Capitalizing the Term "Black"

In the summer of 2020, hundreds of news organizations, including the *Associated Press* and the *New York Times*, began, as the latter put it, "using uppercase 'Black' to describe people and cultures of African origin, both in the U.S. and elsewhere."[1] The capitalization issue has long been debated within the Black population, in and beyond the United States, and in academia. There remains no consensus. We have chosen to capitalize Black, because it has the greatest support of those who identify as Black in the U.S., where most of us work.

As scholars of Britain, discourse, and the past, we acknowledge that these terms have complex histories that vary according to context. First, both black and Black have been used in Britain and its colonies to describe people of color more broadly, including, for instance, those of South Asian heritage and Aboriginal communities in Australia. Second, there is frequent slippage between Black as exclusive and inclusive of Africa.

However, the complexity of identity in nineteenth-century and present-day Africa – given, among other things, the vastness of the continent and the significant cultural differences regionally *plus* the layers of meaning surrounding concepts like "Indigenous" and "settler" – significantly problematizes the use of collective terms like "Black" when referring to individuals and groups from the continent. As a result, on this site, we reference people living on the African continent, whenever possible, using specific ethnic identities or, if absolutely necessary, use the term "African" in a more general fashion. However, we also realize that any collective attempts to reference Africa's current-day inhabitants or those of earlier centuries – whether by using one or more ethnicities, racial identities, national identities, or other such means – are problematic and rooted in practices of European colonial taxonomy that sought to ascribe fixed ontologies and locations to inhabitants in countless situations where migration could be a way of life and/or where identity boundaries could be vague, fluid, or contingent on varying social circumstances.

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[1] https://www.nytco.com/press/uppercasing-black/