

A Debate Over Identity and Race Asks, Are African-Americans 'Black' or 'black'?

The push to capitalize black to refer to African-Americans is far more than a typographical change.

By John Eligon
The New York Times
June 26, 2020

It's the difference between black and Black. A longtime push by African-American scholars and writers to capitalize the word black in the context of race has gained widespread acceptance in recent weeks and unleashed a deep debate over identity, race and power.

Hundreds of news organizations over the past month have changed their style to Black in reference to the race of people, including The Associated Press, long considered an influential arbiter of journalism style. Far more than a typographical change, the move is part of a generations-old struggle over how best to refer to those who trace their ancestry to Africa.

The capitalization of black, which has been pushed for years, strikes at deeper questions over the treatment of people of African descent, who were stripped of their identities and enslaved in centuries past, and whose struggles to become fully accepted as part of the American experience continue to this day.

"Blackness fundamentally shapes any core part of any black person's life in the U.S. context, and really around the world," said Brittney Cooper, an associate professor at Rutgers University whose latest book, "Eloquent Rage," explores black feminism. "In the choice to capitalize, we are paying homage to a history with a very particular kind of political engagement."

The move toward Black is not embraced by all African-Americans, and two of the country's major news outlets, The New York Times and The Washington Post, are still wrestling over whether to make the change.

"Black is a color," said the Rev. Jesse L. Jackson, the longtime civil rights leader who popularized the term "African-American" in an effort to highlight the cultural heritage of those with ancestral ties to Africa. "We built the country through the African slave trade. African-American acknowledges that. Any term that emphasizes the color and not the heritage separates us from our heritage."

There are also concerns that turning black into a proper noun lumps people of the African diaspora into a monolithic group and erases the diversity of their experiences. Some have said it

bestows credibility upon a social construct created to oppress black people. Perhaps the most notable concern is what to do about white and brown as racial identifiers.

So far, most news organizations have declined to capitalize white, generally arguing that it is an identifier of skin color, not shared experience, and that white supremacist groups have adopted that convention.

But some scholars say that to write “Black” but not “White” is to give white people a pass on seeing themselves as a race and recognizing all the privileges they get from it.

“Whiteness is not incidental,” the sociologist Eve Ewing wrote on Twitter in arguing to capitalize white as well. She added: “Whiteness is a thing. Whiteness is endowed with social meaning that allows people to move through the world in a way that people who are not white are not able to do.”

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The debate over racial vocabulary is unfolding amid growing recognition across society of the need to tackle racism after several high-profile police killings of black people incited mass protests nationwide.

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In the aftermath of the George Floyd killing, which has unleashed a national conversation on questions of race and racism, many say the country is long overdue to standardize the use of the uppercase B in black, which has been commonly used at black media outlets for a long time.

The New York Amsterdam News, for instance, describes itself as “the oldest Black newspaper in the country that offers the ‘New Black View’ within local, national and international news for the Black community.”

The debate among black people in America over how they should be described has often centered on identity as a political statement.

In her 1904 essay “Do We Need Another Name?” Fannie Barrier Williams, an educator and activist, described a lively discussion unfolding at the time among African-American scholars

over whether to shed the label Negro in favor of terms like colored or Afro-American. Colored, she wrote, was a “name that is suggestive of progress toward respectful recognition.”

At the heart of the discussion, she wrote, was whether African-Americans needed a new label divorced from Negro and its connections to slavery, something of a fresh start that indicated their new place in society as free people.

Some, like W.E.B. Du Bois, favored keeping the term Negro and transforming it into something positive — an affirmation of their perseverance as a people and their freedom.

“There are so many Negroes who are not Negroes, so many colored people who are not colored, and so many Afro-Americans who are not Africans that it is simply impossible even to coin a term that will precisely designate and connote all the people who are now included under any one of the terms mentioned,” Barrier Williams wrote.

Negro became the predominant identifier of people of African descent for much of the first half of the 20th century, and even then descendants of enslaved people from Africa waged a yearslong campaign before getting most of society, including The Times, to capitalize it.

With the rise of the Black Power movement in the mid-1960s, the word black, once seen as an insult for many African-Americans, started winning embrace. In just a few years, it became the predominant descriptor of black people as Negro became obsolete. Mr. Jackson’s campaign brought African-American into popular use in the late 1980s, and it is now often used interchangeably with black.

For proponents of capitalizing black, there are grammatical reasons — it is a proper noun, referring to a specific group of people with a shared political identity, shaped by colonialism and slavery. But some see it as a moral issue as well.

