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# ***Sassy Sasha?: The intersectionality of (im)politeness and sociolinguistics***

<https://doi.org/10.1515/pr-2019-0005>

Received January 31, 2019; accepted May 5, 2020; published online July 27, 2021

**Abstract:** This article focuses on intersections of race, gender, class, and (im)politeness within the African American speech community (AASC). Although general linguistic theorizing aims at universalizing (im)politeness, ultimately identifying common components within human (im)politeness systems worldwide, African American perspectives have not been interjected within that broader theorizing. Thus, I examine (im)politeness from the perspective of African Americans with a focus on females' linguistic and nonlinguistic behaviors. A plethora of work examines, challenges, and refutes stereotypical gender. I explore facets of the stereotypical, particularly as applied to Black females with the aim of broadening understandings of (im)politeness based on cultural variation. Specifically, I examine *sassy* as a social construct when applied to Black women in U.S. contexts, especially two Black women's online assessments of sassy performativity by Sasha Obama, as a vehicle for allowing Black women's voices and experiences to enter into theory-making. The analysis is interpretative and idiographic. The two African American women bloggers' words and meanings suggest that (im)politeness within the AASC resides in sociolinguistics, not pragmatics. As a result of the analysis, I suggest that (im)politeness theorizing could pay attention to the *social embodiedness* of human polite and impolite behaviors. This, in part, constitutes the sociolinguistics of (im)politeness.

**Keywords:** Black women; sassy; socially constituted (im)politeness; stereotypical gender

In the name of white supremacy, every imaginable act of human atrocity was perpetrated against blacks.

Calvin Hernton (1987: 7–8)

At heart though, the relationship between Black women and the larger society has always been, and continues to be, adversarial.

Darlene Clark Hine (1989: 915)

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# 1 Introduction

This article focuses on intersections of race, gender, class, and (im)politeness<sup>1</sup> within the African American speech community (AASC). (Im)politeness, though nebulous, may be viewed as a uniquely human practice concerned with how people interact in their social world through the use of language and actions, which are evaluated as appropriate/inappropriate within specific social contexts (see Mills 2003 and Watts 2003, who focus on discursive struggle and first order [im]politeness). 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. I examine (im)politeness from the perspective of African Americans with a focus on females' linguistic and nonlinguistic behaviors. Currently, no other scholars have examined (im)politeness in this way, nor generated a theory of (im)politeness as it operates within the AASC. In fact, a paucity of scholarship exists on the topic from African American perspectives (see Morgan 2002). Although politeness has been interrogated since 1975 with Lakoff's canonical *Language and Woman's Place*, politeness and impoliteness are shrouded in hegemonic spaces and ensconced in stereotypical "Western," middle-class behavior (see Mills 2003). As a result, human knowledge and theorizing on (im)politeness, especially cross-culturally in U.S. contexts, is incomplete.

As a whole, I explore facets of the stereotypical, particularly as applied to U.S. Black females with the aim of broadening understandings of (im)politeness based on cultural variation. The article is divided into the following subsections: (1.1) stereotypical gender within Black female spaces; (2) critique of Brown and Levinson's (1978, 1987) (hereafter, B&L) theorizing on politeness; (3) cultural variational perspectives on/approaches to (im)politeness, particularly socially constituted (im)politeness; (4) sassy as a social practice; (5) two online data sites and analysis of Black women's frames for sassy; and (6) conclusion.

## 1.1 Stereotypical gender<sup>2</sup>

The literature (e.g., Collins 1990; Evans 1980; Giddings 1996; hooks 1981; Hull et al. 1982; Ladson-Billings 2009) on Black women in "Western" contexts documents

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<sup>1</sup> (im)politeness entails behaviors considered both polite and impolite.

<sup>2</sup> The contents in this article do not pertain to monolithic womanism (Troutman 1999: 217), nor a monolithic African American experience.

well the historically, socially, and hegemonically constructed behaviors of Black women and girls as angry, loud, loose, idle, and disorderly Jezebels, among other stereotypical images, which function as a counter-narrative to European American women's stereotypical gender (see Mills 2003) and a "homogenous womanhood" (Higginbotham 1992: 251). Hine (1989), in a historical examination of Black women and rape in the American Midwest during the late 19th and early 20th century, claims that Black women occupied and continue to occupy an adversarial relationship with society-at-large. Due to multiple oppressions (for example, rape, physical violence, gender differentiation, job inequity), those Midwestern Black women invented a culture of dissemblance, one that shielded their true selves and feelings, thus creating a "veil of secrecy" (Hine 1989: 915). Hine (1989: 915) makes stereotypical gender clear:

There would be no room on the pedestal for the southern Black lady. Nor could she join her white sisters in the prison of 'true womanhood.' In other words, stereotypes, negative images, and debilitating assumptions filled the space left empty due to inadequate and erroneous information about the true contributions, capabilities, and identities of Black women.

Aspects of the stereotypical, negative attributions to Black women's linguistic and nonlinguistic behavior can be gleaned from Olwell's (1996), *Loose, Idle and Disorderly: Slave Women in the Eighteenth-Century Charleston Marketplace*. Olwell examines one contradiction in the patriarchal statutes and customs of the marketplace in the 18th century. Those statutes followed the dominant ideology of patriarchal control, decision-making, superiority, and subordination of enslaved persons (also applicable to White women and children). Customary practices in the marketplace, however, centered on economic profit with slave marketeers (mostly enslaved Black women) producing extra profit for their masters and themselves. Thus, within the tentacles of a bestial, brutish enslavement system, Black women exercised some autonomy in the *Charles Town* marketplace to the dismay of some. Those in control, vexed by this expropriation of power, referred to the Black women, some enslaved, some fugitives, as loose, idle and disorderly negro women; wenches; idle negro wenches, leading lazy lives; insolent, abusive, notorious, impudent (Olwell 1996: 101–104).

Clearly, some power dimensions were reversed momentarily, which must have felt empowering though not extended more broadly for the marketeers. Importantly here, how did the Black female marketeers see themselves? How would they code their social and linguistic behavior? There are voids because their voices are absent. Secondly, although the enslaved Black women marketeers were accused of verbal defiance and abusive behavior in the selling of

market goods grown by Black labor for the sustenance of Blacks and Whites, complaints by Whites index an early record of stereotypical appellations applied to Black women.

Collins' (1990) work hones in on another historical accounting of stereotypical terminology and characterizations applied to African American women, particularly from an outsider frame of reference. Collins credits a Eurocentric Masculinist knowledge validation system (EMKVS hereafter) for the construction of four stereotypical images of Black women, which persist even today: mammy, matriarch, welfare mother, and Jezebel. hooks (1981) provides a detailed accounting of Black womanhood and devaluation, including stereotypical gender, within U.S. contexts. Particularly, she locates devaluation during enslavement when white men raped Black women, intentionally for profit, yet, more significantly, the acts/instantiations of rape were the cause of Black women's devalued social status then and now. According to hooks (1981: 52), that devalued social status has "permeated the psyches of all Americans. One only has to look at American television 24 h a day for an entire week to learn the way in which black women are perceived in American society—the predominant image is that of the 'fallen' woman, the whore, the slut, the prostitute." Additional scholarship on the stereotypical constructions of Black womanhood exists, premised in the work of hooks (1983), Crenshaw (1989), and Collins (1990). Indubitably, Black women regularly challenge stereotypical gender and reifications of the stereotypical in the U.S. (e.g., Anderson 1997; Atwater 2009; Crenshaw 1989; Hine 1989; Hine et al. 1995; Scott 2002). That body of work aims to make sense of the constructed behaviors and practices of some African American women's speech community (AAWSC) members, which may appear to others as non-deferential (lack of negative politeness), impolite (lack of concern for others), "unnecessary," "aggressive" (too powerful), or "inappropriate" (lack of respect) (see Evans 1980; Morris 2007).

