

Thugs. Students. Rioters. Fans: Media's Subtle Racism in Unrest Coverage

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Essayist and editor Akiba Solomon is a National Association of Black Journalists Award-winning writer. Solomon was raised in West Philadelphia, lived in Washington, D.C., while earning her B.A. in Communications at Howard University, and now resides in Brooklyn. Solomon is the editorial director of Colorlines.com and writes primarily on gender and race in current events. As a freelance writer she has penned articles for *Redbook*, *Vibe*, *Glamour*, and *Essence* and co-edited an anthology titled *Naked: Black Women Bare All about Their Skin, Hair, Hips, Lips, and Other Parts* (Perigee, 2005), a collection of original essays and memoirs about black women and body image that earned critical acclaim.

Solomon also often writes and lectures about women's and social justice issues, particularly through the lens of hip-hop culture. She has spoken at the Schomburg Center for the Research in Black Culture, Stanford University, Yale University, Harvard University, and the University of Chicago. The essay included here first appeared on Colorlines.com on April 28, 2015, the day after police-brutality victim Freddie Gray's funeral and before another wave of riots in Baltimore to protest Gray's death. Gray's death added to the growing and disproportionate tally of black men and women killed by police using lethal force in otherwise routine arrests or incidents. Here Solomon discusses how the language used to report such incidents in the press highlights the racism of media coverage.

WRITING TO DISCOVER: *Have you ever seen or participated in a protest or demonstration? If so, how would you characterize the participants and their mood? If not, what do you imagine a protest on your campus would look like? What words would you use to describe it?*

Whenever black civilians become enraged enough by police violence toward black men to set fires, loot stores and throw things at police in riot gear, I become this old, conservative black lady who asks annoying, clichéd questions like, “Why are they destroying their own neighborhoods?”

I get my faculties back by reviewing how some media describe arson, looting, and projectile-throwing by predominantly white crowds. I don't do this exercise to condemn individual journalists, but the subtle differences in language and context that emerge are just too jarring to ignore.

Take these excerpts from an April 27, 2015 Associated Press piece that ran in the *New York Times* called “Riots in Baltimore Over Man's Death in Police Custody.” Keep in mind that Baltimore is predominantly black and

most of images of unrest over Freddie Gray show black men in their late teens and early 20s:

Rioters plunged part of Baltimore into chaos Monday, torching a pharmacy, setting police cars ablaze and throwing bricks at officers hours after thousands mourned the man who died from a severe spinal injury he suffered in police custody.

... *Earlier Monday, the smell of burned rubber wafted in the air in one neighborhood where youths were looting a liquor store. Police stood still nearby as people drank looted alcohol.* Glass and trash littered the streets, and other small fires were scattered about. One person from a church tried to shout something from a megaphone as two cars burned.

Now, check out how the *Times* characterized the overwhelmingly white mass of Penn State students who tore up State College, Pa., because they were angry about Joe Paterno—a leader who stood by as his assistant coach, Jerry Sandusky, sexually molested boys—getting fired.

The November 11, 2011 article is titled “Penn State Students Clash With Police in Unrest After Announcement” and describes rioters and their actions: 5

After top Penn State officials announced that they had fired Joe Paterno on Wednesday night, *thousands of students stormed the downtown area to display their anger and frustration, chanting the former coach's name, tearing down light poles and overturning a television news van parked along College Avenue.*

... *The demonstrators congregated outside Penn State's administration building before stampeding into the tight grid of downtown streets. They turned their ire on a news van, a symbolic gesture that expressed a view held by many:* that the news media had exaggerated Mr. Paterno's role in the scandal surrounding accusations that a former assistant coach, Jerry Sandusky, sexually assaulted young boys.

So in Baltimore, “rioters” and “youths” are “plung[ing] the city into chaos,” and drinking liquor they looted. In College Park, “thousands of students” are expressing their anger and making “symbolic gestures” like tipping over news vans.

Let's try another one—a March 2015 Cleveland Plain Dealer story about that riot that mostly white Ohio State fans had to celebrate the Buckeyes championship win.

The piece, “Columbus police use of force against Ohio State crowds reveals training, communication problems,” describes some *8,000 to 9,000 people* breaking into the Ohio Stadium, throwing bottles at police, lunging at police, trying to lift police cruisers and setting at least 89 fires. About 200 National Guard members were called in:

Columbus police reported giving differing orders *to a crowd of Ohio State fans celebrating January's championship win* before deploying pepper spray and tear gas, according to reports obtained by Northeast Ohio Media Group.