It confers a sense of power and respect to black people, who have often been relegated to the lowest rungs of society through racist systems, black scholars say.

“Race as a concept is not real in the biological sense, but it’s very real for our own identities,” said Whitney Pirtle, an assistant professor of sociology specializing in critical race theory at the University of California, Merced. “I think that capitalizing B both sort of puts respect to those identities, but also alludes to the humanities.”

Vilna Bashi Treitler, a professor of black studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara, said that racial categories were fabricated, created to denigrate people considered to be nonwhite. Black and white are adjectives, not proper nouns to be capitalized, she said, calling a term like “African descendant” a more appropriate way to characterize black people.

“It’s a placeholder for describing the group of people who are perpetually reinserted into the bottom of the racial hierarchy,” Dr. Bashi Treitler, the author of the book “The Ethnic Project,”

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Now Dr. Fleming, a professor at the State University of New York at Stony Brook and the author of “How to be Less Stupid About Race,” is writing a book for young people about fighting racism. She has decided to use Black.

Part of the reason, she said, was her desire to honor black experiences and speak with moral clarity about antiracism. Another reason was more basic, born in the urgency of the current moment.

“Frankly,” she said, “because I want to. That’s also something that I think we need to see more of in every field — black people doing what we want to do.”

ChatGPT-Generated Critical Assessment of the Above Article

Prompt by Anna Mills

Writing Task

Write a thorough critical assessment of The New York Times columnist John Eligan’s “A Debate Over Identity and Race Asks, Are African-Americans ‘Black’ or ‘black’?”

In your assessment, summarize Eligan’s central claims, reasons, and assumptions. Discuss how he limits claims and describes and responds to any counterarguments. State your assessment of how convincing the argument is and what its weaknesses are, if any.

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ChatGPT Output

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In his article "A Debate Over Identity and Race Asks, Are African-Americans 'Black' or 'black'?", John Eligon discusses the recent widespread debate over the capitalization of the word "black" when referring to African Americans. Eligon explains that the change in style is not just a typographical change, but a reflection of the ongoing struggle to find an appropriate and respectful term to describe people of African descent. He cites the opinions of scholars and activists, including Brittney Cooper, Jesse L. Jackson, Eve Ewing, and Dean Baquet, to provide a nuanced view of the arguments for and against capitalizing the word "black."

Eligon's central claims are that capitalizing the word "black" when referring to African Americans is a way of paying homage to their history and acknowledging the impact that blackness has on their lives, but it is not universally embraced and has faced criticism for erasing the diversity of African American experiences and creating a monolithic group. Eligon also highlights the fact that the debate is ongoing and there is not universal agreement, even among African Americans.

The assumptions underlying Eligon's argument include the belief that language has a powerful impact on identity and the recognition of the historical and ongoing struggles faced by African Americans. He acknowledges the concerns of those who oppose capitalizing the word "black," including the argument that it lumps people of the African diaspora into a monolithic group, erases the diversity of their experiences, and bestows credibility upon a social construct created to oppress black people.

Eligon limits his claims by focusing solely on the debate over the capitalization of the word "black" and not on other issues related to race and identity. He describes counterarguments by citing the opinions of scholars and activists who have different views on the matter, but he does not provide a comprehensive evaluation of their strengths and weaknesses.

In conclusion, I would assess Eligon's argument as being reasonably convincing. He provides a clear and well-researched overview of the debate over the capitalization of the word "black" and offers a nuanced view of the arguments for and against the change. However, his argument could be stronger if he provided more critical analysis of the counterarguments he cites and if he considered the broader implications of the debate for issues related to race and identity. Overall,

Eligon's article provides a valuable starting point for further discussion and reflection on these complex and important issues.

Sample Essay Z

English 1C

Prof. Saramanda Swigart

Typography and Identity

John Eligon's *New York Times* article, "A Debate Over Identity and Race Asks, Are African-Americans 'Black' or 'black'?" outlines the ongoing

conversation among journalists and academics regarding conventions for writing about race—specifically, whether or not to capitalize the “b” in “black” when referring to African-Americans (itself a term that is going out of style). Eligon argues that, while it might seem like a minor typographical issue, this small difference speaks to the question of how we think about race in the United States.