Mills (2003) highlights another aspect of stereotypical gender pertaining to European women's experiences. Beyond hypothesized linguistic gender stereotypes (no bawdy<sup>3</sup> or direct language, yet reified use of affective language, weak particles, tag questions, hypercorrect grammar, etc.), middle-class women, fitting in the racialized category labeled "White", have historically been associated with polite behaviors. According to Mills (2003: 205), "politeness is often associated within English-speaking communities with being deferent, which Brown and Levinson have classified as negative politeness . . . and care for others, which is associated with stereotypes of femininity", particularly stereotypes of "White" femininity. Mills' characterization suggests an inherent weakness within the B&L

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<sup>3</sup> Bawdy refers to ribald language as discussed in Troutman (2006).

theorizing. There is an implicit bias toward one cultural frame of social reality embedded in the theory. Politeness under the B&L theorizing, then, reflects a tradition steeped in Eurocentricism.

## 2 Critique of the B&L theory

With the indexing of that flaw, it becomes clear, in part, that (im)politeness theorizing requires renewed attention, as post-B&L scholars have long advocated (Eelen 2001; Grainger et al. 2010; Haugh 2007; Mills 2003; Watts 2003). Furthermore, Brown and Levinson's (1987) pragmatics-based "face" theory is premised in the notion that politeness revolves around the projection and protection of "face", thus around the underlying principle, "Don't step on my face; I won't step on yours". B&L (1987: 61) express that principle as follows:

In general, people cooperate (and assume each other's cooperation) in maintaining face in interaction, such cooperation being based on the mutual vulnerability of face. That is, normally everyone's face depends on everyone else's being maintained, and since people can be expected to defend their faces if threatened, and in defending their own to threaten others' faces, it is in general in every participant's best interest to maintain each other's face ...

"Face", however, may not function as the main organizing principle for (im)polite behaviors cross-culturally. Not only do such critiques posit a bias towards individualism, yet they also highlight that such individualism may relate to certain cultures rather than to others, individualistic vis-à-vis collectivistic cultures (Ting-Toomey and Kurogi 1998). In this respect, accepting the critique of embeddedness in individualism, B&L's theory would function inadequately in accounting for (im)politeness behaviors. As well, accepting B&L's model of politeness would construct many Black women as impolite based upon stereotypical gender and outsider constructivism, particularly considering moves such as turn-taking or displays of camaraderie, including 'loud' Black girl moves. Thus, social factors (such as *race* or *age*) used regularly in societal constructions of human beings are treated as non-effectual or inconsequential in operations of (im)politeness. (For additional critiques, see Al-Hindawi and Alkhazaali 2016; Ameka and Terkourafi 2019; Mills 2011; Troutman 2010; Yarbrough 1997). Again, "face" may not function as the main organizing principle for polite or impolite behaviors when considering universal (im)politeness. Furthermore, evaluating polite behavior (concern for others and being deferent) would vary culturally (see Grainger et al. 2010; Xie 2003).

### 3 Politeness and impoliteness: a cultural variationist interrogation

An overview of research on (im)politeness following B&L, in general, raises the question of theoretical adequacy, particularly core questions: Does “face” theory really apply to various cultural groups as the primary organizer of (im)politeness? Has research sufficiently allowed for other theoretical models devoid of “face” attachments, including socially-centered models? For example, although Culpeper (2011) situates interactional analysis within context as important, “face”, nonetheless, receives prime positioning in his work. From different vantage points, including cultural and racialized positionings, key questions reverberate: Is “face” the modus operandi? The hinge for machinations of (im)politeness? (cf. Strecker 1993)<sup>4</sup> “Face” may appear as “a metaphor we [humans] live by” (Lakoff and Johnson 1980) in certain cultures as a result of cultural frames yet also as a result of dominance conditions and linguistic appropriations, thus, “face” may have limited applicability.

Ting-Toomey and Kurogi (1998: 189) discuss notions of collectivism and individualism in relation to negotiations of “face”<sup>5</sup> within conflict situations. They define collectivistic and individualistic cultures, as follows:

Basically, individualism refers to the broad value tendencies of a culture in emphasizing the importance of “I” identity over “we” identity, individual rights over group rights and personal self-esteem issues over social self-esteem issues. In comparison, collectivism refers to the broad value tendencies of a culture in emphasizing the importance of the “we” identity over the “I” identity, ingroup interests over individual interests and mutual-face concerns over self-face concerns.

They report that researchers have produced lots of theoretical and empirical evidence supporting a pervasiveness of individualism and collectivism within various cultures.

Culpeper (2011) briefly addresses claims of individualistic versus group perspectives, noting problems of exclusivity. His position is that cultures embed both individualistic and collectivistic tendencies, as Ting-Toomey and Kurogi (1998) had previously articulated in face-negotiation theory (see discussion below);

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<sup>4</sup> Strecker (1993) poses the question, “Do all cultures use “face” as a metaphor, or is “face” not universal” (2). Unlike my approach, he centers “face” in his analysis with an indexing of “face” limitations and the possibility of cultural variation, particularly as exhibited by the Hamar people in Ethiopia.

<sup>5</sup> Ting-Toomey and Kurogi (1998) invest in conceptions of “face” yet they identify “face” differently than B&L (1987), establishing individual and cultural face.

collectivism and individualism are not necessarily mutually exclusive within cultures yet there may be traces of one within the other. Ting-Toomey and Kurogi (1998: 189–90) clarify their point:

While both sets of value tendencies exist in the same culture and in each person, there are more situations in individualistic cultures that entail expectations for the “I-identity” and personal self-esteem enhancement responses and there are more situations in group-oriented cultures that entail expectations for the “we-identity” and social self-esteem enhancement responses.

Thus, some admixture of tendencies may appear “in the same culture and in each person” (Ting-Toomey and Kurogi 1998: 189); nevertheless, “I-identity” and “we-identity” manifest more often in the respective cultures. The individualistic and collectivistic frames, then, may hold social applicability within systems of (im)politeness. For example, many indigenous South Africans highlight collectivistic tendencies within *Ubuntu*: “a person is a person through other persons”, or “I am because we are”, which entails community, respect, caring, sharing, trust, helpfulness (Mandela interview 2012) warmth, unquestioning cooperation, openness, willing participation (Flippin 2012: para. 1; see Grainger et al. 2010). Mandela’s (2012) example below exemplifies the practice and philosophy:

A traveller through a country would stop at a village and he didn’t have to ask for food or for water. Once he stops, the people give him food, entertain him. That is one aspect of *Ubuntu*, but it will have various aspects. *Ubuntu* does not mean that people should not enrich themselves. The question therefore is: Are you going to do so in order to enable the community around you to be able to improve?

