Keeping It Real Despite the Risks: Im/politeness, Rachel Jeantel, and Black Girls' Codes

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Im/politeness, though nebulously defined, may be viewed as a uniquely human practice concerned with how people interact in their social world through the use of language and actions. General linguistic theorizing aims at universalizing im/politeness, ultimately identifying common components within human im/politeness systems worldwide. Thus, interrogations of im/politeness function as markers of humanity. Currently, there is a void in this area. Scholars have not examined im/politeness sufficiently, nor generated a theory of im/politeness as it operates within the African American speech community [a non-contiguous community connected through historical events, racialization, language, and identity]. In fact, a paucity of scholarship exists on the topic from African American perspectives. Although politeness has received attention since 1975 with Lakoff's canonical *Language and Woman's Place*, politeness and impoliteness are shrouded in hegemonic frames. As a result, human knowledge and theorizing on im/politeness, especially cross-culturally in U. S. contexts, is incomplete.

The most prominent approach to im/politeness research over the last twenty-seven years is Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory on 'face.' Does 'face' theory apply to various cultural groups as the primary organizer of im/politeness? Although Culpeper (2011) highlights interactional analysis within context as important, 'face,' nonetheless, receives prime positioning. 'Face,' however, may appear as *a metaphor we* [humans] *live by* (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980) in certain cultures as a result of dominance conditions; thus, 'face' may have limited applicability.

To add to current theorizing and index a variationist positionality, I focus on im/politeness within African American contexts, seeking to interject a varied accounting so that the theorizing may be more fully constitutive of what makes us human. My approach is (1) postmodern and (2) discursive: (1) postmodern in its interrogation of language and power and rejection of positivism and Eurocentric masculinist knowledge validation systems (Collins, 1990); and (2) discursive because it situates im/politeness "within the realm of everyday discourse" (Watts, 2003, p. 9). Watts (2003) argues that a socially real theory should focus on first-order im/politeness as well as the discursive struggle over im/politeness, ways in which lay members of speech communities discuss and evaluate im/polite behaviors. The everyday discursive struggle rather than social scientists' interpretations centers my approach to discursivity.

Linguistically, there are stereotypical labels recycled for Black females, marking them as outside the boundaries of politeness, for example, *talking smart*. Analyses of Black women's linguistic and nonlinguistic im/politeness behaviors provide one means of assessing machinations of im/politeness. For this paper, I analyze insider and outsider views on Rachel Jeantel's testimony during the *State of Florida v. George Zimmerman* trial as a microcosm of im/politeness interrogations. Key questions are: What linguistic and nonlinguistic practices marked Rachel Jeantel's performance? How do insiders/outsiders assess her behavior? Does Rachel display polite/impolite behavior? How? I used social media to analyze outsider and insider perspectives and ten face-to-face interviews with African American women, aged 22-65, for closer insider analysis. Although outside contexts and individuals may construct certain behaviors, such as *talking smart, talking assertively,* or *talking with an attitude,* as rude, insiders tend to index complexity of those implicitly *tolerated* behaviors.