, communities, and other social networks. While it remains essential to fight for language equality in education, it will never be enough unless composition and language scholars take our research directly to those it most affects. Stanford’s text does just that, and while its contribution to the academic conversation is significant, I believe its implications for the larger cultural conversation surrounding language can be even greater.

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"Review of Stanford, GOOD GOD" from *Composition Forum 37* (Fall 2017)

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