Culpeper (2011) mentions the inadequacy of B&L’s (1987) approach to politeness due to cross-cultural evidence, particularly, the theory’s lack of accountability for “group dynamics of at least some ‘non-western’ cultures” (Culpeper 2011: 21) as part of theoretical inadequacy. My preliminary analysis of community data within the AASC suggests that (im)politeness may reside in the realm of social conventions or sociality, akin to Spencer-Oatey’s (2000, 2008) conceptualization, sociality rights,<sup>6</sup> concerns with “personal/social expectancies” (2000: 14). It is not unreasonable, then, to consider that face and facework are not the modus operandi for systems of (im)politeness broadly yet other possibilities exist.

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<sup>6</sup> Spencer-Oatey aimed to improve upon B&L’s theory; in contradistinction to my claims, she centers aspects of rapport management within individualized face, the first component of rapport management.

### 3.1 (im)politeness as a social construct: aspects of socially constituted (im)politeness

“... no sentence is inherently polite or impolite. We often take certain expressions to be impolite, but *it is not the expressions themselves but the conditions under which they are used that determines the judgment of politeness.*”

Fraser and Nolen ([1981] 2011: 121; [emphasis mine]).

Although Fraser and Nolen ([1981] 2011) emphasized that linguistic expressions do not determine (im)politeness, I have expropriated their wording above to index the social. As Eelen (2001), Watts (2003) and Mills (2003) have established, I argue that first-order (im)politeness, i.e., (im)politeness1, not only holds a central position in (im)politeness interrogations, yet also first-order (im)politeness contributes to a construction of second-order (im)politeness, i.e., (im)politeness2. Thus, in the data below, two laypersons have contributed their understandings, experiences, and introspections concerning one performance act, *sassy*, as well as (im)politeness assessments. This is first-order (im)politeness. From those insider contributions, my aim is to outline second-order (im)politeness. Moreover, I wish to develop interrogations and theorizations of (im)politeness, which draw upon socially real behaviors and community knowledge and evaluations of behavior (accessed in various ways, including community texts, interviews, and observation/participation), thus corresponding to the knowledge, experiences, and everyday practices of community members—in contradistinction to Grainger’s (2018) focus on linguistic resources. Watts (2003: 9) aptly captures the point, “investigating first-order politeness is the only valid means of developing a social theory of politeness”, which I label for the present research, *socially constituted (im)politeness*. Particularly problematic has been the abstraction away from social group participants (Watts 2003: 9):

A theory of politeness2 should concern itself with the discursive struggle over politeness1, i.e. over the ways in which (im)polite behaviour is evaluated and commented on by lay members and not with ways in which social scientists lift the term ‘(im)politeness’ out of the realm of everyday discourse and elevate it to the status of a theoretical concept in what is frequently called Politeness Theory.

Researchers, within hegemonic/EMKVS traditions, may place themselves in subject position and language users in object position since the former decide answers to the “basic” pragmatic question, “*what did S mean by saying X?*” (Leech [2003] cited in Culpeper 2009: 533) Culpeper’s (2009: 524) statement below would disavow hegemony by positioning language users as knowers and experts, capable of answering central questions:

Politeness, then, involves ‘polite’ behaviours. What those behaviours, linguistic and non-linguistic, consist of, how they vary in context, and why they are considered ‘polite’ are some of the key areas of politeness study.

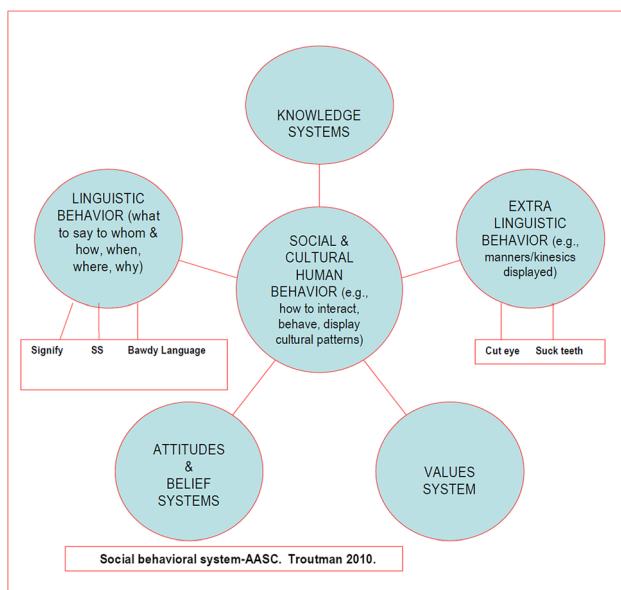
However, a pragmatics approach, intentionally or not, abstracts (im)politeness away from its very users, conveying to laypeople that they are not able to explain *what ... S mean[s] by saying X*. In so doing, there may be performances of social harm and (im)politeness, albeit unrecognizably and on a broader, more nuanced scale than intended by Tedeschi and Felson's (1994, cited in Culpeper 2011: 20) definition: "Social harm involves damage to the social identity of target persons and a lowering of their power or status. Social harm may be imposed by insults, reproaches, sarcasm, and various types of impolite behavior". Though researchers seek non-normative, descriptive theorizing, they are not capable of "becoming embroiled in first-order conceptualisations" (Watts 2003: 48) because descriptions and explanations require 'real' world language usage. Within first-order (im)politeness theorizing, (im)polite behaviors can be assessed by asking participants about their behaviors and knowledge in context. Importantly, (im)politeness indexes the social, "the ways in which individuals use language socially" (Watts 2003: 48) to be friendly, sarcastic, serious, humorous, non-committal, deferential, etc. As Watts (2003: 49) avers, "There is, *per definitionem*, no way of lifting (im)politeness1 out of the social world in which it realises various social values and reifying it as (im)politeness2. But this is precisely what has been done in one model of politeness after another" [emphasis mine].

Social theorizations of (im)politeness seem natural, from my primarily non-dominant positioning. Being human, in most cases, revolves around other humans: (1) existing and functioning as a human (senses of connectedness, belonging, identity, interactions); (2) nurturing and being nurtured; (3) learning and teaching cultural patterns/beliefs/values/traditions/language(s). Most humans are exposed to other humans, molding and being molded. Thus, systems of (im)politeness would seem to be generated out of human social behaviors, mutuality, and divergences (based on context, group historical conditions and decisions, individual decisions, and individual/group independence to follow or flout social rules). Such a system, I label a socially constituted system of (im)politeness.

