

RENDERING WHITENESS VISIBLE

By *Matiangai Sirleaf* 

Dear Editors in Chief:

The recent uprising for racial justice marked a pivotal shift in national and global debates on race. One enduring legacy is that the language we use to speak, think, and label people is consequential. Most style guides that previously called for lowercasing Black altered their positions. This letter to the editors urges the *American Journal of International Law (AJIL)* to join those organizations that have also changed their policies to capitalize White.

AJIL currently follows the Associated Press (AP) *Stylebook's* guidance regarding capitalization. The AP's statement in July 2020, "Why we will lowercase white," asserts that: "White people generally do not share the same history and culture, or the experience of being discriminated against because of skin color." This rationale misses the mark. In Cheryl Harris's article "Whiteness as Property," she demonstrates the material and other benefits conferred on those racialized as White. The process of racialization does not only manifest through discrimination. It also occurs through a shared relative position of privilege as compared to another group(s).

The AP *Stylebook's* decision also asserts that "in much of the world there is considerable disagreement, ambiguity and confusion about whom the term" White includes. However, given that race is a social construct, the same could be and has been said about the term Black or other racial categories. White as a social construct, groups people who share a lineage that can be traced directly or indirectly to Europe together who have socially constructed markers of Whiteness that are supposed to indicate race—usually through inherited traits such as skin tone, hair color, and texture. Black as a racial category is similarly used to describe people of African descent who share socially constructed racial markers of Blackness. Thus, the presumption that groups not racialized as White have natural and inevitable differences which are subject to some clear consensus, is exceedingly problematic.

Moreover, the argument for the capitalization of White is not based on the homogeneity of White people. Certainly, Black people are not a monolith and have differentiated histories and cultures. Nell Irvin Painter astutely observed in "Why 'White' Should Be Capitalized, Too" that White "Americans have had the choice of being something vague, something unraced and separate from race. As banal as it may seem, capitalizing 'White' challenges that freedom." The move to capitalize White challenges global conventions informed by anti-Blackness and White supremacy that seek to race certain groups of people and leave Whiteness untouched. Capitalizing White does not erase the complex histories and hierarchies of how distinct groups came to be racialized, assimilated, and understood as White in world history.

In Eve Ewing's reflection, "I'm a Black Scholar Who Studies Race. Here's Why I Capitalize 'White,'" she powerfully argues that: "When we ignore the specificity and significance of

Whiteness—the things that it is, the things that it does—we contribute to its seeming neutrality and thereby grant it power to maintain its invisibility.” Moreover, in Robin DiAngelo’s *White Fragility: Why It’s So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism*, she writes, “White people get to be ‘just people,’” while everyone else is raced. Kwame Anthony Appiah notes in “The Case for Capitalizing the *B* in Black,” that Black and White are both historically created racial identities—and whatever rule applies to one should apply to the other. He admonishes us to not “let them disguise themselves as common nouns and adjectives. Call them out by their names.”

The table below shows selected editorial practices regarding capitalization style for Black and White:

Style	<i>Black</i>	<i>black</i>	<i>White</i>	<i>white</i>
Recent Changes				
<i>AP Stylebook</i>	✓			✓
<i>AMA Manual of Style</i>	✓		✓	
<i>BuzzFeed Style Guide</i>	✓			✓
<i>Canadian Press, Globe & Mail, CBC</i>	✓			✓
<i>Center for the Study of Social Policy</i>	✓		✓	
<i>Chicago Manual of Style</i>	✓		✓	
<i>The MLA Handbook</i>¹	✓	✓	✓	✓
<i>Mother Jones Style Guide</i>	✓			✓
<i>National Association of Black Journalists</i>	✓		✓	
<i>The New York Times</i>	✓			✓
<i>The Wall Street Journal</i>	✓			✓
<i>The Washington Post</i>	✓		✓	
Unchanged Styles				
<i>APA Style</i>	✓		✓	
<i>Columbia Journalism Review</i>	✓			✓
<i>The Diversity Style Guide</i>	✓		✓	
<i>GPO Style Manual</i>	✓		✓	
<i>Guardian and Observer Style Guide</i>		✓		✓
<i>Scientific Style and Format Online</i>²		✓		✓

Source: Right Touch Editing, October 26, 2021¹

Notably, the *U.S. Government Publishing Office (GPO) Style Manual* of 2016 continues to include “Black” and “White” under the list of examples of words that should be capitalized.

¹ I confirmed the accuracy of this table at the time of writing on May 2, 2023. The first citation states *The MLA Handbook* (9th ed.) advises “choose one and be consistent.” Also, “if you are working directly with an author or discussing a person or community whose preferences are known, . . . follow that preference.” The second notes that the 9th edition of *Scientific Style and Format Online* is forthcoming.

