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Say His Name: *Othello*, Paul Robeson, and Racism in America

By

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East Tennessee State University

1. Introduction

Outside of the living, breathing, physical body of a human being, what allows individuals to stay alive is his/her name, and famous author Terry Pratchett captures the magnitude of this idea with the following quote, “Do you know that a man is not dead while his name is still spoken?” (Pratchett 14). In nearly every conversation, a person speaking uses a name to identify an object which ascribes a certain meaning, feeling, or description that allows the target of that speech to understand the verbal context of the speaker. Generally, the use of a personal name rolls off the tongue without the thought of how powerful a tool or a weapon using a name can have on the subject or audience hearing what the speaker says. When Juliet asks in William Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* — “What’s in a name?”—the question provokes a multitude of answers, not only in that play, but also in an array of other Shakespeare works and in society itself (Shakespeare 2.2.43). The reader should keep this in mind while reading this thesis, as its focus will be on the importance of a name, or the lack of one, to analyze William Shakespeare’s *Othello* in connection with contemporary problems, people, and political events.

Before focusing on the text of *Othello*, I will highlight the importance of any given name ascribed by one person to another, while also borrowing from J.L. Austin’s notion of “speech acts”. A name serves two basic functions in its usage that provide a connection to the individual, along with an attachment to a culture or a group of people. First, for the individual, the positive actions create a particular label for the character, while taking away a name causes a negative action to follow; secondly, a positive attachment of a name to a group can enrich the culture or history of heritage or can place a person within a realm of peoples viewed negatively, depending on what name is used.

Although the positive actions serve a purpose in the explanation of how a name functions, I highlight the fatal consequences of such actions in contemporary society by particularly emphasizing ramifications in Shakespeare's *Othello*. The focal points of the effects are "identity destruction", often resulting in racism, which leads to troubles that reflect the importance of a name—so much so that even in fictional works, we see name-calling and the resulting wrecking of one's identity. Because, historically, authoritarian regimes have often destroyed identities of people whom they intended to place under obedience and control, there are studies showing why stripping people of their names leads to their destruction. These observations and studies lead into the Speech-Act Theory developed by philosopher J.L Austin.

An analysis of Austin's Speech-Act Theory is important in literature and in life as the theory explains how the use of words functions as action, and this idea is particularly prevalent in how the use of racial slurs and epithets in *Othello* is a speech act. In short, a slur delivered by a speaker creates an action to derogate the status of the target receiving the slur, including the effect the action has on the audience hearing the slander. This theory forms the foundation for my analysis of *Othello*, and this chapter examines the text by observing how the enemies of Othello intentionally forego the use of his name, leading to his identity destruction.

The main plot of *Othello* follows the evil ploy set forth by Iago to destroy the marriage of Othello and Desdemona through the tactic of jealousy. Racism is the motive behind Iago's plot, and his racial strategy is an important element in initiating and then executing his plan. The scheme is tied to Iago and other enemies of Othello; labeling him as "The Moor," and substituting his name with a racial slur is a speech act linked to identity destruction. These acts by Othello's enemies result in the schism of Othello's identity, Othello's becoming the stereotype of a Black person in a White society, and the eventual innocent death of Desdemona.

For this reading to be clear, the reader must understand that the term “Moor” is a racial slur and not simply a word used to describe a sub-Saharan African descendent. Such a definition is often associated with criticism of *Othello*, but I will demonstrate a negative connotation of the word. Othello’s enemies’ naming Othello as The Moor relates to the meaning of Moorishness associated with barbarity in the language used in this play. It is a speech-act playing on the role of Othello as a war leader, and the negative connotations linked with the feelings and attitudes toward Othello and his skin color by Iago, Roderigo, and Brabantio, thus forming a negative sequence of actions resulting from the racial slur.

From this analysis, the thesis moves into exposing literary works and movies in American culture that tell a similar story of racism where a White woman and a Black man become enjoined in a relationship or romantic affair. Studies of this sort reveal a history of the attitudes White America has towards Black men, dating back to the once highly lauded film *Birth of a Nation*. Celia Daileader coined the term “Othellophilia” to give a singular definition to the way White America views Black men involved with White women. This helps explain some of the dynamics that create problems in *Othello*, and it also leads my argument toward the life of Paul Robeson because these popular works and developing theories, such as Austin’s Speech-Act Theory, were popular during crucial parts of Robeson’s life.