Social norms can (and do) exist on a smaller, more local scale, for example, among non-dominant communities within a broader social context. From the positioning of non-dominant groups, there may be meta-social norms, emanating from the dominant culture/s and imposed in a modicum of ways upon less dominant cultures. For example, within U.S. school contexts, ABAB turn-taking takes precedence yet within communities of color other interactional patterns may occur at the local level. Simultaneous to the meta-social norms, less dominant cultures appear to develop and enact, in many cases, a different set of social norms, perhaps emanating from "indigenous" values, beliefs, and practices, as captured in Figure 1. In such cases, some of the meta-social norms may be viewed in a derogatory light and thus not practiced within the non-dominant cultures, for example, calling elders or parents' friends by their first names.

My argument here delves into epistemological, methodological, and theoretical framing. The power to explain should belong to the relevant speakers rather than extracting power from them. The explanation from laypersons would contribute to theory building, thus constituting a social theory of (im)politeness, which does not preclude the potential for a rich, complex theory. Such a theory, then, would emerge from and intersect with social practice. The theory would recognize the inextricability that the explanations reside amongst language users in context.

For the AASC in the U.S., a social theory of (im)politeness does not seem unreasonable. Within socio-historical contextualizations, memory runs deep in this community: Transatlantic thievery; the Middle Passage; denied human rights; linguistic melding; linguistic identity; socially constructed race/racism; almost four hundred years of labor without pay and/or inequitable pay (1619–2018); linguicism; educational atrocities; health disparities, Say Her Name, Black Lives Matter, and so on. Such historicity helped construct a social identity and aspects of community (Ladner 1998) – “a nation within a nation,” according to Black abolitionist Martin R. Delany (Gates 2013), aspects of that identity which have not been impervious to change over decades yet which hold many applicable tenets presently. (For example, recognizing another Black body by exchanging social greetings has waned yet still applies in various Black contexts. Greeting people collectively and/or individually upon entrance into a space has held social



**Figure 1:** (im)politeness schema – African American speech community.

applicability over many decades within various contexts, also.) Thus, some external ostracization, as well as values, traditions, beliefs, have helped formulate and shape insider identities and practices. The social aspects, then, appear salient. Figure 1 represents aspects of the complexity in socially constituted practices/behaviors within African American culture. Knowledge, values, and belief systems shape and inform socio-cultural behaviors and vice-versa. The linguistic and non-linguistic behaviors emanate from all the other systems. For example, *cut eye* (or rolling one's eyes) and *suck teeth* may reflect African cultural carryovers (see Rickford and Rickford 1976), which functioned under the horrors of enslavement, thus executed surreptitiously, for survival purposes. Due to proscribed human-to-human communicative exchanges, enslaved Africans needed some forms of displaying disapproval, dissatisfaction, even resistance to power moves. In this instance, understandings about expected socio-cultural behavior shaped, informed, and prescribed the non-linguistic acts.

## 4 Sassy as a Black social practice

The word sassy, and acts associated with it, could tread into nebulous waters within an African American context. Major (1994: 397) catalogs a positive and negative denotation used in both the South and North “(1930s–1950s) usually used to describe a little girl who is disobedient; vibrating and radiating with youthful energy”. This definition reflects, at least, an 87-year old denotation. The first meaning explicitly indexes little girls – no one else (not other females, nor males of any age) and harbors a negative meaning. The second meaning appears to relate to any person radiating with youthful energy.

Jones and Varner (2002) write, prodigiously, of (a sometimes idealized, yet often socially realized and desired) sisterhood that Black *sistahs* must acknowledge, revere, and enact, as nurtured and sustained by our ancestral foremothers. One key element in the unwritten rules of sisterhood is *taking care of your sisters*, displayed linguistically and nonlinguistically. Although *taking care of your sisters* manifests in a variety of communicative forms, Jones and Varner (2002) identify and analyze three that occur regularly in the plays of Pearl Cleage: sass, silence, and support. The authors deduce a few points pertaining to sass. First, they claim that *sass* “is a way of having voice when other means are not available” (Jones and Varner 2002: 147). Also, they determined that *sass* may function as a mechanism of verbal agility or defense. Among a range of speech practices available in AAWSCs, Jones and Varner identify sass as synonymous with *smart mouthing, being womanish and talking back/back talking*, functioning as a tool for survival or a source of protection.

Even though the social acts associated with sisterhood are analyzed based on Cleage's constructions in the form of plays, Jones and Varner (2002) validate the

legitimacy of the representations in play format. They acknowledge that plays do not reflect all the idiosyncrasies of everyday communicative practices; nonetheless, playwrights create works that are socially real presentations of “actual spontaneous communication” (Jones and Varner 2002: 145). Fiction unequivocally intersects with reality here. Thus, Cleage, an African American female playwright, presents “fictive dramas” ensconced within firsthand experiences of a shared speech community.

Sassy within popular culture, from an outsider stance, can be seen online, posted on Comedy Central’s website as aired on Carlos Mencia’s *Mind of Mencia* program on July 2, 2008. Mencia begins the skit with the words:

Sassy Black women [music] I lov-v-ve sass-sy Black women. Let’s face it. There are Black women all over the world but the sas-sy only lives in America. Yeah. Have you ever seen a sassy African woman? [“African” woman enters; portrays disgruntledness due to Mencia’s statement; speaks briefly; Mencia comments on her actions. An African American woman enters; she defends the “African” woman and displays actions associated with a sassy performance per the *Mind of Mencia* skit.]

How do Black women assess *sassy* as a behavioral act? What is it? Who performs this social act? When? How? Why? Is it a polite/impolite act? I have established two main goals: (1) present information on a culturally-specific speech act practice indexed within the African American speech community, particularly African American women’s perspectives; (2) discuss the speech practice relative to (im)politeness theorizing ([im]politeness2), while simultaneously indexing hegemony within folk linguistic and scholarly discussions.

Afrocentric Feminist epistemology (AFE), qualitative research, culturally sensitive research, phenomenology, and critical discourse analysis<sup>7</sup> frame the theoretical approach for this study. They intersect in placing focus on enlightenment, emancipation, and transformations of the world. Particularly importantly, I center the research on representing silenced voices for broader societal enlightenment, acknowledging and complicating issues of power, dominance, and racism in order that oppressive conditions may become diminutized, precisely in light of socio-political action movements, such as *Say Her Name*, *Black Lives Matter*, and other recent hegemonic struggles in U.S. contexts. My approach is postmodern in its focus on language and power and rejection of positivism, including EMKVS (Collins 1990); it is also discursive because it situates (im)politeness “within the realm of everyday discourse” (Watts 2003: 9). In fact,

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<sup>7</sup> Critical discourse analysis (CDA) highlights institutional discourses due to residual control of linguistic and social power within institutions (van Dijk 1993). I extend CDA to non-institutional frames herein due to challenges and resistance to hegemonic constructions of *sassy* and (im)politeness executed on local and national levels. Centering community members’ voices functions as one valid way of interrogating dominant constructs, particularly in view of overarching CDA principles.

the discursive struggle over (im)politeness, ways in which lay members of speech communities discuss and evaluate (im)polite behaviors, rather than social scientists' interpretations, centers my approach to discursivity. I collected data online as a vehicle to allowing Black women's voices and experiences to enter into theory-making. Their words and experiences are valid due to their lived experiences (Collins 1990; Mills 2003). Akin to Mills (2003), I focus on a community-based, discourse level discussion of (im)politeness and the relationships therein.