. . . "The one weakness in our plan, *as Generation Xers planning for a Millennials event*, was that we did not account for everyone to meet at a central location," stated Sgt. Smith Weir in his report.

. . . "Monday we were dealing with *drunk, happy college kids* with a handful of agitators just taking advantage of the situation," Weir wrote.

. . . *Some in the crowd claimed they couldn't hear the police's demands to leave*, [Commander Christopher D.] Bowling stated [in his report], so *he suggested that his department purchase better amplification equipment*.

Compare that to this Associated Press story the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* ran on January 12, 2012 called "White Only' swimming pool sign violated girl's civil rights, panel says."

. . . *Racial discrimination has particular resonance in Cincinnati, whose population is 45 percent black*, far higher than the rest of Ohio, which is about 12 percent black. Surrounding Hamilton County is 26 percent black.

Cincinnati was the scene of race riots in April 2001 when police and demonstrators clashed in a blighted neighborhood following the shooting of a black suspect by police.

A white Cincinnati landlord posts a sign that says "Public Swimming Pool, White Only" at his complex's pool to bar a black girl from "clouding" the water with her hair products and that's "discrimination." The April 2001 unrest over a police shooting of a black man amounts to "race riots." 10

The "racial discrimination has particular resonance" among Cincinnati's black population. But the purposeful, proudly racist landlord literally takes things back to Jim Crow segregation, but racial discrimination doesn't resonate with him?

And then, of course, there's the infamous "who's a looter?" captions from Hurricane Katrina coverage.

Now I admit that this level of examination does leave me vulnerable to becoming that big-word butchering guy from "In Living Color."

But at the same time, as my late, beloved aunt Kinyozi Yvette Smalls used to say about 15 times a day: "Words are powerful."

If they weren't, everybody would be using the same language. 15

So in Baltimore, "rioters" and "youths" are "plung[ing] the city into chaos," and drinking liquor they looted. In College Park, "thousands of students" are expressing their anger and making "symbolic gestures" like tipping over news vans.

THINKING CRITICALLY ABOUT THE READING

1. How does Solomon argue that the media describes riots involving black crowds? What is Solomon's first reaction to such behavior? Why does her reaction shift?
2. How does Solomon argue that the media describes riots involving white crowds? How does it differ from the descriptions of the rioters in Baltimore? Why does Solomon choose the examples she does?
3. For what reasons do you think Solomon compares descriptions of rioting in Baltimore to those at Penn State in particular? Why might she emphasize twice the sexual assaults involved in the Penn State case? Why do you think she emphasizes the "symbolic gesture" ascribed to the Penn State crowd in comparison to those in Baltimore? How does she suggest these responses are incongruous?
4. How does Solomon suggest race determines the language of media coverage? How does this disparity in media coverage reinforce her Aunt Kinyozi's favorite phrase: "Words are powerful" (14)? What power do the words of the press have to shape the population?
5. What Ohio incidents does Solomon compare? Why are these incidents particularly unnerving? How does the use of language like "racial discrimination has particular resonance" contrast with a phrase like "race riots" (9)?

LANGUAGE IN ACTION

Look up one of the articles Solomon mentions, or another article that uses racially coded language to talk about instances of protest or demonstration. Try replacing the biased language in the articles you find, and rewrite them to follow the opposing model. How drastically do you have to rewrite the articles to avoid the kind of language that Solomon points out? How many times do you have to replace the word "riot" with a phrase like "expressed their anger"? Are you able to find language neutral enough to simply report the events without introducing a racially coded interpretation?

WRITING SUGGESTIONS

1. Solomon makes reference to the now infamous "Who's a Looter?" reactions from Hurricane Katrina coverage, in which a black man with groceries is described as having just looted while a white woman carrying groceries is described as having found food. (Searching the phrase "Who's a Looter?" along with "Hurricane Katrina" will link you to this story and its aftermath.) Is your local press guilty of similarly racist coverage? Search the archives of a local or regional newspaper for coverage of a recent criminal incident involving race. How does the newspaper characterize the police? The victim? The incident? The response? Using Solomon's essay as a model, write an essay analyzing your newspaper's coverage of the story and any biases you notice.