Following the short mentions of films and books in Robeson’s earlier years, I trace the story of Paul Robeson. As a well-known Othello actor, musician, and social activist, Robeson is the epitome of success as a Black man in America. High points and struggles of his life through his journey to overcoming the racial barriers set before him begin with his early childhood, continue through his adolescent and collegiate life, and finally end as he takes the stage as the first Black man to play Othello on Broadway. This chapter captures America’s attitude toward

Robeson, compares the real-world Othello with the character of the play, and continues to show how racism fuels America even when many claim the problem has been eradicated.

Robeson's dilemma foreshadows the present state of America when the movement of "Say His Name" becomes a staple phrase after the killing of George Floyd when Floyd, a Black man in America, suffered a tragic death at the hands of overzealous police officers. Officer Derek Chauvin forced his knee into Floyd's neck until his breathing stopped because of his crushed windpipe. The subsequent outbreak of protests and movements aimed to put an end to police brutality in America. The focus will be on the "Say His Name" movement in response to Floyd's murder to show this problem is still prevalent in the twenty-first century.

The opening chapter explains the importance of names, its functions, the effects these functions can have, and how these functions are relevant to Austin's theory. The next chapter focuses on the text of *Othello* and how the functions of the names and speech acts destroy Othello's identity through racism. Along with *Othello*, I will draw brief attention to popular works in America that paint a picture of a violent, fearful Black man. To connect this play to reality, the fourth chapter will be about the life, struggles, and accomplishments of Paul Robeson, who blazed a trail for Black men wanting to set foot on America's biggest stage. I conclude with the murder of George Floyd and the "Say His Name" movement showing that racism and the importance of a name is still prevalent in America today. The outcry and protests will be described to highlight how the fight for equality and justice for an aggressive police system needs to continue before the lives of more innocent, Black men are destroyed.

2. The Importance of Names and Speech Act Theory

The focus for analyzing William Shakespeare's *Othello* centers around the name of Othello and the substitution of his name with the racial slur "The Moor." For example, John

Inscoe states that a personal name, “identifies and acknowledges the individuality of a person, and at the same time it ties that person to a social group by denoting membership within it” (527). The first function, pertaining to individuality, suggests someone is separate from others because of the actions, characteristics, endeavors, and personality traits that make up that person. The name itself bundles all those elements into one word people use to identify the individual. Tying someone to a specific group or culture through a name, the second function, is important in linking history to an individual. Using a name to define an individual by the many categories that set him/her apart from other individuals is a positive function because it serves a purpose in allowing society to be different. Without the individual, self-autonomy would cease to exist, which leads to problems of authoritarian governments and societies unable to progress due to forcing people to think in groups rather than allowing the marketplace of ideas to flow freely. Tying someone to a social group can also yield positive results because it identifies a connection to a culture, enriching part of the individual.

As far back as the Victorian period, philosopher John Stuart Mill describes the idea of self-autonomy best and how it applies to a flourishing society. For Mill, a central point for autonomy is developing an authentic identity or individuality (qtd. in Donner 138). This connection is inseparable from the first function of a name which acknowledges the individual. The individual remains crucial to progression because it prevents conformity, and where conformity happens, human excellence stops, at least in the eyes of Mill (139). Without people who have desires and impulses that are their own, there is not an authentic character, and this in turn means there is no individual. Mill furthers the benefits of the individual by theorizing that self-development and individualism lead to diversity and a pluralism of life plans (141). Knowing this philosophy helps to understand why individualism is important, and the self-

identity of humans begins with their names. Unfortunately, because names are one of the most important components of the individual, taking away someone's name can cause dire consequences, both in Mill's time and today.

Just as a name creates an individual, stripping a person of a name is a form of identity destruction, which is a strategic tactic used in Iago's plan against Othello. The act of name stripping is typically associated with authoritarian regimes such as Nazi Germany where individuality is discouraged to force people into obedience with less struggle. For example, at the Mauthausen Concentration Camp the prisoners were stripped of all personal belongings and items that could attach them to their previous lives, and the final step in this process of annihilating an individual's identity was stripping their names (Hausmair 476). When describing the impact name stripping has on the individual, sociologist Wolfgang Sofsky argues the practice is, "among the most far-reaching and profound mutilations of the self that signified the metamorphosis of the individual into the element of the mass, the transformation of personal society into the serial society of the nameless," an issue which eliminates individuality (Sofsky 84). This act becomes especially crucial to the story of Othello when focusing on the schism of the character's identity throughout the play, but before we focus on Shakespeare's tragedy, it is best to further describe the positive and negative actions for the second element of a name's function.