## 5 Data

I used a qualitative approach to analyze the data. I wanted to explore culturally embodied experiences with *sassy*. Particularly, I sought to understand how some Black women make sense of *sassy* in online contexts. Thus, I focused on meanings that a specific experience held for the women. The analysis is interpretative (contextualized with the aim of making sense of women's meanings) and idiographic (the study of a specific situation/event [Larkin et al. 2006]). In this respect, I followed aspects of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), including intensive, detailed analysis from a small number of women, yet detouring here from IPA data collection by not including interviews (due to length considerations). In addition to IPA, I also used critical discourse analysis (CDA) in analyzing the data, attending to meaning-making at the micro-level and connections to broader social forces, as well attending to how the women bloggers use language to mediate relationships of power and privilege. This perspective entails a bottom-up analysis in contradistinction to van Dijk's (1993) top-down focus. Inequity with regard to social and linguistic resources does exist, emanating especially from the powerful to the less powerful; nonetheless, there is a trajectory of social moves (e.g., the National Council of Negro Women, the Civil Rights Movement; Say Her Name; Black Lives Matter) indexing challenges/resistances to dominant positions, thusly, interjecting social change from below.

There are numerous Google hits resulting from a search on *sassy*. Of the 353,000 results<sup>8</sup> surfacing during my search, I selected the first two, relevant sites

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<sup>8</sup> A March 2011 general Google search resulted in about 22,900,000 results. When using the descriptors *African American* OR *Black* along with *sassy*, the search resulted in over six million hits, many that were irrelevant and some of which were risqué, pejorative, or stereotypical, especially with the descriptors *Black women* + *sassy*. For example, one very pejorative blog (now defunct) turned up, purportedly constructed by an African American male, titled *I HATE SASSY BLACK WOMEN*. Another blog consisted of the entry: Dear Sassy Black Ladies Who Clean the Hall in the Morning, posted April 2009.

created by Black women. One of the more prominent sites included is a blog watch on First Lady Michelle Obama, called Michelle Obama Watch (MOW), now defunct.

The second online treatment of *sassy* stems from the web site, *Sojourner's Place*, constructed in response to comments posted on MOW (Figures 2 and 3).



#### Site #1

I started Michelle Obama Watch to avoid being overrun by emails at my blog, What About Our Daughters. WAOD often serves as a 911 and 411 related to the negative portrayal of African American women in popular culture. . . . Predicting that Michelle Obama would be the target of an unprecedented level of media scrutiny over the months leading to the general election, I decided to provide a separate blog to deal exclusively with the media and Michelle so that I could continue to use WAOD to highlight other troublesome issues related to African American women such as the cases of Private Lavena Johnson, Dunbar Village, Romona Moore and other horrific atrocities committed against Black women and girls in the country that often go unreported by mainstream media. Since the election of President Obama the mission of Michelle Obama Watch has not changed much. We are still committed to commenting on news about First Lady Michelle Obama, Mrs Robinson, and the weeMichelles. Michelle Obama Watch is a repository of all things Michelle Obama. If it has anything to do with the First Lady, you can read about on Michelle Obama Watch.

Figure 2: GM blog. Online Site #1. Michelle Obama Watch.



#### Site #2

##### **do not call me sassy!**

I love being a weekly contributor at [Michelle Obama Watch](#) blog, founded by [GM] of [What About Our Daughters](#). If you've not had the opportunity to visit MOW, I strongly encourage you to do so. The posts provide a wealth of up-to-date information and commentary on all things about First Lady in Waiting, Mrs. Michelle Obama.

Oftentimes, the posts evoke debate between commenters and contributors. While such debate is often "lively", I do my best to be as "restrained" as possible when posting and commenting. It is simply my way of showing due respect for the blog's namesake and the purposes under which it was founded. But, [This is SJP's Place](#), and I'm about to blow over comments made on a recent MOW post entitled, [Chicanery and Foolishness: Huffington Post Calls Sasha Obama "SASSY"](#).

**Figure 3:** Sojourner's place. Online Site #2. do not call me sassy.

### **5.1 Analysis of data. First order (im)politeness assessments**

Overall, the data analysis highlights the intersectionality of power, stereotypical inequities, (gendered) discursive struggle, and sassy as an (im)polite act, particularly (im)politeness1 (Watts 2003). Analyzing the intersectional components helps disrupt historical (im)politeness stereotypes stemming from dominant, privileged spaces. The first web blog identifies GM as the founder of MOW. (Originally posted on <http://www.michelleobamawatch.com/about-mow/>). She posted content pertaining to *sassy* due to her disgruntledness with the *Huffington Post's* online style article, [\*Sasha Obama's Sassy Vacation Sunglasses\*](#), which first appeared on December 22, 2008 at 1:12 pm. In her mission to present positive commentary about Mrs. Obama, on the very day the article appeared in

the *Huffington Post* (hereafter *HP*) GM deconstructs *sassy*. She titles the blog, *Chicanery and Foolishness: Huffington Post Calls Sasha Obama "SASSY,"* which unequivocally communicates GM's position on the *sassy* label. The following words are hers.

**Site #1**

**Chicanery and Foolishness: Huffington Post Calls Sasha Obama "SASSY"**

MONDAY, DECEMBER 22, 2008 AT 08:30PM GM, MOW FOUNDER

*So I skipped over their headline photo of a topless Barack Obama and scrolled down the front page at the Huffington Post and saw a cute photo of Natasha "Sasha" Obama and had an ONTD ( Oh No They Didn't) moment when I read the headline "Sasha Obama's Sassy Vacation Sunglasses." Sassy? I wasn't the only one who had a problem with the headline:*

*If HuffPo had just one black editor, they would immediately stop using the word "sassy" to describe this cute little girl. Sassy is a stereotypical description of black women. If someone used it to describe my daughter I would quickly correct them. Stop the bullsht HuffPo.*  
dct1999

*They can't claim to be ignorant that the phrase "sassy" is pejorative because this isn't the first time they've described Sasha as "sassy."*

*Readers have already pointed out that "Sassy" is a poor choice of words to use to describe this child when they pointed out the meaning in a previous slide show called Sasha Obama's Sassiest Moments." Sassy?*

**Figure 4:** GM's blog. Online Site #1. Chicanery & foolishness (a).

In addition to the blog content above (Figure 4), GM also posts the image from the *Huffington Post* web page (see below) of Sasha and her sunglasses and continues with her deconstruction of *sassy*, which has emerged as a discursive site of (im)politeness struggle based on, seemingly, her unconscious insider knowledge of an African American lexicon, usage, and permissibility rules (Figure 5).

MONDAY, DECEMBER 22, 2008 AT 08:30PM GM, [MOW FOUNDER](#) (Continued)

THE  
HUFFINGTON  
POST

DECEMBER 22, 2008

**Osteoporosis Treatment** - Learn  
& How To Make Your Bones Stronger. [www.F](#)

HOME POLITICS MEDIA BUSINESS ENTERTAINMENT LIVING STYLE GR  
BIGNEWS >> FASHION | SLIDESHOWS | FOOD | MORE...



