Open in app ↗

Medium Search Write

Member-only story

Race + Society + Culture + Sociology + Language +

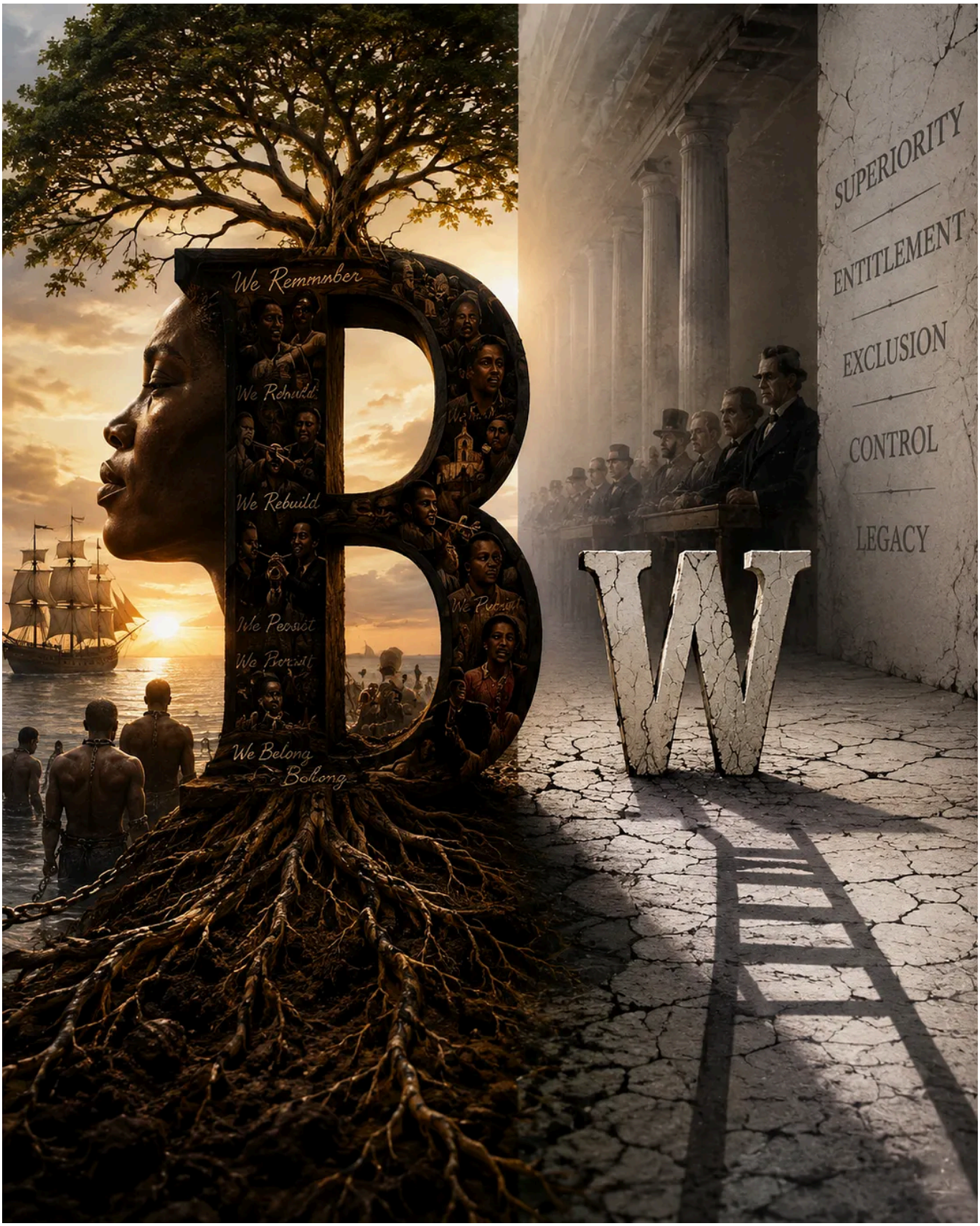
They Started It, We Finished It:

Why Black Is Capitalized and white Is Not



Dr. Cynthia Alease Smith Follow 7 min read · 3 days ago

161 3



In this essay I want to be perfectly clear about what I am arguing, because the argument is routinely misunderstood. Capitalizing *B* for Black and

lowercasing *w* for white is not a question of style. This is not about asking which manual a writer follows or whether a house preference should be applied consistently across a publication. This is about what each of these two words refers to, because capitalization is not simply an ornament placed on a word after the fact. It is a claim about what kind of thing the word names, something written as a proper noun, and the two words in question do not name the same kind of thing.

One names a lineage that was stolen and then recreated by the people who were stolen. The other names an ideology of supposed superiority. The letters follow from that, and they would follow from it whether or not a single style guide had ever taken a position.

The American English vernacular already knows how to make this distinction, and it makes it without controversy in every other instance. Peoples take the capital: Cherokee, Korean, Igbo, Latino, Indigenous. Ideologies take the lowercase: capitalism, socialism, fascism, nativism, colonialism, racism. Where an ideology does appear in the uppercase, the capital is inherited from a proper name rather than earned by the ideology itself, which is why Marxism carries Marx.

No one argues that fascism deserves a capital F for the sake of consistency with Cherokee, because everyone can see that the two words are doing entirely different work. The point is, the capital is not a compliment and the

lowercase is not an insult. Each is a report on the category of the referent.

As I said previously, Black in America is a lineage that was stolen and recreated, and I mean both halves of that literally. The transatlantic trade severed millions of people from ancestry, nation, language, and cosmology, and it did so as a matter of operational necessity rather than incidental cruelty, because a person with a lineage is a person with a claim.

What the legal architecture supplied in place of everything taken was a single word, assigned in the lowercase, meaning color, meaning the opposite of the category doing the assigning. That word was not a name. It was an instrument of administration, and it existed so that a body could be counted, insured, sold, and denied.

They started it. That much belongs entirely to them, and I have no interest in pretending otherwise or in claiming the word was ever chosen. But we finished it. Across four centuries a severed people built a lineage where one had been destroyed, and built it out of the very term meant to stand in for its absence.

Our unique kinship was reconstructed outside of bloodline, culture, ethnicity, and outside of law. A vernacular, a religious life, a body of music,

thought and aesthetics, politics, and a memory were assembled by people forbidden to assemble anything. This is the transformation the capital B records. It does not commemorate the assignment and it is not a courtesy extended by a sympathetic committee. It is a report of work performed, and it is earned in exactly the way Cherokee and Igbo and Latino are earned, which is by the existence of a lineage created, there to be named.

Whiteness has no such referent, and I want to scope that claim succinctly, because this is where the objection usually lands and where the objection is sometimes right about what I am not claiming. I am not claiming that people classified as white have no culture. There's Irish, Italian, Polish, Greek, Jewish, and Appalachian communities among others in this country who carried, and in many cases still carry, particular traditions, foodways, liturgies, languages, and griefs. Those are lineages, and they take their capitals accordingly. What I am claiming is that whiteness isn't any of them.

Whiteness is what those lineages were traded for, assimilated into, and the historical record of the trade is well documented in the successive admissions of groups previously held at the margin of the category. Whiteness is an ideology of feigned superiority, and I use whiteness and white supremacism interchangeably throughout this essay, because I do not accept the distinction that treats the first as a neutral demographic position and reserves the second for the people willing to say it into a microphone.

Remove the claim of superiority from whiteness and there is nothing left to name. The legal, economic, and social classification of it is not a separate mechanism the ideology happens to operate through. It is the ideology itself in operation, which is why the entitlements appeared in statute centuries before anyone thought to describe them as a movement. Ask what whiteness is apart from what it is not, and the answer arrives as a complete inventory of the things it has been able to exclude other people from.