A historical example showing the importance of a name's function lies in America's dark history of slavery where slaveowners attempted to forego the names of their slaves to maintain obedience on their plantations. Yet, instead of allowing the slaveholders to erase their cultural history which would have caused them to fully assimilate into White society, the slaves found a way to use names to keep their culture alive. When slaves crossed into America, they were

introduced into a new set of names from their slaveholders, but according to available evidence, slave parents were able to name their own children most of the time (Inscoc 529). Because of the practice of naming their children through names tied to their African heritage, slaves were able to resist complete assimilation into the dominant White society (531). When comparing this to the first element of a name's purpose, the slaves were stripped of their individuality, but the second function of a name, such as slaves naming their own children, provides a connection to a cultural heritage which makes up part of the individual.

Although the majority of the slaves' identities were destroyed, they held onto their cultural identities and passed on that culture through the names of their babies restoring the individuals and their heritage. By forcing people from West Africa into a completely new continent, keeping alive the words and practices of African tribes was rare. Remarkably, some Africanisms survived the considerable odds a transcontinental forced move would have inflicted on these conditions, and slaves naming their children contributed to this positive result. For example, the conscientious effort put forth by the slaves, especially early on, to name their children using "day names" such as Quash, Cudjo, Cuffee, Juba, and Quasheba, kept alive African names and words (533). These African nomenclatures represented specific days of the week the children would have been born on, similar to astrological signs, which was one of the most common practices for naming their children, according to the records studied from North Carolina and South Carolina. The association of a name with a group had a positive outcome in this instance, but in the opposite, negative associations occur through the use of speech acts too.

Before delving into the ways Othello's enemies use speech acts to destroy his identity, I will lay the groundwork for understanding the Speech Act Theory developed by John Langshaw Austin. Austin categorizes words into many different purposes, but his focus lies in a set of

words called performatives. Performatives are words used to do something, and this set of words is also called speech acts; speech acts are described as, “cases in which saying something counts as an action: they serve to alter the world, to bring something new into existence, or to modify, create, or establish a certain relationship between people” (qtd. in Leitch 1429). Austin then assigns a force and a meaning to speech acts, and the force of the act is the impact the action has on the listeners of the utterances which can or cannot always be controllable (1429). The main takeaway from Austin’s theory is the way certain performative utterances or speech acts establish a relationship between people. Racial slurs fit into the category of speech acts because the slur establishes an uneven balance between the speaker and the target of the slur. This fits into the second element of a name’s functions by associating a name with a group of people, and when the association is linked with a racial slur, a negative association is created.

“Slurring” is the verb used to describe the act of people using racial epithets against other persons, and using a slur or epithet to address someone is a speech act aimed at altering the discourse roles between the speaker and target, where the speaker denotes the social status of the individual with the slur (Wyatt and Wyatt 2879). Targets of slurs experience humiliation, disempowerment, and dehumanization (2880). It takes away the power an individual has by stripping him/her of the name that ties that person to strong roots of a heritage, and the dehumanization of the effects are critical in understanding what happens to Othello in the play as well.

Instead of being associated with one’s cultural heritage and proud history, one’s connection to a group becomes entwined with the group or the history of oppressed peoples that the speaker has feelings of hatred towards. In short, the target is bunched into a set of peoples created by the terminologies and meanings assigned to peoples from the oppressors. For

example, in response to famous athlete Kobe Bryant shouting “Faggot” in an NBA game in 2011, John Amaechi, the first openly gay NBA player, shed light on this problem by stating, “Right now in America young people are being killed and killing themselves because of the words and behaviors they are subjected to” (qtd. in Jeshion 231). Amaechi’s response captures the significance and power a single word can hold over the lives of people who are viewed as different from the majority, and this shows the consequences of such an utterance do not stop with just the feelings of the individual. Slurs may also offend surrounding non-targets who hear the speech but are not the direct subjects of the utterance, and a surrounding audience of bigots may approve the slur uttered by the speaker leading to further negative, if not violent, consequences by the crowd (2880). Bryant’s utterance occurred on a platform where people around the world would have been watching, and there are millions more people who followed Bryant that could have been influenced by the slur as well.