PHOTOS: Sasha Obama's Sassy Sunglasses [More in Style: Rice Gifts... Obama's Ho](#)  
Vacation... Michelle Obama Hair...

## Sasha Obama's Sassiest Moments (PHOTOS, VIDEO)

Huffington Post | Anya Strzemię | November 13, 2008 08:36 AM



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Where I am from "sassiness" when applied to a child is pejorative. Sassiness would get you a green switch. So I had to go to my old friend [Merriam Webster Online](#) to look it up.

...

Their readers have pointed all this out to them, **they don't care**. She's seven folks, seven years old and she's walking down steps wearing pink sunshades and that's "sassy"? Yeah right. DO a search on HuffPo for the other ways in which they've used "sassy." They know what they are doing calling this child sassy. If it had been Red State or Drudge Report, they would be up in arms. But then again, these are the folks that made a [topless Barack Obama](#) their headline of the day.

Posted by GM

**Figure 5:** GM's blog. Online Site #1. Chicanery and Foolishness (b).

On the blog, as a whole, GM advocates that calling Sasha Obama *sassy* is not only chicanery and foolishness, it is pejorative for the sunglasses context, and amounts to another event of historical impoliteness. GM delineates aspects of *sassy* as an impolite act, based on her experiences as an African American woman (Hilliard 2012).

1. *Sassy* is pejorative when applied to [+animate – puberty + female] and to [-inanimate] and discouraged by community members when those conditions apply.
  - a. *They can't claim to be ignorant that the phrase “sassy” is pejorative because this isn't the first time they've described Sasha as “sassy.”*
  - b. *Where I am from “sassiness” when applied to a child is pejorative. Sassiness would get you a green switch.*
  - c. *She's seven folks, seven years old and she's walking down steps wearing pink sunshades and that's “sassy”? Yeah right.*
2. *Sassy* is inappropriately applied to Sasha and her sunglasses.
  - a. *had an ONTD (Oh No They Didn't) moment when I read the headline “Sasha Obama's Sassy Vacation Sunglasses.”*
  - b. *I wasn't the only one who had a problem with the headline*
  - c. *Readers have already pointed out that “Sassy” is a poor choice of words to use to describe this child ...*
  - d. *Their readers have pointed all this out to them, they don't care. She's seven folks, seven years old and she's walking down steps wearing pink sunshades and that's “sassy”? Yeah right.*

Clearly, there is discursive struggle here over (im)politeness (Watts 2003). *Huffington Post* writers and contributors may be operating from a lens of dominance in assuming one meaning pertains to *sassy*. They may be incognizant that the AASC enacts divergence in many verbal and non-verbal acts, thus historically having constructed oppositional meanings, even coinings, that mark the community distinctly (e.g., *I'm bad*). GM's words convey her rearing within a Black context and a deep commitment to the lexical meanings therein, as Major (1994) has recorded. At three different points, she adamantly documents other readers' discontent with *HP*'s usage, many (if not all) of whom were Black: (1) *I wasn't the only one who had a problem with the headline.* (2) *Readers have already pointed out that “Sassy” is a poor choice of words to use to describe this child when they pointed out the meaning in a previous slide show called *Sasha Obama's Sassiest Moments*.* (3) *Their readers have pointed all this out to them, **they don't care**.* In the end, GM is distrustful of *HP*'s usage, associating *sassy* with seven-year-old Sasha: *They know what they are doing calling this child sassy.* An ulterior motive emerges, perhaps a denigration of Sasha, as a microcosm of Black girl stereotypical identity construction. Power, thus, enters into the dynamics. Regardless of readers' protests over the usage, *HP* did not retract previous stories, nor the sunglasses story: to the contrary, *they [didn't] care*. The voices and positions of readers, including GM, appeared to have fallen on muted ears. An opportunity for social action was lost. *HP* displayed cultural dominance through a lack of recanting its usage and

ownership of stereotypical reproduction. Although GM consulted the Merriam Webster Online dictionary, she may not be cognizant of two different lexicons, particularly an African American lexicon with distinctive vocabulary items and meanings (Rickford and Rickford 2000). The two lexicons do not always match, as with this item. Cross-cultural misunderstanding and hegemonic framing easily entered into *sassy* usage, an impolite framing for Sasha based on the Black lexicon and metalinguistic acts (Agha 2007).

The second online site addressing *sassy*, *Sojourner's Place*, aligns with GM's experiences and mental lexicon. Again, I present the words of the blogger directly, which intensify misconstrued understanding and (re)presentation of *sassy* and an inappropriate association of Sasha to *sassy*, thus indexing impoliteness<sup>1</sup> (Figures 6 and 7).

*This is SjP's Place, and I'm about to blow over comments made on a recent MOW post entitled, Chicanery and Foolishness: Huffington Post Calls Sasha Obama "SASSY".*

As [GM], the writer of the post, so aptly states "Where I am from "sassiness" when applied to a child is pejorative. Sassiness would get you a green switch." Yet, there were many who saw nothing wrong with the characterization of Sasha as "sassy". The following comments simply got my blood boiling.

**"sassy" is a positive word about women who speak their minds.**

Oh really? Let's try calling a woman (Black or White) "sassy" in the workplace one time. Just how quickly can you say "sexual harassment"? As a professional African American woman, I have to struggle each day to make sure that I am taken seriously, that my opinion matters, and that I am a meaningful and integral part of the operation. I speak my mind and for doing so, I am more times than naught called "aggressive" and yes even an ABW. I can deal with that - but, NEVER would I ever allow anyone to characterize me as "sassy" to my face.

If anyone out there in the blogosphere can name me one woman (Black or White) who has ever been characterized as "sassy" who was honestly taken seriously, I might be able to be talked down from this rant - but, I doubt it. Why? Because, I suspect that if there has ever been a woman - living, dead, Black, White, blue, grizzly or gray - who was considered "sassy" that she was NEVER taken seriously. And in the event that there came a time that she was taken seriously, I doubt that she was ever characterized as "sassy" again.

**...negative sense as well as in the positive sense. No one would raise an eyebrow if a black person called a white person sassy these days...unlike years ago. Sassy is now an equal opportunity word.**

"Sassy" is how I might describe a hat, dress, a handbag, a pair of shoes, or a child who thinks it appropriate to talk back to an adult or suck his/her teeth when an adult is talking to him/her. A "sassy" hat, dress, handbag, or shoes I'd wear. A sassy kid - well let's just say that my eyebrow would be the last thing I would think about raising if that kid were mine.

"Sassy" is not something that I would call a woman of any color who was not on the silver screen, television, or stage portraying a character akin to *Carmen Jones*, *Holly Golightly*, *Margaret 'Maggie the Cat' Pollitt*, or *Lady Eloise*. Personally, I consider "sassy" as inappropriate as calling a woman a b\*tch - which is now an equal opportunity word used by many women much younger than myself. But I will say this, everyone as an "equal opportunity" NOT to call me either.

Figure 6: Sojourner's place. Online Site #2. Sassy deconstructions (a).

