

The Language of Race

"The suspect is described as a thin, black male, 20 to 30 years old ..."

This is the sort of description that passes for information in too much of American journalism today, part of a dysfunctional racial discourse that doesn't always mean what it says and seldom says what it means.

Excellent journalism starts with an understanding that language has power. It demands clear writing. It leaves little to chance interpretations.

But the mangled language of race is punctuated with descriptions that underscore ethnicity but describe nothing. It is mired in euphemisms and the tortured, convoluted syntax that betray America's pathological avoidance of straight talk about race relations.

Put it all together and you get stereotypes, dangerous misinformation, half-truths, and daily proof that when it comes to race, journalists are chained to habits that defy the cornerstone principles of solid journalism.

And that's the point. Journalists who can't connect with the myriad moral reasons to reform the way they write and report about race and race relations don't have to look further for their motivation than some of the core values that undergird the profession: Accuracy. Precision. Context. Relevance.

You won't find euphemisms on that list.

Yet, 'urban' (a sociological term), 'inner city' (a geographic term), and 'blue collar' (an economic term), are employed to connote race and ethnicity. 'Minority', a numerical term, is often used when the journalist actually has a specific racial group in mind. 'Poor' is euphemised as 'disadvantaged' and often used as a synonym for people of colour.

How might a story change if the reporter asked the question, "What am I trying to say?" Ask that question about the description at the end of this story about a Californian man accused of posing as a doctor and 'treating' patients in a clinic:

"Police believe Moreno worked at the First Street clinic for at least a year, with his partner Rafael Garay. The clinic primarily served Hispanic families." — April 1998

Why is it important for the public to know that the clinic served Hispanic families?

The thing is, race often has relevance in stories. It's just that the relevance goes unexplored and unexplained. In the case above, perhaps the clinic was serving recent immigrants whose English was poor and whose tenuous status in the community made them

more susceptible to scam artists.

But maybe not. Who knows? The story provided none of the context that solid journalism demands.

What the public is left with is a story that singles out a person's race or ethnicity for no apparent reason, harkening to a day when the reason was racism. That's why the practice of using race to identify people, as journalistically unsound as it often is, generates so much emotional heat.

It's about history. White-run news organizations historically used racial identifiers to distinguish the person from white people. Black people, like American Indians, Asians, and Latinos, were regarded as a "separate society". So it was natural to identify them by race so that white readers would know the story wasn't about white people. The use of race had nothing to do with the details of how a person looked. All that mattered was that they were not white.

Racial identifiers were used selectively to support beliefs in white supremacy. They were used to call attention to the criminal, immoral, or threatening acts of other racial and ethnic groups to demonstrate that the stereotypes about those groups were true.

The most benign effect of that practice was to separate people of colour from the white mainstream. The more malignant, lasting effect — in the media and beyond — has been an unfounded but unshakable connection between people of colour and social pathology. It has contributed to some of America's most destructive acts of prejudice, from white flight in neighbourhoods and schools, to injudicious police stops of men with black, brown, red, and yellow skin.

That is why people continue to anguish over using identifiers. Journalists who understand this historic habit worry about contributing to the stereotypes and prejudices to which the practice plays.

Because this is about hurting people, it is an ethical and moral issue. But the larger point here is that it is imprecise to describe someone as black. Or Latino. Or white. Or Native American. Or Asian.

Racial identifiers do carry information — about geography, about bloodlines, about heritage. But they don't describe much of anything.

What, for example, does a Hispanic man look like? Is his skin dark brown? Reddish brown? Pale?

And what is black? It's the colour of pitch. Yet, the word is used to describe people whose

skin tones can cover just about every racial and ethnic group in the world, including white people. What does the word 'black' add to the mental picture the public draws? How do you draw the lips? The eyes? The nose? What sort of hair does a black person have? What colour skin does a black person have? The combinations are infinite.

All racial and ethnic groups do share some common physical characteristics. Still, we don't see the phrase "Irish-looking man" in the newspaper, though red hair and pale skin are common Irish characteristics. Would a picture come to mind if a TV anchor said, "The suspect appeared to be Italian"? Couldn't many of us conjure an image if the police said they were looking for a middle-aged man described as "Jewish-looking"?

There are good reasons those descriptions never see the light of day. They generalise. They stereotype. And they require that everyone who hears the description has the same idea of what those folks look like. All Irish-Americans don't look alike. Why, then, accept a description that says a suspect was African-American?

Here is an alternative: if journalists told their audience that the suspect was about 5-foot-8, about 165 pounds, with caramel-brown skin, wavy, dark brown hair about an inch long, thick eyebrows, a narrow nose, thick lips, and a light moustache, people could pick me from a line-up of men whose skin and face were different from mine. Nobody would need to know my race. It wouldn't matter if I was descended from Africans, spoke Spanish, worshipped Allah, lived on a reservation, or called a Hawaiian woman mother.

Unless the story is specifically about race, race has little descriptive value in a story. A suspect description is about how a person looks. Journalists need to challenge the presence of racial identifiers and their euphemistic disciples in every story.

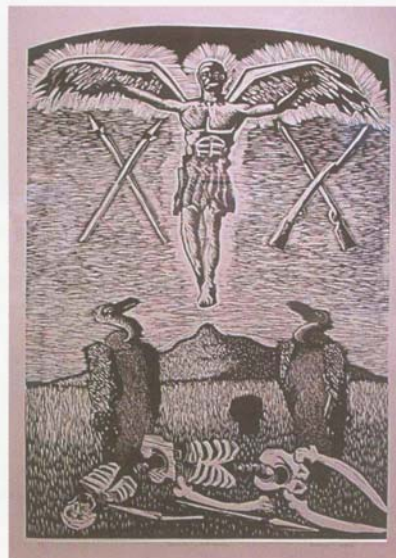
Say what you mean and say it clearly.

This is an abridged version of Woods' article at <http://poynter.org/research/div/diversity.htm>

Get right to the racial point ... if there actually is one. Keith Woods' advice to US media resonates in South Africa



Keith Woods,
Poynter Institute



NYANISO LINDI
b. 1973

**Ukuza kuku Nxele —
Something that will never
happen**

The proverb I have chosen to use refers to the understanding amongst the Xhosa people that sometimes some things will never come true — like both Nxele's promises that the bullets would turn to water and that he would return. I have shown Nxele, almost like a Christ figure, or an angel, or something that is not really human, coming back to rectify the death and destruction that resulted from the battle. But, like the proverb, he never could return and so we must make things better and rectify them through our own means today.