The editorial staff of the *Chicago Manual of Style* changed their guidance in June of 2020 remarking, “as a matter of editorial consistency, *White* and similar terms may also be capitalized when used in” the same sense as *Black*.

Several professional organizations have also acknowledged the necessity of capitalizing *White*. In September 2019, the American Psychological Association’s *Style Guide*, stipulated that racial “and ethnic groups are designated by proper nouns and are capitalized. Therefore, use ‘*Black*’ and ‘*White*’ instead of ‘*black*’ and ‘*white*.’” Similarly, in June 2020, the National Association of Black Journalists advised, “whenever a color is used to appropriately describe race then it should be capitalized, including *White*.” The 11th edition of the American Medical Association’s (AMA) *Manual of Style*, published in February 2020, also provides that the “names of races, ethnicities, and tribes should be capitalized,” including *White*.

The underlying rationales for capitalizing *White* deserve the *Journal’s* considered attention. The *Washington Post’s* July 2020 announcement on writing style changes for racial and ethnic identifiers reflects on how many:

White Europeans who entered the country during times of mass migration were the targets of racial and ethnic discrimination. These diverse ethnicities were eventually assimilated into the collective group that has had its own cultural and historical impact on the nation. As such, *White* should be represented with a capital *W*.

Further, the Center for the Study of Social Policy in, “Recognizing Race in Language: Why We Capitalize ‘*Black*’ and ‘*White*,’” maintains that to “not name ‘*White*’ as a race is, in fact, an anti-*Black* act which frames Whiteness as both neutral and the standard.” Additionally, their March 2020 statement notes, “the detachment of ‘*White*’ as a proper noun allows *White* people to sit out of conversations about race and removes accountability from *White* people’s and *White* institutions’ involvement in racism.” They also condemned *White* supremacists capitalization of the “*W*” in *White* for the sake of evoking violence. They concluded that capitalizing *White* invites all of us “to think deeply about the ways Whiteness survives—and is supported both explicitly and implicitly.” Capitalizing the “*W*” in *White* is thus important to render Whiteness discernible and to avoid unparallel terms.

Furthermore, having a global audience makes it even more imperative to surface how race functions both transnationally and internationally. Whiteness is a social construct that transcends borders. For example, as Robert Vitalis has maintained in *White World Order, Black Power Politics: The Birth of American International Relations*: “The problem of empire or imperialism, sometimes referred to as ‘race subjection,’ was what preoccupied the first self-identified professors of international relations.” This was explicitly reflected in the discipline’s first journal, the *Journal of Race Development*, which was later renamed the *Journal of International Relations*.

International law was not inoculated from this process. Ruth Gordon’s “Critical Race Theory and International Law: Convergence and Divergence” has shown how international law tends to frame hierarchy in terms, “such as north/south, developed/developing or ‘Third World’ Nonetheless, the southern, developing Third World is for the most part the colored world, and like the colored world in the United States, it is marginalized, disproportionately poor and relatively powerless.” Indeed, Antony Anghie has forcefully demonstrated in *Imperialism, Sovereignty and the Making of International Law* how international law’s

animating purpose was the “civilizing mission” and the project of subordinating people of color through economic exploitation and cultural domination. Notwithstanding this, issues of race are marginalized. For instance, James Gathii’s “Studying Race in International Law Scholarship Using a Social Science Approach” found that since this publication’s founding in 1907, only 1.25 percent of 5,109 pieces in *AJIL* substantially engaged with race in the body of their texts. Encouragingly, the *American Journal of International Law Unbound*’s 2023 online symposium co-organized by E. Tendayi Achiume and James Gathii provides incredible insights on how race and racism function in international law.

My hope is that *AJIL* will join the likes of Kristen Mack and John Palfrey of the MacArthur Foundation, who in “Capitalizing Black and White: Grammatical Justice and Equity” recognize that language “itself is radical. It can be used to either support or challenge the systemic racism we seek to dismantle.” *AJIL* need not wait for the *AP Stylebook*’s guidance to evolve before reconsidering its policies. Instead, *AJIL*’s decision should be informed by the normative choice to further anti-subordination efforts and by the need to take corrective action to the *Journal*’s historic aversion to explicitly engaging with race. *AJIL* must continue to reckon with its own complicity in rendering Whiteness invisible with a commitment to ensuring to do better prospectively. Capitalizing White is one of many concrete steps the *Journal* can take.

Thanks for the consideration,

Matiangai V. S. Sirleaf

Nathan Patz Professor of Law, University of Maryland Francis King Carey School of Law
Professor, Department of Epidemiology and Public Health, University of Maryland
School of Medicine