**I think its [sassy] cute and endearing.**

Cute and endearing? Oh! Like the N-word "sassy" is now a term of endearment. A term that is appropriate to call women and young girls. I think not! It is neither cute or endearing. To paraphrase [GM], sassiness will get you a switch at best (and let me add) or a very clear view of the palm of my hand at worst.

***In a positive gesture to move us forward (and I am dead serious here), perhaps you could collaborate on an article — what are the 50 worst words, phrases, comments that today's writers (predominantly white, of course) could use that are considered offensive to readers of Michelle Obama Watch.***

Now this last one took the cake! Once again "we" are called upon to open the lines of communication in an effort of educating those who continue to stand behind the excuses of "I just didn't know" or "It was just a joke. Why are you so offended?". These are oftentimes the same folks who want to "touch my hair" or expect me to be the "spokeswoman" for all things African American.

But, lets just say that this exercise were to be done. O.K. But, remember, you can only come up with the 50 worst words, phrases, and comments for today's writers (predominately white, of course) should not use for fear of being offensive. Open up the lines of communication - but only by the rules pre-set and determined by you? Typical! I think not!

Look! I'm sorry - but it is not my job or my inclination to educate you about being Black in America. But, I will give you one piece of advise in your quest to not be offensive. When you want to use a word, phrase, or comment to describe an African American or an African American characteristic, "Google" it first. If you don't see the word, phrase, or comment you want to use portrayed on any one of over one thousand Black blogs used in a positive light - DON'T USE IT.

As I said at the beginning of this post, I love being a contributor at Michelle Obama Watch. Therefore, I have to remember my "home training" and "be good" when I'm out in public.

*Obliged to you for hearing me,  
and now old SjP ain't got nothin' more to say...*

**Figure 7:** Sojourner's place. Online Site #2. Sassy deconstructions (b).

Discursive struggle is salient in this second blog post. SjP is unequivocal in her positioning, as was GM. On her blog (now defunct), SjP explicitly identifies herself as *"One Christian, African-American, Wife, Mother, Daughter, Sister, Professional, Sorority Woman just Sojourning for the Truth and not afraid to tell it!"* (Sojourner's Place 2008). She titles this page: *do not call me sassy!* As AASC members would interject, "Are there any questions?" Sassy is not a positive characteristic, nor one that SjP wants to be associated with. She interjects a lived, cultural value while those in the dominant position demonstrate the workings of power in ignoring, silencing and marginalizing that cultural value. Agha (2007: 190) makes the point that cultural value, including discursive practices, are sociohistorical constructions "with recognizable indexical sign-values". HP appears to have maintained social power by not acknowledging a non-hegemonic,

sociohistorical cultural value: do not call people sassy under inappropriate conditions.

Before sharing her stance further, SjP situates the posting. Exuding respect for Mrs. Obama, per the function of MOW, she has opted for politeness performativity, thus, avoiding posts on MOW that could conceivably be disrespectful to Mrs. Obama and the site's function ("I love being a contributor at Michelle Obama Watch. Therefore, I have to remember my "home training" and "be good" when I'm out in public.") *Sojourner's Place*, however, allows SjP to speak truth to power, which she is not afraid to do ("just *Sojourning for the Truth and not afraid to tell it!*"). Unlike GM, SjP challenges four readers' constructions, some of whom may identify as Black readers, due to a difference in lexical meanings that countered her lived experiences. Those four comments, as SjP notes, were highly contestable: *The following comments simply got my blood boiling*. For each reader's comment, SjP develops a convincing counterpoint, including the caveat of inequity when labeling sassy as positive due to its association with stereotypical Black womanhood (sassy, aggressive, *Angry Black Woman*). SjP fully resists any positivity with sassy usage and presents a challenge: (1) **do not call me sassy!** (2) *NEVER would I ever allow anyone to characterize me as "sassy" to my face.* (3) *Personally, I consider "sassy" as inappropriate as calling a woman a b\*tch ... But I will say this, everyone [has] an "equal opportunity" NOT to call me either.*

Interestingly, SjP interjects the physicality of face (*NEVER would I ever allow anyone to characterize me as "sassy" to my face.*), which counters general pragmatic theorizing. Black scholars have noted that Black culture deals with images rooted in the everyday, real world (see Smitherman 1977: 121). Thus, making a negative assertion in someone's tangible face holds high reciprocity. That is, such an act will incur serious repercussions, such that some African Americans will enter into a habitual repository of quips, particularly, "Don't say that to my face." (cf. Yarbrough 1997). SjP interpolates other issues, which space does not allow me to discuss (power differentials: *Open up the lines of communication - but only by the rules pre-set and determined by you? Typical! I think not!*; hypothesized gendered stereotypes: *These are oftentimes the same folks who want to "touch my hair" or expect me to be the "spokeswoman" for all things African American ... Look! I'm sorry – but it is not my job or my inclination to educate you about being Black in America; Black (im)politeness performativity: When you want to use a word, phrase, or comment to describe an African American or an African American characteristic, "Google" it first. If you don't see the word, phrase, or comment you want to use portrayed on any one of over one thousand Black blogs used in a positive light – DON'T USE IT ... I have to remember my "home training" and "be good" when I'm out in public.*) Given the

context of the data under consideration—the first Black president of the U.S., an outspoken Black FLOTUS, the first official Black family living in the White House, conservative critiques of the Obamas, SjP challenges stereotypical Black female-ness, akin to Collins (1990) and hooks (1981) and exhibits Jones and Varner's (2002) *taking care of your sisters*.

The length of the posting suggests that SjP accredits seriousness and importance to the topic. There are a few points to glean from SjP's presentation of *sassy*, whereby she presents lay perspectives and evaluations of *sassy* as an (im)polite construct contextually.

1. *Sassy* is pejorative, not positive nor endearing.
  - a. *I speak my mind and for doing so, I am more times than naught called “aggressive” and yes even an ABW [Angry Black Woman]. I can deal with that – but, NEVER would I ever allow anyone to characterize me as “sassy” to my face.*
  - b. *everyone has an “equal opportunity” NOT to call me either [sassy or b\*tch]*
  - c. *Like the N-word “sassy” is now a term of endearment. A term that is appropriate to call women and young girls. I think not! It is neither cute or endearing.*
2. *Sassy* is pejorative regardless of race.
  - a. *Let’s try calling a woman (Black or White) “sassy” in the workplace one time. Just how quickly can you say “sexual harassment”?*
  - b. *“Sassy” is not something that I would call a woman of any color who was not on the silver screen, television, or stage portraying a character akin to Carmen Jones, Holly Golightly, Margaret ‘Maggie the Cat’ Pollitt, or Lady Eloise.*
3. *Sassy* connotes non-seriousness.
  - a. *I suspect that if there has ever been a woman – living, dead, Black, White, blue, grizzly or gray – who was considered “sassy” that she was NEVER taken seriously. And in the event that there came a time that she was taken seriously, I doubt that she was ever characterized as “sassy” again.*
4. *Sassy* may be appropriately applied to non-animate objects [+positive attribution] or children who misbehave when spoken to by adults [+negative attribution].
  - a. *I might describe a hat, dress, a handbag, a pair of shoes, or a child who thinks it appropriate to talk back to an adult or suck his/her teeth when an adult is talking to him/her [as sassy]. A “sassy” hat, dress, handbag, or shoes I’d wear. A sassy kid – well let’s just say that my eyebrow would be the last thing I would think about raising if that kid were mine.*