The reader or playgoer witnesses this action take place in *Othello* because Othello’s opponents refer to him often times as simply “the Moor” and use other slurs to avoid saying his name. Indeed, it is not until Act Three of the play that someone addresses Othello by his name; he is only defined by racist speech up until that point. Iago is typically the speaker of this performative utterance, and the audience or crowd of bigots feeding off his words are Othello’s other enemies: Roderigo and Brabantio.

3. Analyzing the Absence of a Name in *Othello*

William Shakespeare’s play *Othello* traces the tale of protagonist Othello as the antagonist of the play, Iago, drives him to madness. Othello marries the daughter of a senator of Venice named Brabantio which sends a shock wave of problems throughout the city because it is an interracial marriage. Desdemona is White, and the reader can assume Othello is Black based

on an immediate description of him as “an old black ram” (Shakespeare 1.1.88). Because the marriage is unacceptable to the Venetian society, a mission by the more racist perpetrators of Venice ensues to destroy the relationship, reputation, and life of Othello. The head of this plot for destruction is Iago, with help from the likes of Brabantio, Desdemona’s father, and Roderigo, an unworthy suitor of the White Desdemona. As Othello’s ensign, one of Othello’s top ranking war officers, Iago possesses the trust of his war leader, and that allows for his evil ploy to work. Racism is the core reason for wanting to see Othello’s demise, and the group of enemies uses racial tactics centered around racial slurs and speech acts to destroy Othello.

When analyzing Othello’s identity, it is crucial to look at what character he holds before his reputation and life are destroyed. Othello’s individuality is defined by his actions as a reputable war leader. As a war leader, he is respected by the noble people of the country because of the sacrifices he has given to Venice on the battlefield. This becomes clear in the play when the Duke of Venice addresses Othello as the “Valiant Othello” (Shakespeare 1.3.49-50). The Duke’s use of the word “valiant” signifies the respect he holds for Othello’s bravery and courage, and calling on Othello when the country is in need signifies Othello’s importance in upholding the stability of Venice.

Another instance representing the way in which Othello is associated with a name possessing power and the utmost respect is found in the story of how he married Senator Brabantio’s daughter Desdemona. Brabantio accuses Othello of stealing his daughter because he cannot fathom how she could marry a man with darker skin. However, the reader learns their introduction to each other was due to Brabantio’s actions. Othello reveals the Senator loved him and often invited him to his chambers to retell the stories of his times in battle (1.3.128-130). By understanding the prior relationship between Brabantio and Othello, the reader understands

Othello is viewed as a high-ranking part of the community. The problem of marriage arises solely because of his skin color, and his opponents will use his African heritage as a tactic to denote his status among his peers.

The slur most often used by the opponents of Othello: Iago; Brabantio; and Roderigo, to identify him in their speeches is, “the Moor”. Although the term Moor is associated with varying definitions, the reader understands “the Moor” carries a negative meaning due to the clear hatred spouted out by the three characters. Iago’s hatred is most recognizable as he tags Othello as “an old black ram” (1.1.88) and a “Barbary Horse” (1.1.111) which denotes Othello’s status down below that of a human. It is important to also note the descriptions as a black ram, a barbary horse, and the identifying epithet as the Moor are the introductions of Othello; no character of the play ever uses the name “Othello” until the Duke uses it in Act 1, Scene 3 of the play (1.2.49). Three hundred and thirty lines of dialogue defining Othello as everything but his name are said before the reader realizes he holds a reputable status among the citizens of Venice. The racial connotations Iago’s phrases hold degrade Othello’s character below the status of an animal and even further.

As the note in the Oxford edition of *Othello* says, Iago’s identifying Othello as an old black ram makes him out to be a beast. Outside of the ram being an animal, there is an association of black rams to a darkness or wickedness. The color and physical features of the animal such as the horns make it out to be a devil like creature, so labeling Othello with this phrase creates a character resembling a monster. The meaning of a monster in this sense is what Michael Neill describes of being outside the realm of the natural order stemming from an offspring of different kinds of creatures (Neill 203). The description is rooted in racism because the speech act takes away Othello’s humanity, but it also degrades him below the level of an

animal. Along with this, the idea of being monstrous like a black ram comes from two different kinds producing an offspring. This idea aligns with the racial fears being pressed on Desdemona and Othello as an interracial couple because the Venetian society views Othello as lesser than human due to his skin color.

