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CASE SENSITIVE

Why We Shouldn't Capitalize "Black"



Notes

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- ❶ Ben L. Martin, "From Negro to Black to African American: The Power of Names and Naming," *Political Science Quarterly* Vol. 1, Spring 1991.
- ❷ Lori L. Tharps, "The Case for Black With a Capital B," *The New York Times*, November 18th 2014.
- ❸ Lori L. Tharps, "I Refuse to Remain in the Lower Case," *My American Meltingpot*, June 2nd 2014.
- ❹ Olúfẹ́mi Táíwò, "Being-in-the-Room Privilege: Elite Capture and Epistemic Deference," *The Philosopher*, Autumn 2020.
- ❺ Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race*, University of Minnesota Press, 2007.
- ❻ Kwame Anthony Appiah, "The Case for Capitalizing the B in Black," *The Atlantic*, June 18th 2020.
- ❼ Fred Moten, *Stolen Life*, Duke University Press, 2018.
- ❽ Marquis Bey, "The Trans*-Ness of Blackness, the Blackness of Trans*-Ness," *Transgender Studies Quarterly* Vol. 4, May 2017.
- ❾ Stanley Cavell, *Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow*, Harvard University Press, 2006.
- ❿ Ashon T. Crawley, *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility*, Fordham University Press, 2016.

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Why We Shouldn't Capitalize "Black"

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ical ways of living and being that resist the congealment of black politics into extensions of precisely that which it opposes. Perhaps I am wrong that resisting capitalization is necessary for such politics; what drives me is not security in my own intuitions but a kind of anarchical sentiment, a willingness to wonder, to pursue otherwise possibilities. In considering and engaging such resistance, you too will exercise the willingness to wonder. In other words, I have sought to unsettle what is swiftly becoming a monolithic, static practice, to reveal both what precisely it entails and what resides beyond it. This critical, imaginative work is the first step to any radical work that deserves the name, and it must be plumbed for all that it is worth. Any party line that discourages such work does not deserve our time.

anarchism and abolitionism are rooted in “the quotidian practice of refusal to ‘be’” any one thing, to fit neatly within any one category—not because a particular category is problematic, but because one seeks to build a world without categories at all, a world unbound by rigid definitions. Such a pursuit is not based in wishful thinking, but in a politics that sends our gaze outwards—to those around and among us—rather than inwards, towards isolating our precise and exact nature or essence. If we discard the question “In what category do we belong?” we can instead ask, “What are we capable of being and doing?”

This is not how Tharps describes the passionate character of “Blackness.” She hopes to derive a sense of *respect*, of *awe*, directed towards the accomplishments of “Black culture.” Her passion is different from a love for the possibility of a utopian future and the people who live that possibility in the present. Namely, as Bey reminds us, a love for blackness need not *care* about figuring out what blackness *really* is; it need not require proof of our “excellence,” any more than lovers care if their beloveds “deserve” their love according to some objective metric. Following Bey, what I want to imagine is a love that is not smug or self-assured, a love that is uneasy and unsure and unknowing, a love that claims no conceptual ownership of the beloved.

I turn to “black” to express this kind of love, because I don’t think “Black” can—not because the latter does not accurately delineate something worth loving (I do not *care* whether it does or does not) but because of all that has accrued to it over time. “Black” has been consumed by the project of definition; its emotional, aesthetic significance is, I think, now irrevocably rooted in it. My use of “black,” then, is an emotional, aesthetic act.⁹ It is a loving signal of my resistance to definition, a wrench in the gears of the delineation machine.

If you are unsure if you wish to join me here, to abandon capitalization and the project of definition it has embraced, then I urge you to consider not just the forms of feeling and knowing such an abandonment allows and rejects, but what real, substantive politics those forms of feeling and knowing lead to. That, after all, is the ultimate test: to seek out ways of speaking that cultivate a fundamental *openness*, to what Ashon T. Crawley calls “otherwise possibilities”¹⁰: new and rad-

Every so often, an apparently seismic shift in American race talk occurs¹—“Negro” to “black” in the 1960s, “black” to “African American” in the 1980s, and back to “black” more recently. The summer of 2020 marked the latest linguistic revolution, as a swath of major news outlets opted, as a rule, to capitalize the “B” in “black”—a change swiftly embraced in everyday use. The linguistic revolution took place over the span of two or so weeks in June, prompted by the highly-publicized police killings of Breonna Taylor, Tony McDade, and George Floyd. It was framed as part of the supposed reckoning with American antiblackness those murders—and the subsequent protests, sit-ins, lobbying, and, yes, riots—prompted. The push to capitalize was no mere aesthetic or semantic flip-flop; it was, from the beginning, political, and painted as politically radical.

