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Olivia Robinson

Pepperdine University, olivia.robinson@pepperdine.edu

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Capital Offense: The Rhetorical Importance of Identifiers

Olivia Robinson

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Introduction

Too often, the freedom of Black people to create a cross-culturally acceptable practice is predicated on the existence and recognition of a comparable white practice. Even in something as fluid as language, Black people's expressions of identity are deemed incorrect and out of order until proven acceptable to others. Writer and columnist George M. Johnson released an article in early October 2019 on Mic, a diversity-focused journalism and storytelling platform, describing the importance of capitalizing "Black" in written conversations regarding race. Johnson states, "Capitalization is important because ["Black"] is not just describing the color of skin, or of a car or a desk for that matter. It describes a race — one whose existence has historically been plagued by erasure. Formatting the name of a race accurately, in books, on Twitter, in the media, is a glaring demand for our humanity."

The motivation to address this topic stems from the writing composition controversy of capitalizing the "b" in "Black" when referring to Black people. In traditional American English spelling practices, it is incorrect to capitalize a common noun when the word does not occur at the beginning of a sentence. However, considering that the definition of Black people — which will be contextualized for the purpose of this paper — refers to a formally recognized and named group of people, the term "Black" should be treated as a proper noun. Black writers across various professional fields have received much pushback for choosing to utilize this style technique, with opposing arguments ranging

from being out of line with common style guides to being an unnecessary political statement.

This conversation is much deeper than exploring the limitations of the English language's capitalization guidelines. Abiding by the boundaries of a construct as abstract as language is a choice. In considering the importance of names and identities, however, one must realize the power of being able to choose and control the rhetoric surrounding one's own identity. Capitalizing the "b" in Black, choosing to use the terminology "Black," and even referring to certain generations of Black ancestors using politically correct language speaks to the power of having a say in racial identifiers. This is a right that other groups have robbed from Black people throughout history.

Discussion

In Steven Mailloux's exploration of rhetorical hermeneutics and contingent universals, Mailloux argues that those who engage with rhetoric — which is everyone — must engage with the present truths of their respective time and society. As systems, institutions, and people groups change, tensions arise between what was once rhetorically acceptable and what is presently appropriate in regard to how people reference others or themselves. Scholars refer to these references as "identifiers." Historically, racial identifiers reflect various truths about the respective points in time in which certain terms have been most popular.

Terms of identification are a natural attribute people ascribe to groups of people

based on common characteristics. These terms consist of rhetoric that can be either affirming, neutral, or derogatory, and they exist in the form of words, symbols, caricatures, and even sounds. Oftentimes the dominant groups within a society set the tone for how they address marginalized groups within that same society. There are moments in which the terms that marginalized groups have created for themselves begin to become more prevalent. There are also periods in which marginalized groups reclaim a term that dominant groups once used to describe them, and they redefine the term itself and restrict the terms under which an outsider can use it (Davis 2005).

Identifiers are a key component in understanding the systems of race. Any racial group is difficult to define with a single definition due to the fluid, non-constant construct of race. Historically, Black people have been defined by characteristics such as descendance from the continent of Africa and physical features. Take note of the rhetorical purpose of my passivity in stating what Black people “have been defined by.” In history books, in media, and in political and social discourse, people in control of these systems have dictated the dominant rhetoric that identifies Black people (McGee 1999). Additionally, the terms with which Black people have chosen to identify themselves have not been included in the common language until non-Black people have accredited them. The lack of rhetorical autonomy Black people have had over their identifiers speaks to the greater message of non-Black people having a degree of control over Black identity.

With creating the construct of race, Europeans also generated new rhetoric to support it. As expressions both for and in opposition to the systemic infiltrations of race evolved through different periods of history, so did racial identifiers. Dating back

to when European colonizers first brought enslaved people to the Americas, Black people have received identifying labels created by people other than themselves. George M. Johnson expands on this in his recent Mic article:

Since the very first American census in 1790, Black people’s identity has been left in the hands of white people in power. After that, our identity on the US census changed from “Slaves” (1790) to “black” (1850) to “negro” (1900) to “Negro” (1930) to “Negro or Black” (1970) to “Black or Negro” (1980). The most current iteration is “black, African American or Negro” (1990). Other descriptors have also been used to describe those with Black blood in their body, like “mulatto” (mixed) “quadroon” (1/4th Black), and “octoroon” (1/8th Black). (Johnson 2019) Johnson’s list maintains political correctness and does not include more controversial identifiers used to refer to Black people, nor does it need to. Simply put, Black identifiers have often been in the hands of white people to create and decide. These terms alone rhetorically give context to the periods in which they have been most prevalent and correspond with the most impactful experiences shaping Black identities at given times. At “slaves,” Black people were enslaved. Throughout periods of “black” and “negro,” Black people were second class citizens. The term “African American,” coined and promoted by Reverend Jesse Jackson in 1988, was the first popular identifier fully created by Black people that Black and non-Black people could use in a politically correct manner (Martin 1991).

Additionally, it is important to consider the relationship between identifiers and identity. Rhetorician Krista Ratcliffe describes the pairing as such:

As academic-theory and daily-life examples demonstrate, identification is inextricably linked with identity but does not

directly correspond to it. In other words, although an identification may inform a person's identity, a person's identity cannot be reduced to a single identification. No single identification solely defines a person's identity; he or she is a compilation of many identifications. (Ratcliffe 2005)

Ratcliffe goes on to state that identification impacts how we comprehend constructs and socialization at particular moments in time. Considering this position, identifiers serve as rhetorical expressions of an extension of self. They cannot comprehensively describe a person or a group of people, but they do inform, to a degree, how people have been shaped. An identifier in and of itself gives reference to whom one is addressing and what social confine the person is subject to. With systems and constructs having a significant impact on how people understand the identities of others and shape their own, it is necessary that people have agency in selecting what terms of identification they want over them.

In the era of "black, African American, or Negro," Black people have more opportunities than ever before to create and dictate self-made identifiers. Incorporating these identifiers, however, is the current impediment. Writers such as Nikole Hannah-Jones of the New York Times' 1619 Project have successfully navigated the conversation of intentionally using the term "enslaved people" rather than "slaves" to reframe how readers and listeners think of and acknowledge slavery. Nevertheless, there are also writers such as George M. Johnson who receive editorial harassment for capitalizing the 'b' in "Black." In light of the

rhetoric of identifiers, the strive for standardization of a racial descriptor as a proper noun is more so demand for recognition of Black people's humanity (Johnson 2019).

It has always been true that Black people deserve identifiers created for them and by them. They are not dependent on non-Black people to qualify what identifiers they can use or how they can use them. Nonetheless, it is important that non-Black people use the terminology and its implicit guidelines set forth by Black people when referencing them in order to reinforce the autonomy that groups have to establish and maintain the rhetoric surrounding their own identities.

Conclusion

Considering Mailloux's notion that people should engage with the truths of their environment, it is important that people recognize and incorporate the changing rhetoric of Black racial identifiers. Racial identifiers are a fluid form of rhetoric that often reflects a portion of the historical context in which they originated or popularized. While identifiers do not fully encompass the extent of one's identity, the relationship between identity and terms of identification illuminates certain details regarding the constructs that the subjected person or group belongs to. Marginalized groups often receive identifiers that dominant groups ascribe to them, but it is important and necessary to empower all groups to establish their own identifiers and the criteria by which others can incorporate their terminology.

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