Following these slurs are Roderigo's racist descriptions of Othello's physical characteristics in the lines describing his "thick-lips" (1.1.66) as "gross-clasps of a lascivious Moor" (1.1.125). By pointing out physical features of an African character then describing that bodily attribute in an unpleasant fashion, Roderigo is unveiling his racist feelings. Finally, Brabantio expresses his racial tendencies related to using "the Moor" by voicing "It is too true an evil" (1.1.159) for his daughter to be marrying Othello. The Senator says he must have "enchanted her" by using black magic or the black arts (1.2.63). Again, associating blackness with evil beyond the natural order continues to reveal a deep hatred for Othello's skin tone. The sudden change from Brabantio being overly impressed by Othello's past journeys to refusing to believe he could marry his daughter without magical coercion aligns the Senator's feelings with those of Iago and Roderigo.

By understanding the characters' use of "the Moor" as aligned with racist notions, the reader can conclude the opponents are using it to place Othello into a group of people where Moorishness means barbarity (Neill 115). Constraining Othello's character into this association of people is his enemies' attempt to further the destruction of his character through the second function a name serves. In the beginning of the play, the reader witnesses Othello's noble reputation as being defined by the various battles and sieges he experiences to protect Venice (1.3.130). Serving his country as a war leader is recognized by society in a positive light, but when his opponents use the slur to draw out his warrior-like reactions, his association with

violence becomes negative. Barbarity relates to brutality, and Othello also finds himself to be a barbaric outsider in his use of language by stating, “Rude am I in my speech” (1.3.82). This self-deprecation further proves the notion of “the Moor” representing barbarity in its use even though Othello demonstrates his speech is what woos Desdemona later in the scene (1.3.166). While his speeches, when not confronted by the Venetian court, are eloquent, the character loses confidence within the room surrounded by the Duke, Senator Brabantio, and other Senators reflecting how his opponents can diminish his place in society with the slur.

Discoursing Othello’s role in Venice allows Iago to break Othello and to destroy his valiant identity. Iago’s ploy is to antagonize Othello into believing his wife, Desdemona, is unfaithful which will raise anger within the character leading to violence, and eventually, murder. Iago uses Othello’s strengths against him, but the plan succeeds due to the outsider feeling Othello possesses. The reader sees Othello self-deprecate himself in front of royalty with the racial slurs thrown in by Iago, Roderigo, and Brabantio adding to his outside status. Othello’s marriage to Desdemona occurred in secret because of racial barriers, and concerns arise at the end of the scene when Brabantio exclaims, “Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see; / She has deceived her father, and may thee” (1.3.290-291). Senator Brabantio belittles Othello in his unwillingness to call him by his name and adds the extra sting by questioning his daughter’s trust. With societal pressures and Iago’s words pouring like evil into Othello’s ears, he is ultimately driven to madness. The play concludes after Othello strangles Desdemona in bed, and this scene represents the transformation of the Valiant Othello into the barbarous Moor (5.2.125). By forcing him into this brutal act, his identity is destroyed. Finally, Othello stabs himself after realizing the heinous murder he commits, which reveals the damages racist identity destruction can inflict on individuals and by extension, into society.

4. Paul Robeson: A Real-World Othello

When analyzing the play and how it relates to reality, one person who broke through racial barriers like Othello is Paul Robeson. On April 9, 1898, Robeson was born in Princeton, New Jersey, a society plagued by racism (Duberman 4). America's culture, heavily influenced by the media and the arts, was circulating books titled *The Negro a Beast* and *The Negro: A Menace to Civilization* (4). Paired with these novels of the time was the film *The Birth of a Nation* depicting a Black man being lynched for raping a white woman, and it celebrated the Ku Klux Klan. More telling, Woodrow Wilson, the 28th President of the United States, received a private screening of the film at the White House during his presidency (Pitcher 50). Being born as a Black man during a time where racism did not just exist but was celebrated by the leader of the country set racial blockades in Robeson's path that seemed unbreakable. However, Robeson fought against these challenges to pursue a calling in academia, and eventually, a successful career as an actor and singer.