The new practice gained national attention on June 9, when the *Los Angeles Times* announced the adoption to its house style of a capital “B” when “referring to people who are part of the African diaspora.” Almost immediately, other national and international publications followed suit. First BuzzFeed, then NBC News and MSNBC, then *USA Today*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Atlantic*, *The Chicago Sun-Times*, The Associated Press, and even Fox News, as well as many smaller media outlets. Since then, “Black” has largely become the standard, even for those outside the spheres of professional news and literary media. These were not the first cases of mandated capitalization of “Black”; publications like *Ebony* and *Essence* have long capitalized the “B,” and *The Seattle Times* and *The Boston Globe* had already introduced the practice into their style guides. But it was the *LA Times*’s decision that prompted the sea change.

Nearly every publication in question released an extensive justification or defense of the new policy. These would-be manifestos are virtually interchangeable. Each based the decision on grounds of equality—as *USA Today* put it, the practice places the word on “equal footing with other ethnoracial identifiers.” In a sense, “Black” is the same kind of label as “Chinese” or “Celtic” (or “Igbo,” for that matter), and in standard English, these labels are already capitalized (though “white,” notably, is not). But in their statements, these publications went beyond mere egalitarianism. “Capitalizing Black reflects an understanding and respect,” *USA Today*’s press release went on, “and reflects a rich range of shared cultures.” For The Associated Press, meanwhile, “Black” conveys “an essential and shared sense of history, identity and community.” *The Seattle Times* explained that “Black” should be capitalized “because it is a reflection of shared cultures and experiences (foods, languages, music, religious traditions, etc.)” *The New York Times* agreed: “This style best conveys elements of shared history and identity, and reflects our goal to be respectful of all the people and communities we cover.” This almost robotic repetition—and the phrases chosen for it—suggest exactly what errors attend the capitalization of blackness.

To begin with, capitalization is not in itself a marker of understanding or respect: in the same way that capitalizing “Boise” does not signify any special respect or love for the city, capitalizing “Black” doesn’t tell us what theory of blackness its speaker endorses. Yet each of the above declarations implies that blackness is defined by a shared history, identity, or culture. And each asserts that “Black,” as opposed to “black,” best captures that true definition.

Behind the push to capitalize is the desire to define blackness, and it is a desire that I think we should be wary of. Any major conventional shift ought to be interrogated for its motivations and its implications. In this case, the shift has been touted as a radical (and antiracist) break from a (racist) past. But capitalization—the linguistic convention, but also the politics and theory behind it—is not new, and is indeed deeply anti-radical. Capitalization remains tied to what came before—to the conceptual framework and language of *antiblackness*—by its base and reductive impulse: by the desire to *define*.

ical illusion. He offers no way out of the trap of definition, in the end; by entering the capitalization debate, he accedes to its definitional terms.

Through no fault of its own, “B” has become indelibly tied to the project of definition. Definition is a field of [im]possibility, a limiting structure, within which the vast majority of race discourse—no matter one’s particular theory—is constrained. But impossible as it may seem, we can reject the bases of this debate. We can escape the definitional project. When an ideology impedes and confounds us, we can implement another. We are on a path paved many times over since the invention of the modern concept of race. We know where it has led. We could keep going, convinced that *this time* it will be different, that this new semantic flair will be better, or we could look for a new way forward.

If an alternative to the project of definition exists, it is not one that proposes a *different* definition of blackness (as Appiah does). That is not an alternative at all, not really. I do not want to argue that “blackness” is correct because it better captures the essence of blackness, or that “Blackness” *fails* to capture the essence of blackness. But what else is there? What other kind of linguistic intervention (and, more importantly, what other kind of politics) exists?