Are words like “black” or “white” mere adjectives, descriptors of skin color? Or are they proper nouns, indicative of group or ethnic identity? Eligon observes that until recently, with the prominence of the Black Lives Matter movement, many journalistic and scholarly publications tended to use a lowercase “black,”

while Black media outlets typically capitalized “Black.” He suggests that the balance is now tipping in favor of “Black,” but given past changes, usage will probably change again as the rich discussion about naming, identity, and power continues.

Eligon points to a range of evidence that “Black” is becoming the norm, including a recent change by “hundreds of news organizations” including the Associated Press. This comes in the wake of the George Floyd killing, but it also follows a longtime Black press tradition exemplified by newspapers like *The New York Amsterdam News*. Eligon cites several prominent academics who are also starting to capitalize Black. However, he also quotes prominent naysayers

The opening sentence introduces the text this essay will respond to and gives a brief summary of the text's content and argument.

The thesis statement includes two related ideas explored by Eligon: the current trend toward using “Black” and the value of the ongoing discussion that leads to changing terms.

Summary of a counterargument.

The choice of "points out" signals that everyone would agree that mostly white supremacist groups capitalize White.

This paragraph shifts focus from present to past trends and debates.

This paragraph summarizes the historical examples Eligon gives. Phrases like "He cites" point out that certain ideas are being used to support a claim.

Summary of a historical trend that parallels today's trend.

Summary of a historical countertrend based on a counterargument to the idea of reclaiming negative terms.

Describes a response to the counterargument, a justification of today's trend toward Black.

and describes a variety of counterarguments, like the idea that capitalization gives too much dignity to a category that was made up to oppress people. Capitalizing Black raises another tricky question: Shouldn't White be likewise capitalized? Eligon points out that the groups most enthusiastic to capitalize White seem to be white supremacists, and news organizations want to avoid this association.

Eligon's brief history of the debate over racial labels, from "Negro" and "colored" to "African-American" and "person of color," gives the question of to-capitalize-or-not-to-capitalize a broader context, investing what might seem like a

minor quibble for editors with the greater weight of racial identity and its evolution over time. He outlines similar disagreements over word-choice and racial labels by scholars and activists like Fannie Barrier Williams and W.E.B. Du

Bois surrounding now-antiquated terms like "Negro" and "colored." These leaders debated whether labels with negative connotations should be replaced, or embraced and given a new, positive connotation. Eligon observes that today's "black" was once used as a pejorative but was promoted by the Black Power

movement starting in the late sixties, much as the word "Negro" was reclaimed as a positive word. However, the Reverend Jesse Jackson also had some success in calling for a more neutral term, "African American," in the late eighties. He thought it more appropriate to emphasize a shared ethnic heritage over color.

Eligon suggests that this argument continues to appeal to some today, but that

such terms have been found to be inadequate given the diversity of ethnic heritage. "African-American" and the more generalized "people/person of color" do not give accurate or specific enough information.

Ultimately, Eligon points to personal intuition as an aid to individuals in the Black community grappling with these questions. He describes the experience of sociologist Crystal M. Fleming, whose use of lowercase “black” transformed to capitalized “Black” over the course of her career and years of research. Her transition from black to Black is, she says, as much a matter of personal choice as a reasoned conclusion—suggesting that it will be up to Black journalists and academics to determine the conventions of the future.

This last sentence of this summary paragraph focuses on Eligon's conclusion, his implied argument about what should guide the choice of terms.

Eligon's statistical and anecdotal survey of current usage of Black and black covers enough ground to convince us of the trend in favor of capitalization. But the value of Eligon's article lies in the attention it brings both to the convention and the discussion as a way for the Black community to

This sentence indicates the shift from summary to a positive assessment of the argument's effectiveness.

wrestle with history and define itself. By presenting a variety of past and present opinions from Black leaders, Eligon gives a sense of the richness and relevance of this ongoing debate. His focus at the end on the opinion of one Black scholar, Crystal Fleming, offers an appealing intuitive approach to these decisions about naming. This idea is more hinted at than developed, leaving us

This part of the assessment emphasizes not just what is effective at convincing readers, but what is most valuable about the argument.

to wonder how many other leaders share Fleming's approach and whether this approach might lead to chaos, as each writer might choose a different way to refer to racial identity. Still, Eligon's ending leaves us hopeful about the positive outcome of continuing the discussion: perhaps decisions about naming can help the Black community find self-definition in the face of historical injustice.

This sentence offers a gentle critique of the limits of Eligon's evidence on this last point and the existence of possible counterarguments that are not addressed.

Works Cited page uses MLA documentation style appropriate for an English class.

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action=click&module=Top%20Stories&pgtype=Homepage

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