Being born from a father, William Drew Robeson, who was a former slave and living in a hometown Robeson labeled as "spiritually located in dixie," the odds of finding a successful path in White America were not in his favor (Duberman 6). However, Robeson's achievements in academics prevailed early in his life and especially at Somerville High, but Robeson had to play down his successes to not appear better than his White peers. Similar to how Othello self-deprecates himself in the room full of royalty, Robeson had to do similar acts after delivering great performances on the field and in school around White people. One of his former teachers praised Robeson as popular because, "he had the faculty for always knowing what is so commonly referred to as 'his place'" (15). Robeson knew his place was not defined by the Whites surrounding him, and he made it his mission to prove that to himself and the society

around him. One example of an early success demonstrating his unwillingness to lay down and take the easy route came in 1915 when Robeson won a four-year scholarship to Rutgers University (17).

Rutgers University was considered the “big university” where Robeson came from, and although other family members of Robeson’s family received college educations such as his father Reverend Robeson and brother Bill Robeson, Robeson wanted to take his educational path a step further. His family’s influence suggested an all-Black college named Lincoln University, the alma mater of his dad and brother, but Robeson refused. Robeson’s former teacher Anna Miller mentioned many Black colleges were recommended to Robeson, but Robeson’s focus was on reaching the heights of a major college regardless of what difficulties would confront him due to the color of his skin (17). With this determination engrained deep into Robeson’s character, he entered a statewide high school competition which awarded the winner a four-year scholarship to Rutgers University. Like the other facets of Robeson’s life, the odds were stacked against his chances of winning because unbeknownst to him, the other participants of the competition took a test about their past three years in high school; Robeson was forced to write an essay about the entirety of his four years of courses (17). Robeson won the competition which revealed his heightened intelligence and grit, and these characteristics would take him places in life where White society barred his inclusion.

The scholarship award was an academic achievement, but Paul Robeson the football player also wanted to burst onto the scene for Rutgers University. Robeson tried out for the Rutgers varsity football team his freshman year, and as he stepped onto the field as a whopping 6’2, 190-pound player, Rutgers’ starting squad attempted to stop him from earning his spot. During the first scrimmage, Robeson left with a broken nose, a sprained right shoulder, and

many more injuries due to under handed and harsh actions committed by his White teammates. He was not certain he could continue this fight every day, but his father instilled in his son an unrelenting drive to continue because Robeson's status as a Black man on a college field and in the classroom was bigger than Robeson the individual (20). If Robeson quit, the White man won, so he continually pushed through the physical and mental pains pressed onto him by racism. With a drive bigger than the hatred he faced off, Robeson succeeded as a two-time All-American football player and an eventual law graduate from Columbia Law (22). His knowledge and recognition as a law graduate from a top program would seem to be enough to escape racism and prove his worth, but racism even crept into his law career.

His first ever job offer in the legal field came from a law firm titled Stotesbury and Miner, which was a special accomplishment since no other Black person worked in the firm at all (Duberman 54). Sadly, Robeson's co-workers were critical of his skin color and physique. While writing an important legal brief, Robeson asked for the stenographer to write down a memorandum of the law, and instead of carrying out this task, she stated, "I never take dictation from a nigger" (55). Robeson followed up on the issue with his boss who felt poorly about what happened, but the conversation revealed a system ran by wealthy White people who would not allow Robeson to represent them in a court room. Robeson stepped away from the practice of law, but this should not blemish his achievement in any fashion. He proved himself and showed he was capable, if not more capable, than other lawyers in the field. The problem is not Robeson. The problem is that the society he practiced in was not ready to take on a trail blazer like himself. Robeson's various achievements represent the extraordinary individual of Paul Robeson, and with the practice of law behind him, Robeson then set out to break down other racial barriers with his presence on the acting stage as Shakespeare's famous Othello.

In 1920, Robeson became involved with the Amateur Players which was an acting group with intentions of performing plays of their race, and this involvement eventually guided him to a career in acting (43). As Robeson's hard work equaled success in all his ventures, the stage proved to be the same. His career took off in London, a place Robeson felt lacked racism, and after success in the play titled *Show Boat*, later a major film, the idea of playing Othello entered his mind. The London Production in 1930 was his first attempt at the part, and challenges of Robeson's personal struggles paired with the notions of racism proved difficult at first. However, after performing the part, Robeson claimed Othello made him free from the limitations, prejudices, and fears of racism (137). Robeson had stepped across another racial boundary, but one blockade standing taller than all the others in his portrayal of Othello was America's unwillingness to allow a Black man to be romantic or violent with a White woman on stage.

