

Why we capitalize ‘Black’ (and not ‘white’)

AT THE COLUMBIA JOURNALISM REVIEW, we capitalize *Black*, and not *white*, when referring to groups in racial, ethnic, or cultural terms. For many people, *Black* reflects a shared sense of identity and community. *White* carries a different set of meanings; capitalizing the word in this context risks following the lead of white supremacists.

In deciding on a styling, fussy grammarians and addled copy editors generally fall back on a pair of considerations. The first is broad adherence to a general rule—like, say, the *Chicago Manual of Style’s* (§8.38) edict that “Names of ethnic and national groups are capitalized.” (Though *Chicago* still generally mandates lowercasing both *black* and *white*, it does include the proviso that the rule can be suspended if “a particular author or publisher prefers otherwise.”) The second thing we look for is attestation. In this case, it’s instructive to turn not to the largely lilywhite mainstream press (nor to the style guides that govern their renderings), but to writers of color and to alternative stylebooks. *The Diversity Style Guide* (2019), produced by Rachele Kanigel in consultation with some fifty journalists and experts, takes it as a given that *Black* ought to be capitalized. Sarah Glover, a past president of the National Association of Black Journalists, wrote in a recent piece (<https://amsterdamnews.com/news/2020/jun/11/one-thing-newsrooms-can-do-capitalize-b-when-repor/>) for the *New York Amsterdam News*, a historically Black weekly, that “capitalizing the ‘B’ in Black should become standard use to describe people, culture, art and communities.” After all, she pointed out, “We already capitalize Asian, Hispanic, African American and Native American.”

And, as my CJR colleague Alexandria Neason told me recently, “I view the term *Black* as both a recognition of an ethnic identity in the States that doesn’t rely on hyphenated Americanness (and is more accurate than *African American*, which suggests recent ties to the continent) and is also transnational and inclusive of our Caribbean [and] Central/South American siblings.” To capitalize *Black*, in her view, is to acknowledge that slavery “deliberately stripped” people forcibly shipped overseas “of all other ethnic/national ties.” She added, “*African American* is not wrong, and some prefer it, but if we are going to capitalize *Asian* and *South Asian* and *Indigenous*, for example, groups that include myriad ethnic identities united by shared race and geography and, to some degree, culture, then we also have to capitalize *Black*.”

Per this understanding, it is a kind of orthographic injustice to lowercase the *B*: to do so is to perpetuate the iniquity of an institution that uprooted people from the most ethnically diverse place on the planet (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2013/05/16/a-revealing-map-of-the-worlds-most-and-least-ethnically-diverse-countries/#:~:text=African%20countries%20are%20the%20most,be%20the%20continent's%20colonial%20legacy> systematically obliterating any and all distinctions regarding ethnicity and culture. When people identify with specific terms of the African diaspora, we defer to those; in the absence of the identifiable ethnicities slavery stole from those it subjugated, *Black* can be a preferred ethnic designation for some descendants. (For a pop-culture consideration of this question, see the “Juneteenth” episode of *Atlanta*, in which a woke white husband asks Donald Glover’s character what part of “the motherland” he’s from, hazarding a guess that the answer might be “southeastern Bantu.” Glover responds, dryly, “I don’t know. See, this spooky thing called slavery happened and my entire ethnic identity was erased.”)

If capping the *B* strikes you as in part a project of reclamation, well, it is. As *The Diversity Style Guide* notes,

There are various historical, social and political reasons why one might prefer to identify as Black. The term has historically connected people of African descent around the world and was revived during the Black Power Movement.... Black and then African American replaced older terms such as Colored and Negro imposed by others. Self-identification might reflect feelings about origin, affiliation, colonialism, enslavement and cultural dispossession.

That argument persuaded CJR to change its style (in defiance of a piece (https://www.cjr.org/analysis/language_corner_1.php) published on our site a few years earlier). Glover, in her article, called on the Associated Press stylebook (“the bible for working journalists”) to update its entry. Given the timing, after the killing of George Floyd (https://www.cjr.org/special_report/covid-floyd-protests.php) and in light of a global reckoning with race relations, I’d be surprised if the AP didn’t take heed, and soon. In the meantime—and in what is surely a sign of evolving American attitudes on the topic—*USA Today* has announced (<https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2020/06/12/why-usa-today-gannett-capitalizing-b-black-uppercase/3178288001/>) that it will be adopting the cap-*B Black* across its network, which includes the flagship paper and “more than 260 local news organizations.” (The man responsible for issuing the editorial fiat, Michael McCarter, was named managing editor of standards, ethics, and inclusion exactly one day (<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2020/06/11/usa-today-names-michael-mccarter-standards-ethics-inclusion-editor/5343405002/>) before making the call.)

This all makes for a good start, but it will mean nothing if white Americans don’t make an effort to understand the whys and wherefores—which is to say, the history that delivered us to this precise point in time. That, of course, will be a taller order than simply asking them to capitalize one little letter.

Editors Note: This piece has been updated for clarity. An earlier version included an explanation that was off-base. We appreciate the feedback, have revised the language, and will continue to discuss this subject internally.

RECENTLY: The movement for Black trans lives
(https://www.cjr.org/the_media_today/black-trans-lives-matter.php)

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