From black and white to Black and White

Why we’re capitalizing terms for racial identity

From the Editors in the September 23, 2020 issue

Magazine editors are attentive both to big ideas and to the minutiae of language. While the latter constantly informs our work, only rarely does it come up explicitly in our pages.

In recent years, many publications have begun capitalizing words for racial identity like *Black, Brown*, and *White*. In June, *The Chicago Manual of Style*, the *Century*’s primary guide to language mechanics, embraced this emerging consensus. After some conversation, we’ve decided that we should, too.

We have long followed a “down” style in capitalization. This keeps things simple. We use lower-case for social movements, doctrines, job titles—if it isn’t a person or organization’s name, it likely isn’t getting a capital. (Decades ago our predecessors even insisted on a lowercased *protestant* while the ecumenical movement awaited the great church merger to come, one true Protestant Church.)

What’s more, when it comes to words for identity, capitalization can be read as essentializing, as indicating the singular thing that defines a person. This is perhaps

the best argument against capitalizing words for race: a person's racial identity is not the only thing they are.

Despite these defensible reasons for the old rule, we're changing it. We aren't simply jumping on a bandwagon or following the *Chicago Manual*'s lead. We're doing it because this trend toward capitalization is no mere fad. It's something that more and more Black and Brown people are saying is important to them. It's important for publications to listen.

That capital *B*, after all, emphasizes particularity. The social reality of being Black or Brown embodies a particular set of experiences. Naming and capitalizing it points to the work of identity formation within the space of that particularity—and to pride in that identity.

Phrases like *White identity* and *White pride*, on the other hand, make us cringe, associated as they are with violent White supremacists. Yet we're capitalizing *White*, too. That's because Whiteness, like Blackness, is a particular social reality. And those White Americans who reject racist extremism have tended to fail to see the particularity of Whiteness at all—treating it as nonexistent, the default status.

In this issue, ethicist Reggie Williams offers a definition of White supremacy: fundamentally it is not about bias or hatred but rather the maintenance of Whites-only structures. Such structures rely on this assumption of Whiteness as the default, the generic protagonist rather than a particular, privileged identity. They rely on the assumption that when police officers enact violence against Black people, they must somehow be protecting society rather than harming it. Naming Whiteness in its capitalized particularity can help us see through such assumptions.

We won't end White supremacy simply by understanding the particularity of identity, and we won't understand that particularity simply by using the shift key more often. But we're convinced that the subtleties of language matter—even the implications of something as small as a capitalization rule.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "The case of race."