The hatred for Black people is embedded deep into the framework of American society and performing a play where problems of racism are raised in front of a White, American audience could result in physical harm for Robeson or his family. Shakespeare's *Othello* shows a reputable Black man, an interracial marriage, and a scene where a Black man violently murders a White woman through suffocation; all portrayals White Americans stood strongly against at that time. Robeson openly expressed his reserve of performing in America by stating, "They certainly wouldn't stand in America for the kissing and for the scene in which I use Miss Ashcroft roughly" (Sawyer 326). Portraying a character on stage could result in real world effects but allowing fear and racism to rule Robeson's life was not a part of his identity.

On October 19, 1942, *Othello* showed on Broadway with Paul Robeson playing the character of Othello (Duberman 277). Robeson became the face of America's biggest stage, and his performance of the role as a Black man changed the meaning of the play before the audience.

While earlier productions had used White men in black face to portray the role, this act allowed the audience to ignore the racial problems outlined in the play by confirming the belief of the time that Black men were violent and dangerous. However, when the role was acted out by a Black man, the audience could better understand the manipulation and racist tactics used to destroy the identity and life of a noble war leader. This milestone, on top of an array of other achievements in Robeson's life, represented more than an individual success which echoes his father's words Robeson heard as a freshman at Rutgers. This moment was a breakthrough for the entire Black race's fight against racism, and Robeson led the way. One quote capturing the gravity of the event comes from a foreign journalist recalling audience reactions by stating, "the doors of the American theatre opened for the Negro people," in this moment (277). Robeson broke down the door in the American theatre, but the problems of racism highlighted in *Othello* still exist in America today.

5. Say His Name: America Today

Milestones and marks of progression toward an equal society, such as Robeson's performing on Broadway, continue to increase across time, but America appears stuck in its racist past. The world today is ruled by technology, so heinous acts caught on video stream across social media platforms within minutes of their happening. A group of people exploited by the newfound technology happens to be the ones who are supposed to be the most trusted. Americans witness police forces across the nation committing acts of violence against Black men and women, often leading to the deaths of these individuals. It seems another name or another video of a Black person being brutally murdered by police officers hits the air on a consistent basis, and although this does not show every policeman is untrustworthy, it does reveal a system and country still plagued by racist ideology.

Before focusing on America's problems, one may wonder how this connects to Shakespeare's *Othello*. In connection with reality and the written text, the term "Othellophilia," coined by Celia Daileader, best captures White America's attitude toward Black men. It is a word used to describe the way the Anglo-American culture views Black masculinity in a sexualized, violent manner backed by a false history of sexual rapacity and how this idea also applies to White women viewed as stepping outside the realms of sexual purity (Glotzer 28-29).

In *Othello*, Roderigo and Iago bring attention to this through their speech. Iago tells Brabantio, "I am one, sir, that comes to tell you your daughter and the Moor are now making the beast with two backs" (Shakespeare 1.1.115-116). The quote diminishes the interracial relationship of Othello and Desdemona to a bestial, sexualized action rather than a loving marriage. Roderigo also sexualizes Othello's masculinity by describing his lips as the "gross clasps of a lascivious Moor" (1.1.125). Using the adjective "lascivious" before "Moor" enhances the idea of Othello's barbarity by implying a longing for sex. Racist attitudes of this kind have not changed, and the research and work done by the "Innocence Project" exposes America's broken legal system.

The Innocence Project is an independent, nonprofit organization founded in 1992 by Barry C. Scheck and Peter J. Neufeld at the Benjamin N. Cardozo School of Law at Yeshiva University. The organization's mission statements reads, "The Innocence Project works to free the innocent, prevent wrongful convictions, and create fair, compassionate, and equitable systems of justice for everyone" (Innocence Project "About"). The reality is that a justice system will never be perfect, but when the freedom of someone's life hangs in the balance, officers, judges, lawyers, and juries must prove the defendant is guilty beyond a reasonable doubt; this is the burden of proof the prosecutor must carry in American criminal courts to prove one's guilt.

With this foundational requirement, one would feel comfortable about the low percentage of a person being falsely prosecuted. The problem runs much deeper, though, because if Black people are targeted by the system, poorly represented by lawyers, placed in front of a jury with racist feelings, or murdered before a court date is even set, the burden of proof only minimally impacts the protection of someone's freedom. The statistics gathered through the work of the Innocence Project reveals disturbing numbers many choose to ignore about the issues of the legal system.