Based on my initial query, African American women, unequivocally, have interrogated constructions of *sassy* online.<sup>9</sup> For the two African American women bloggers above, *sassy* is a socially real construct, which has a different set of meanings and possible repercussions than the creators of the *Huffington Post* online Style article projected. Cultural intertextuality is evident between the blog sites: GM and SjP both see *sassy* as pejorative and, particularly, an inappropriate label for Sasha Obama yet appropriate for a child who misbehaves (linguistically and nonlinguistically), thus deserving the green switch. Geographical location, age, race, and/or familial practices may have shaped GM and SjP's experiences and constructions of *sassy* yet I cannot determine that based on accessible, online information, though both are Black women. There are small variances in their deconstructions of *sassy* yet both are adamant about representations of Sasha as *sassy*. Overall, both GM and SjP "keep it 100" with their lived experiences on *sassy*, challenging hegemonic presentations in the *HP* article and some readers' comments. Significantly, both bloggers index discursive struggle over *sassy*, exuding agency in *talking back* to HP (regardless of power dynamics) due to the latter's erroneous, indeed, impolite, labeling of Sasha as *sassy*. They challenge power from the bottom up, as many of their foremothers have done, to impact change. Despite *HP*'s deletion of the Sassy Sasha online content, they may have induced social harm, not only pertinent to Sasha, but also (re)investing in a litany of Black women's stereotypical gender.

## 6 Conclusion: "Now you know!" moving beyond the stereotypical

This paper comprises one phase of my quest to interrogate social and linguistic (im)politeness within AAWSCs. Although the data focus on two African American women, their voices are vital, meaningful, and significant, especially instantiating first order (im)politeness interrogation and theorizing. The language practice indexed herein has not been situated within the larger discourse on women and language, nor within that of Ebonics, nor (im)politeness although it resides in all three landscapes. *Sassy*, furthermore, has insider and outsider values. The discussion of the data aims to activate Hirschon's (2001: 17) position of "promoting

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<sup>9</sup> I found additional sites grappling with *sassy* yet do not discuss them here due to space. For example, <http://tiffanybrown.com/2009/03/01/why-is-sassy-racist/>, <http://www.mixedmediawatch.com/2006/08/03/overweight-sassy-black-woman-thrives-in-advertisements/>, <http://dcmoviegirl.blogspot.com/2008/03/most-tired-worn-out-stereotypical-black.html> and <http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2009/02/27/no-apologies.html>.

understanding across cultures” based on an insider frame, as mentioned earlier, to overcome cross-cultural trauma in communication (Tannen [1984] cited in Hirschon 2001).

I concur with Mills (2003) that politeness must involve aspects beyond positive and negative politeness based on my research and the lived experiences of some Black women in US contexts. For example, impoliteness has socially real, stereotypical manifestations for a generalized population of Black women. Yet, as Mills (2003: 21) indicates, impoliteness is not dealt with in the B&L model because that model is situated within the “harmonious aspect of social relations”. It is incumbent upon Black women, then, to interrogate constructions of ourselves as impolite and as deviations. Mills’ words, though intended differently, suit my purposes aptly: “What I should like to contest is the reifying of this view of the stereotypical behaviour of a group of women, and the extension of such a stereotype to all [Black] women” (Mills 2003: 203).

Clearly, sassy embeds more displays and cultural knowledge than presented in this article. I have provided some of the knowledge and experiences of two African American women, which may not represent the knowledge and experiences of other women within AAWSC. From the perspectives of those voices included herein, certain traces of experiences are noticeable:

1. Sassy holds social reality; it is a socially real construct.
2. Sassy is gendered, primarily [+female].
3. Sassy imbues multiple social meanings within the AASC, indexing [+female, +animate] or [+inanimate], with restrictions on applicability, appropriateness, and context (van Dijk 2008), including geography, age, race.
4. Sassy performances may occur linguistically and/or non-linguistically.
5. Sassy may function as both polite and impolite behavior.

With regard to (im)politeness, then, Black women, in many cases, have been socially constructed as impolite, too assertive<sup>10</sup> – even aggressive, sassy and loud, pejoratively so, from outsider stances and in contradistinction to an idyllic *lady* (see Lakoff 1975, 2004) or the cult of true womanhood. As Morgan has articulated, “depictions of black women persist that stereotype them as primitive, uncivilized, uncontrolled, immoral, lascivious and the opposite of the ‘good’ woman who has personal control over desires and impulses” (Morgan 2004: 253). *HP* placed Sasha Obama, a seven-year-old, within a highly contested, stereotypical frame, problematically. Sassy, more broadly, remains undisrupted as an implement of stereotypical girlhood/womanhood due to its association to Black girls and women.

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<sup>10</sup> Consider constructions of Michelle Obama as “too assertive”, articulated by one voter on *The News Hour with Jim Lehrer*, August 2008.

Although some outsiders and insiders may malign *sassy* as performed by Black females in U.S. contexts, especially stereotypically, it becomes clear from the data and analysis above that *sassy* is a complex construct. It is not an act that can be easily performed without appropriate socialization and insider knowledge. Indigenous-insiders have gained lots of knowledge about permissibility rules and social context, which are largely unwritten. There is a wealth of knowledge acquired here. Most indigenous-insiders have experienced firsthand through observation, trial and error, explicit and/or implicit conversations the who may say what to whom, when, where, why and how of *sassy*. This constitutes, in part, the intersectionality of (im)politeness and sociolinguistics. Stereotyping and buying into stereotypes is easy action. The users/producers of *sassy* displays deserve keener recognition and acknowledgement of their embodiments and skills, especially considering Ebonics and appropriations within broader U.S. contexts (e.g., *reading someone* and *throwing shade*). The participants' words have demonstrated that (im)politeness within the AASC occurs within an arena that combines the social with the linguistic; thus, (im)politeness in that context resides in sociolinguistics, not pragmatics. As a result of the analysis herein, I suggest further that (im)politeness theorizing could pay attention to the *social embodiedness* of human polite and impolite behaviors.

As Ting-Toomey and Kurogi (1998: 188) claim about face, "Face is, fundamentally, a 'social self' construction issue. Social self is tied closely with the conceptualization of 'personal self' phenomenon in different cultures", it may be the case that the same applies to (im)politeness. Specifically, (im)politeness may be a *social-self* construction evolving out of socio-cultural rules and identity. Thus, the social rules of a speech community, context, and senses of identity help shape (im)politeness systems. The social rules that communities develop over time would be *elemental* components in operations of (im)politeness (see more in Troutman Forthcoming). Although Fraser (1990: 221) has written, "I think it is safe to say that the social-norm approach has few adherents among current researchers", I believe that a more fully or differently developed construction of the social-norm approach is unequivocally connected to sociolinguistics and socially real community practices for some groups. This, too, constitutes the sociolinguistics of (im)politeness.

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