Instead of compressing blackness into a category, we can allow it to remain indeterminate. Rather than try to articulate “the truth” about blackness, we can choose instead to speak with feeling, with a revolutionary affect. This is a way of rethinking⁷ the emotive and conceptual power of language, but it is also a way of rethinking politics. For if the project of definition—and the capitalization convention it grounds—exists to prepare us for a particular kind of politics, perhaps we can imagine another kind altogether. This would be a politics based not on empirical and definitional accuracy but on—as trite as it may sound—love.

The theorist Marquis Bey invokes the Gingerbread Man to understand blackness: “Run, run, run as fast as you can, but you will still not catch blackness,” they write.⁸ “It is always escaping.” Bey argues that blackness is most radical when it escapes definition, and seeks to nurture a radical black politics that embraces indefiniteness. For Bey, black

the AP a shared agreement in the inferiority of black people, even as the three deal in antiblack philosophies of race. But if capitalization is not motivated by the same definitions of blackness proposed by Hegel and Jefferson, it is motivated by the *same presumptive project* that underlies those early definitions: the pursuit of any rigid definition at all. My worry is that in the abrupt embrace of “Black,” we have failed to question the conceptual commitments of capitalization—that we are not even *seeing* what such a choice has in common with antiblackness. This worry is exacerbated by the sense of self-satisfied progress the capitalization trend has occasioned.

In a June 2020 essay for *The Atlantic*, the philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah presented a case for capitalization that attempts to provide another way of understanding—of categorizing—the phenomenon of “blackness.”⁶ He argues that “Black” cannot do the work Tharps would want it to, because capitalization does not always convey respect or elevation. He also disagrees with the precise cultural meaning she ascribes to “Black.” Like Tharps, he believes that “Black” never refers just to the color of one’s skin, but for him it carries with it expectations, beliefs, and norms about one’s behavior, experience, or character (whether these are racist or antiracist). “Blackness,” for him, is a social fantasy we’ve invented, a concept useful for picking out a select group of people subjected to a particular political situation, and capitalization may highlight the artificiality of the category. “Conventions of capitalization can help signal that races aren’t natural categories, to be discovered in the world,” Appiah writes “but products of social forces.” He cautions against normalizing linguistic conventions that allow us to “treat a bloodstained product of history as a neutral, objective fact about the world.” He wants us to “try to remember that black and white are both historically created racial identities—and avoid conventions that encourage us to forget this.”

However, Appiah’s disagreement with Tharps (and the majority of those embracing capitalization) on the nature of blackness belies a more fundamental agreement: even though Appiah takes “Blackness” to be an artificial racist construction, he is still making an attempt to categorize it—not as a culture or a phenotype, but as a fantasy, an ideolog-

Though the mass adoption of capitalization is a new development, black writers and activists have been pushing for it for quite some time, in a tradition stretching back to W.E.B. Du Bois’s own successful campaign to convince *The New York Times* to capitalize “Negro” in the 1920s.

Almost a century later and once again in the *Times*, the writer Lori L. Tharps asked in a 2014 op-ed: “If we’ve traded Negro for Black, why was that first letter demoted back to lowercase, when the argument had already been won?” she asked.² Tharps went on to argue that “Black” and “black” actually refer to different things, insisting that “black” is a descriptor for mere color, while “Black” refers to a culture. “Black should always be written with a capital B,” she writes. “We are indeed a people, a race, a tribe. It’s only correct.” Indeed, at the center of Tharps’s argument is the question of correctness. Capitalization is justified, for her, because it is definitionally accurate; it correctly isolates the true nature of blackness.

On her blog, Tharps is more sentimental about what “Black” means: “Black with a capital ‘B’ refers to a group of people whose ancestors were born in Africa, were brought to the United States against their will, spilled their blood, sweat and tears to build this nation into a world power and along the way managed to create glorious works of art, passionate music, scientific discoveries, a marvelous cuisine, and untold literary masterpieces.”³ To reduce blackness to a color is an act of erasure, per her logic. “When a copyeditor deletes the capital ‘B,’ they are in effect deleting the history and contributions of my people,” she writes. Black people, according to her, are not simply identifiable by the color of their skin. They (we) do, as a matter of fact, belong to a “Black” culture. Calling those people “black”—where that word only refers to color or phenotype—is incorrect, by her logic. And this incorrectness, this *false account of the essence of blackness*, begs for adjudication.