A racist history embedded into the framework of the country is where the problem begins because the Constitution is the most important document determining the freedoms American citizens are guaranteed. Daniele Selby, an advocate for human rights and the Innocence Project, points out that White men who owned property were the ones protected by the initial draft of the Constitution, and this leads to the current struggles of guaranteeing those same protections to everyone (Selby). For example, 40% of the estimated 2.3 million incarcerated people are Black, and 50% of people who are exonerated are Black. To put the impact of this data into full light, one should also know that Black people make up only 13% of America's population (Selby). This shocking statistic reveals a clear problem within the justice system, and by reading through tactics invoked by police forces, one understands that racism is what drives these arrests and wrongful convictions. After reading these numbers, one might be misinformed to believe Black people commit more crimes which is why they are so heavily incarcerated. The true reason for this startling statistic lies within a biased policing system stemming from an also bias use of technology.

As our society increases its use of technology, the police have begun using systems that produce algorithms predicting which people are more likely to commit crimes based on data collection of arrests and facial recognition tools. Immediate discrepancies in the accuracy of

these techniques are obvious. For example, Selby explains that in the prediction process of who is more likely to commit illegal acts, data is taken from arrests of individual people or from the number of arrests occurring in a certain neighborhood. What is not factored into the data is whether the person was falsely arrested, or how heavily policed that certain neighborhood is (Selby). In 2016, a ProPublica investigation discovered the algorithm used in Broward County, Florida, inaccurately predicted that Black people were twice as likely to commit a crime than the White residents, which also underestimated the predicted crime rate of the White residents (Selby). Reading these numbers makes it clear why more Black people are being arrested because they are being targeted by the technological strategies police use, and they are more heavily policed due to these failing systems. What the Innocence Project has revealed through their work about racial policing methods extends for pages with statistics and mind-boggling data, but one more data figure captures the sad reality of what Black people in America feel from the White society.

As we noted, Daileader's term Othellophilia represents the notion of Black men who are falsely viewed as overtly sexual and violent. In America, a Black person incarcerated for sexual assault is three-and-a-half times more likely to be exonerated than a White person incarcerated for sexual assault due to false testimonies and allegations (Innocence Project). This may seem like a statistic in favor of Black people, but the time wasted in jail along with the destruction to one's reputation produces harsh consequences to that person's life, even after exoneration. Until this point, my focus has surrounded policing methods and techniques that led to arrests, but this statistic adds the component of accusations from more than just the police; it involves testimonies and allegations from the public. Based on these numbers, the public's view still matches the racist slurs and actions aimed at the fictional character Othello in a play written over

400 years ago. Thus, this horrifying, recent statistic uncovers the lively roots of racism driving America and its police force, and it reveals the sad truth that America's society still views Black people as violent threats.

One specific Black man who was targeted and portrayed as violent due to his skin color is George Floyd. On May 25, 2020, Floyd was wrestled down by a gang of White police officers in broad daylight; with Floyd's hands cuffed behind his back, officer Derek Chauvin embedded his knee into Floyd's neck for such an extended period of time that he tragically suffocated him to death during the arrest (Hill 1). A modern-day lynching occurred as multiple video cameras captured the act, and to prolong the remembrance of the individual, the movement "Say His Name" streamed across America. This movement highlights the significance of a name in the same way that refusing to say Othello's name matters in Shakespeare's play. To prevent George Floyd from becoming just another statistic, saying his name continues to give life to an individual no longer physically alive. It makes people around the world understand his story and recognize him as a human rather than a number in a data sheet that will be quickly forgotten. Exposing these problems and refusing to let them go unnoticed will, one hopes, stop a problem that has existed for far too long.

Identifying these racial tactics used against Black people can stop a repetitive history of identity destruction faced by a character like Othello, provide freedom for talented individuals like Paul Robeson, and save the lives of people like George Floyd. Keyshawn Thomas, Dante Kittrell, Jayland Walker, Christopher Kelley, Patrick Lyoya, Donnell Rochester, Amir Locke, Isaiah Tyree Williams, Jason Walker, and James Williams: these names are Black people from all walks of life, all ages, families, and much more, but they are also the names of Black people

killed at the hands of police in 2022. The fight must continue, and one way to prevent these tragedies from being forgotten is simple: never stop saying their names.

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