



The Capitalization of Black And White

By Dr. Lorne Foster

As the 20th century came to a close, many ethno-racial relations experts and anti-racism activist were embroiled in a discursive discourse on the capitalization of the words “Black” and “White.”

All agree that the English language is not simply a neutral medium of communication and social interaction. The public education curriculum, for instance, is the central purveyor of the power dynamics and group asymmetry that exists in our society, insofar as it projects the ideas of the dominant culture into the heads of subordinate ones. Consequently, language and the existing conventions in writing are integral to both cultural domination, on the one hand, and internalized colonization on the other.

In this respect, the capitalization of “Black” and “Blackness” becomes an example of a revolutionary linguistic act because it breaches the standard way of communicating in textual form, and so disrupts reading. Here, the capitalization of Black and Blackness represents a perverse usage of the colonizer’s language, and is, therefore, a visual and linguistic subversion of White supremacy. At the same time, capitalizing Black also symbolizes a sense of pride and power in group identity. Here, it functions as a resistance strategy that creates a personal space, in which the logic and force of domination is contested by the power of subjective agency to subvert the process of language socialization. Seen this way, the linguistic subversiveness of capitalizing Black serves as a type of negation or affirmation placed before ruling discourses that frame our social reality.

Conversely, until very recently, capitalization of the word “white” has been subject to some dispute among ethno-racial relations experts and anti-racism activist. Some have argued that the word “white” and the idea of “whiteness” are the reference points by which all other colours or racially defined groups in this society are measured, named, described, and understood. Therefore, to capitalize white would be, in effect, to say the obvious and affirm the norm.

Others contend that the reverse is true - to fail to capitalize “White” is to acquiesce to a linguistic code and competency of the dominant culture. In short, the arbitrariness of Whiteness as the generic standard in the social construction of knowledge and reality is precisely why it should be capitalized. In this view, capitalizing White undermines the existing linguistic convention by disrupting the taken-for-grantedness of the norm, and ascribing or re-asserting the ethno-racial dimensions of power that are embedded in language and frame traditional discourse.

Now, as we begin the 21st century, there is new movement toward a linguistic revolution afoot that may transform ethno-racial and anti-racism thinking on a global scale, by capitalizing Black and White as racial domains or “archetypes.”

In England, for instance, many people of colour historically originating from South America and South East Asia are beginning to call themselves Black. In this view of the world,

all people of colour (regardless of their differences and multiplicity) can see themselves as one-identity when they juxtaposed themselves against individuals and groups categorized as White. While it is only in its nascent stages, this new movement in thought is an overtly political project that denotes a critical insight into the political reality of ethno-racial identity, and the chasm of power and privilege that separates White and non-White cultures. Consequently, as a strategy of resistance we might say that it is the next step in a decisive engagement and on-going struggle with the external social forces of domination and the internal human forces that seek humanization and cultural democracy.

Or, to coin a phrase, when all of the ethnic and racial sub-groups boil down Black and White in the new millennium, then "the game is on."