So the lowercase w is not a demotion administered by me. It is the ordinary operation of the language on an ideological noun. If whiteness and white supremacism name the same thing, then white in its racial use is not the name of a people at all. It is the adjective of an ism, and English lowercases isms. To capitalize it is to make an exception, and the exception has to be argued for on the grounds of what the word actually names, which is the argument its proponents consistently decline to make.

This brings me to the mechanism I most want to name, because it is the reason I hold the position and not merely a consequence of holding it. When symmetry is demanded, when a reader insists that fairness requires the same letter for both words, what is being requested is not consistency. To capitalize White is to claim the grammatical form of a recreated lineage on behalf of the thing that did the severing in the first place. It asks for the shape of what Black people built under conditions engineered to prevent them from building anything, and it asks by way of a rule that presents itself as neutrality.

Whiteness cannot have a stolen lineage when it was the theft. The capital letter would let the category that performed the assignment claim the standing that belongs to the people who survived being assigned, and that is a theft of existential meaning transacted at the level of a single letter.

I resist this more strenuously than I resist open hostility, and the reason is that hostility does not endanger the meaning of Black. Hostility confirms it. Equivalency is the more effective instrument, because equivalency proposes that the two words are the same kind of word, that each names a people with a history worth marking, and that the difference between them is therefore a matter of perspective rather than a matter of record. Once the two are the same kind of word, everything Black means becomes available as a template.

The serious objection to my position doesn't come from people defending themselves. Eve Ewing, a Black sociologist whose subject is race, has argued for capitalizing White on explicitly anti-racist grounds, and Kwame Anthony Appiah has argued that both categories are historical inventions and that whatever rule governs the one should govern the other. Their strongest claim is that the lowercase permits whiteness to go on functioning as the unmarked default, the position from which every other person is a variation, and that leaving the w small is therefore camouflage rather than accuracy.

I take their diagnosis seriously and I do not think the remedy fits it. Marking whiteness is necessary, but a capital letter is a poor instrument for the job, because a capital letter cannot carry an analysis. It can only carry an implication, and the implication it carries is lineage, which is the one thing I am unwilling to concede.

The way to make whiteness visible is to name it as an ideology and to analyze it at length as one, which is what I do essay after essay, in the lowercase, using the noun rather than the capital. The capital purchases visibility at the price of any legitimacy, and the exchange rate is bad.

The manuals that capitalize both are answering a different question than the one I am asking. Their concern is parallel treatment of terms that appear in the same syntactic position, which is a question about the surface of a sentence. Mine is a question about what is living underneath it. Two words can sit in identical positions in a sentence and still refer to categorically different things, and consistency of appearance is not an argument that they don't.

There is also the matter of who has asked for the capital most openly, and I place this argument last on purpose. White nationalist movements have wanted the capital W for a long time, because it manufactures the impression of a people with a shared inheritance and a common destiny, which is the impression their project requires. I do not treat them as a

separate constituency with a distinct demand. Given what I have said about the identity of whiteness and white supremacism, they are asking out loud for the thing the category asks for more quietly, which is the form of a lineage for something that is not one.

I put this last because it is the weakest of my arguments and because leading with it invites the reader to conclude that my position is a reaction to the loudest people holding the opposite position. It is not. My position would stand if the request had never once been made aloud. But it has been made, repeatedly and in writing, and what that record shows is an ideology stating its own preference in its own name.

All of this is finally an argument about the third of my 3Cs framework.

Comprehension asks what a word denotes, Context asks what conditions produced it, and Connotation asks what the word carries that it doesn't say out loud. Typography is not exempt from Connotation. The formatting of these two words carries subtextual weight whether or not a given writer intends it, and the only question available is which weight it will carry.

Black is a lineage that was stolen and recreated, and white is the ideology

that required the stealing and still requires the belief. They started it. We finished it. The letters need to say so.

Race + Society + Culture + Sociology + Language +



Written by Dr. Cynthia Alease Smith

896 followers · 61 following

I don't write "here's my opinion, let me persuade you." I write "here's what I offer: the language, its racialized nomenclature, the history and the receipts."

Follow