

Rachel Jeantel's lack of literacy is a societal problem

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LOS ANGELES, June 30, 2013 — Rachel Jeantel's testimony on the witness stand during the George Zimmerman murder trial was cringe-inducing, embarrassing, and mortifying to watch. As a Black woman I have been ridiculed for "talking white" and "thinking I'm white" because I navigate quite well outside of Black culture. Frankly, I would rather take that type of flack than be an embarrassment across worldwide media because of my inability to do so.

If we take nothing else away from Rachel Jeantel's testimony, it should be this: Literacy involves more than being able to read and write. It involves the ability to effectively operate in the overall society *when it matters most*. Unfortunately, Rachel failed this test. We will see how it affects the outcome of this trial, and whether it helps or hurts the prosecution's case.

It would be wonderful if this sparked a wider conversation on the failure of modern Blacks to instill a love of words, literacy, and knowledge in our young, and greater still, the failure to encourage and teach our children how to maneuver outside of their everyday reality. This used to not only be a matter of practicality, but of progress, and *safety*. We appear to no longer give this proper weight, let alone thought.

Ebony, a history-making Black publication, could have penned a thought-provoking piece about how far we have fallen from this cultural norm, how we must return to it, and how we can begin again. Instead, the editorial writer went into attack mode: "The chastising of this woman's speech and body language belied the fact that many themselves were rejecting their own self-reflection. For far too many of our community members that epitomize Drake's 'started from the bottom' mantra would like to forget the places from whence they came." [When You Make Fun of Rachel Jeantel, You Make Fun of Us](#).

Ebony shoots, Ebony misses. My single mother made sure I knew how to read and write, as well as how to talk to adults and authority figures. If reality and sitcom television is any indicator, this has become a lost art. Christina Coleman, writer at the [Global Grind](#), takes the "you're not black enough to understand Rachel" tack: "And as Rachel Jeantel sits on the stand, nervous, mumbling and annoyed, it's not that she's just a 'hoodrat with no media training from a hostile environment.' It's just that your world and our world are ... excuse the cliché ... worlds apart."

This excuse is not only lousy, but lazy. Some critics of Rachel Jeantel may have come from the bottom, some may come from a middle class background, while others may even be upper class. But here is what we all have in common: Parents (single and otherwise) who made sure that no matter how *down* and *fly* we were at home, we knew how to interact, engage, and compete outside of the home. This is a necessary component in finding success for any person of any background or race. Knowing this was one way to ensure you did not *stay* at the bottom, and you were not limited in your opportunities.

You cannot discount that being on the witness stand is not easy, even for the most cultivated or collected of persons. The purpose of cross examination is to dispatch and discredit the witness as quickly as

possible, so being grilled on the stand is akin to being baptized by fire. But we do not help ourselves when we fail to have a grasp of standard English, cannot read cursive writing, do not know how to speak up when spoken to, or how to address an officer of the court.

My mother would say, “You can talk like that here, but don’t you embarrass me outside the house.” I took this seriously, and so did many of my peers, but no longer. Now when young people tank themselves, instead of honestly looking at the reasons and the whys, we blame the critics.

Chicago Sun-Times columnist John W. Fountain wrote a thought-provoking and pointed article on “[Talking Right—Not Talking White](#)“. Fountain makes this assertion: “I have come to understand that your speech does indeed betray you. For one’s enunciation and command of the English language can be as revealing about one’s roots as a buttered southern drawl. But in my mind, mastering the King’s English is no more a betrayal of one’s roots than choosing a mode of transportation to get you to a destination. The point in either case *is access*.” [emphasis mine]

Let’s take that a step further: It’s not only about access in terms of career and life opportunities, but when you are required to enter into arenas outside of your normal realm, you have a foundation to draw upon and you stand firm, instead of wrecking what little credibility you could have had.

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