Tharps’s *New York Times* op-ed was published six years before the paper heeded her arguments (without, of course, acknowledging her in doing so). Were the periodicals that altered their style guides last summer really motivated by the earnest realization of their own complacency, one made possible by murder and unrest? Perhaps. That is a

question only editors, diversity committees, and boards of directors can answer. But I am skeptical. The abrupt reactivity of the capitalization shift, the scramble for a symbolic gesture of solidarity, can also be read as a manipulative sabotage of a radical and dangerous black politics.

Perhaps *The New York Times* and The Associated Press acted not from genuine conviction—after all, these arguments have been circulating for quite some time—but from a desire to *appease* the black voices they had previously ignored. The philosopher Olúfẹmi Táíwò has warned against the “deference” he sees in calls to “center marginalized voices,” like those of the employees of major newspapers who apparently advocated for capitalization.⁴ Táíwò warns of many dangers inherent in this practice, including the risk that making deference the primary goal diverts a pragmatic politics away from actually transforming material conditions and into a sentimental fawning over appointed tokens of “marginalized identities.” Deferring to members of the social category associated with the oppression in question, irrespective of their actual knowledge or political commitments regarding the subject matter, is a strategy primarily aimed at making them feel “heard” and “respected” simply on the basis of their identity. If capitalization is a pat on the head, the decision to embrace it does not reflect any kind of substantive politics or constitute a step towards radical social transformation. To reduce black politics to deference and appeasement is to turn away from a radicalism concerned with eradicating material, ideological, and spiritual evil.

We are all too familiar with the ability of guilty institutions to stave off real change by signalling faux solidarity and symbolic progress. In point of fact, maneuvers like that of the *Times* serve primarily to mischaracterize the demands of black radicals—these being calls for the abolition of the police, and the literal protection of black life from a state bent on its extermination—as mere pleas for acknowledgement and respect. Yet what work has *The New York Times* (or *The Atlantic*, or Fox News) truly done to excise the deep rot of antiblackness, even from its own organizing structure and principles? Symbolic changes like “B” may cover up those questions, or distract us from posing them.

But what if we take these publications at their word, and assume they are acting in good faith? What if we critically examined the conceptual and political bases for the arguments in favor of capitalization? We would discover that Tharps’s desire to define blackness is, in fact, crucial to the intellectual and social formation of race as a fundamentally antiblack concept. For G.W.F. Hegel, Thomas Jefferson, and David Duke alike, blackness is something that must be pinned down, determined in its core nature. In that respect, the concepts of blackness that Tharps and others today subscribe to, and the capitalization practice built upon them, are extensions of a project that is most loathsomely antiblack.

The philosopher Denise Ferreira da Silva suggests that concepts like culture and race both attempt to schematize the world, to partition it into classifications that can be separated from each other by rigid boundaries.⁵ As she and other philosophers have argued, these efforts to render the world *legible* by demarcating it with impermeable conceptual boundaries are a defining feature of modernity, but not an absolute or inevitable element of human life. It can be difficult to bring this phenomenon of categorical distinction into view, not because it is alien, but precisely because it is too near, too ubiquitous. We take it as a given that much of life can be rigorously defined and delineated, once and for all. And race talk—be it antiblack or antiracist—is often located squarely on that conceptual Mobius strip.

Historically, antiblackness has operated as a series of stories about “what black people are like”—achieved through an insistence on essential black attributes (shifty, evil, lustful, stupid, etc.) asserted as inviolable science and divine fact. These explanations, in order to account for the *why* of black people, relied on the premise that *black people*—as a distinct and separate category—*exist at all*. In order to disseminate ideological accounts of blackness’s various monstrosities, the Euro-American concept of “blackness” had to be secured by the presumption that there exists an objectively-verifiable category called “black people.” As Silva argues, re-wiring “blackness” to refer to a culture and not a race still serves to restrict the concept.

Of course, I do not mean to imply between Tharps, the *Times*, and