



# Race Matters, I

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A cornerstone of great writing is precision. A great wrecking ball of precise writing is this word: race. It foments fear. It breeds euphemisms and racial codes that slip unchallenged into our vocabulary. It engenders a universal, pathological discomfort with difference that comes stuttering from our keyboards in inane, insulting and inexplicable ways.

Take the phrase "inner-city youth." What does that mean? Does it mean young people who live in the innermost core of the city? In the euphemistic lingo of race, conflated as it often is with class and geography, the precise answer is: not exactly.

We use "inner-city youth" to mean young people who are poor, black, Latino, Asian or Native American -- though it is most-often reserved for the first two. It never means "white," which would rule out President Bush's daughters, though, geographically speaking, they sleep in the inner city of Washington, D.C., every time they take a snooze in the White House.

"Inner-city youth" becomes even sillier when you think about gentrification, the movement to decentralize urban poverty, and the related migration of poor people into middle-class neighborhoods as far out as the suburbs. That would make them "suburban youth," but somehow I don't think the images are the same. (Oh, yeah, about that word "urban." Careful that it doesn't become a racial synonym.)

If you mean black children who are poor, then write this: black children who are poor. If you're referring to the innermost core of the city, then write "inner city." If you mean both, then say so. But if you can't be sure which of those phrases covers the group you're describing, don't pull out another label. Do more reporting.

We use "inner-city youth" to mean young people who are poor, black, Latino, Asian or Native American -- though it is most-often reserved for the first two. Race, class and geography morph into one phrase in other ways: "blue collar" and "soccer mom" are generally euphemisms for white people, the former living in the city, the latter in the suburbs. Check the language

(grassroots) and notice how many ways (diverse people) we have for using race (mainstream people) without ever (underprivileged) actually (at-risk) using race.

What, for example, does "minority" mean? Here's what my dictionary says: "1. the lesser part or smaller number; less than half of a total: opposed to majority. 2. a racial, religious, national, or political group smaller than and differing from a larger, controlling group of which it is a part."

"Minority" defines people in relation to other people. In Congress, Democrats are minorities at the moment. In the world, Christians are minorities. But journalists use the word interchangeably with race, transforming people into "lesser" numbers even in places where they are the majority.

"Minority" is not a synonym for someone's race. Precision demands that you use it when referring to numbers. Even then, write what you mean: Racial and ethnic minorities. If you're only talking about Latinos, don't switch to the ubiquitous "minorities" on second reference. Say "Latinos." And that reminds me. "Latino" is not a separate racial category (if you accept that race even exists, but that's another column). Latinos are an ethnic group of many races, including mainstream people.

Oops. I meant to say non-black people. Uh, non-minorities? Okay, non-diverse people. That's another of our hang-ups around writing race. We have a tough time saying "white." It's understandable, given the way that word is so quickly translated to "racist" in the language of modern race relations: White flight. White leader. Angry white male. I suppose it's one reason why no one wants to call a gang of white youngsters a "white gang," since our racial codebook so easily transforms "white gang" into "skinheads," even when they're fighting other white males.

"Minority" is not a synonym for someone's race. And if you'll tolerate one last racial rant, here goes. Why, in the name of melanin, do boys and men, whether they're toddlers, teens, or tottering octogenarians, get reduced to their naked gender — males — when we're writing about race? White males. Asian males. Two males. Ten males.

Somewhere along the way, journalism adopted the veterinarian way of referring to some people, which doesn't require us to reference the fact that they're people at all. They're just males. Like my cat. Or my fish, which is, best I can tell, a black male.

Lost in that language is our humanity. When you think about it, that's the problem with all of the euphemisms and dodges of our racial codes and idiosyncrasies. They strip people of an identity and reduce their lives to a shorthand that is as imprecise as it is insulting.

Maybe in the history of our linguistic evolution, there were good intentions, honorable efforts to

get away from even worse ways of referring to people. Here is journalism now, though, engendering with its prose the kind of distrust and conversational dysfunction that comes when you don't say what you really mean.

It takes just a few more words to be respectful. Just a little more thought to be complete. Just a little better journalism, to be precise.

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