

# The Washington Post

Democracy Dies in Darkness

## Opinion Why 'White' should be capitalized, too

By Nell Irvin Painter

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Let's talk about that lowercase "white."

Restructuring policing in ways that matter will take years, and many more Confederate monuments remain standing than have come down. But in these past few earth-shaking months, one change has advanced with startling speed: All this social upheaval has suddenly and widely restored a capital B to the word "Black."

I say "restored," because that capital B appeared in the 1970s. I used it myself. Then editors, uncomfortable with both the odd combination of uppercase "Black" and lowercase "white," and the unfamiliar, bumpy "Black and White," took off both capital letters. "Black" returned to "black."

In the wake of massive George Floyd and Black Lives Matter protests, however, media outlets and journalist associations are re-embracing the capital B. The [Associated Press](#), [New York Times](#), [Los Angeles Times](#) and many others took the step. (The Post has [said](#) it is considering the change.) Even [Fox News](#) joined the crowd. The most common motive can be summed up as *respect*. To many, the case for capitalizing "Black" seemed obvious, whether as an ethnicity or a racial designation.

But what about "white"?

I had been inclined toward the new formula: capital B for "Black"; lowercase w for "white" and lowercase b for "brown" (another important question to resolve) — but with serious reservations.

My initial thinking: When I compare the cultural, intellectual and historical heft of the three categories, "Black" comes out well ahead of "white" and "brown." We have whole libraries of books and articles about "Blackness," world-beating traditions of music and literature, even entire academic departments 30 to 50 years old specializing in African American/black studies. Compared with blackness, whiteness and brownness are severely under-theorized.

But, in a June statement, the National Association of Black Journalists [articulated a different view](#), stating, "NABJ also recommends that whenever a color is used to appropriately describe race then it should be capitalized, including White and Brown." Such a recommendation from the leading organization representing black journalists should give anyone pause.

A second reservation arose as I considered the asymmetry of racial identities of blackness and whiteness — and how they function differently in American history and culture.

These two identities don't simply mirror each other — one works through a pronounced group identity; the other more often is lived as unraced individuality. However much you might see yourself as an individual, if you're black, you also have to contend with other people's views. W.E.B. Du Bois summed this up as “twoness,” as seeing yourself as yourself but also knowing that other people see you as a black person. You don't have to be a black nationalist to see yourself as black.

In contrast, until quite recently white Americans rarely saw themselves as raced — as white. Most of them, anyway. The people who have embraced “white” as a racial identity have been white nationalists, Ku Klux Klansmen and their ilk. Thanks to President Trump, white nationalists are more visible than ever in our public spaces.

But that group does not determine how most white people see themselves. Instead, in terms of racial identity, white Americans have had the choice of being something vague, something unraced and separate from race. A capitalized “White” challenges that freedom, by unmasking “Whiteness” as an American racial identity as historically important as “Blackness” — which it certainly is.

No longer should white people be allowed the comfort of this racial invisibility; they should have to see themselves as raced. Being racialized makes white people squirm, so let's racialize them with that capital W.

Others have come to similar conclusions. In June, Kwame Anthony Appiah of New York University said capitalizing “White” along with “Black” would situate “White” within historically created racial identities that have linked the two terms over a very long run. For intellectual clarity, what applies to one should apply to the other.

More emphatically, Eve L. Ewing, a poet and sociologist of education at the University of Chicago, recently started capitalizing “White” to emphasize the presence of whiteness as a racial identity: “Whiteness, she says, is not only an absence.” She compares the fates of the McCloskeys, a white couple who pointed loaded firearms at protesters in St. Louis, with that of young Tamir Rice, who lost his life simply for playing with a toy gun in Cleveland. The capital W stresses “White” as a powerful racial category whose privileges should be embedded in its definition.

Ewing may have been thinking of James Baldwin, who said at Wayne State University in 1980, “white is a metaphor for power.” The capital letter can underscore the existence of an unjust racial power imbalance.

Capital-W “Whiteness” is less saliently linked to white nationalism than to racial neutrality or absence. We should capitalize “White” to situate “Whiteness” within the American ideology of race, within which “Black,” but not “White,” has been hypervisible as a group identity. Capitalizing all our races — “Black,” “Brown” and “White” — simply makes this ideology visible for all.

One way of remaking race is through spelling — using or not using capital letters. A more potent way, of course, is through behavior.

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