From Karen to Keisha: The New Black Names

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“A rose is a rose is a rose,” wrote Gertrude Stein (Sacred Emily), but in contrast Shakespeare had opined: “A Rose by any other name would smell as sweet” (Romeo and Juliet). What’s in name? When I first started teaching, full time, at Jefferson Community College in 1983, most of my students had either family names or biblical names. As a result I had an equal number of Rebeccas, Annes, Carolyns, Andrews, Johns, and Jameses. This remained a constant until the early nineties. Then, I started to see names on the class rosters that I sometimes could not pronounce; these names were not spelled phonetically, and apostrophes began to appear in odd places such as La’Tonya. Despite their unorthodox spellings and creative pronunciations, these names were often quite poetic—they were exercises in euphony: Lashonda, Keisha, and Ronisha. What’s in a name? Maybe names not only indicate one’s racial identity but also are a way of “keeping it real” in the hood during the post-industrial age. Soon these names would become markers of both race and class in post-industrial America.

Moreover, these new African American names serve not only as identifiers but also as race and class markers. Therefore, Mary and Kimberly will be hired while Ronesha and Latonia will probably not even get an interview. That’s the rub. Are these names emblems of racial and ethnic pride or obstacles to employment and upward mobility? It all depends on whom ones ask. Studies exist that come to diametrically opposed conclusions. Nevertheless, this is a social and linguistic phenomenon worthy of study.
This paper is an attempt to systematically study the new African American names and to draw conclusions about the social and political impact of such names. As mentioned previously, these names can prevent a person from getting a job. And one can only speculate does such a name affect the way a teacher interacts with a student? Does it affect the expectations that a teacher has for the student? These names may become labels “full of sound and fury” that signify marginality and exclusion.

Some people derisively call these “ghetto names”; others call them distinctly black names. Just what are the new black names? First of all these names are not from the list of English common names nor are they biblical names. Thus Arthur, Roger, William, Jane, Frances, Taylor, Paul, Peter, and David are not ebonic names. The names are neither Islamic nor traditional African names. Instead these names are names that have been created or coined during the late twentieth century or the early part of the twenty-first century in the United States. These names are uniquely African American and, usually, do not have Anglo-Saxon, Scot, Irish, German, or Hebrew origins. Moreover, these names often have unphonetic spellings; the spellings for the same name can vary and the pronunciations are arbitrary and may reflect low educational attainment by the parents. This definition excludes neo-African Americans – those blacks from the continent of Africa and the Caribbean.

According to Steven D. Levitt and Stephen J. Dubner: “black and white parents have named their children, dissimilarly over the past 25 years or so—a remnant, it seems of the Black Power Movement” (“Roshanda” 2). If their study is true, a major paradigm shift in African American forenames (first names) began around 1980 en mass; however some changes began for prominent African American athletes, musicians, writers, and political
activists in the 1960s and 1970s. For example, Louisville’s Cassius Marcellus Clay announced his name change to Muhammad Ali after his victory over Sonny Liston. Basketball phenom Lew Alcindor changed his name to Kareem Abdul Jabbar. These names changes reflect a change in religion—from Christianity to Islam which was one reason for names changes.

Still another cause of name changes for African Americans was the Black Power Movement of the 1960s. Groups such as the Republic of New Africa and Ron Karenga’s US adopted African names and gave their children African names. Sometimes parents gave their children African forenames and kept their English surnames; consequently, there were children named Lumumba Cunningham and Kwame Jones. Often these children were named after famous African leaders such as Jomo Kenyatta, Kwame Nkrumah, and Patrice Lumumba. During the 1960s this writer was also known as David Uhuru or Kwaku Uhuru. The playwright, essayist, and poet, LeRoi Jones, changed his name to Imamu Amiri Baraka. These names reflected a heightened Black Political Consciousness and identification with Africa.

In the 1970s, Alex Haley’s book and successful television miniseries, *Roots*, led to a new cluster of Afrocentric names. As a result a number of Kuntas and Kizzys appeared in Head Start, preschools and kindergartens. This series caused African Americans to engage in genealogy searches and sparked a renewed interest in African and African-American Studies.

Finally, the ability to name one’s self and one’s children implies power. During slavery the “masters” chose names for the slaves. They often assumed the surname of the
master. After slavery ended in 1865, many African American chose their own names. For some reason the last name of Washington is perhaps the most common surname for African Americans. Hence Booker T. Washington is in that vain. Parents often named their children after famous black people: Booker T. Washington, George Washington Carver, Jack Johnson, Ida B. Wells, Benjamin Brawley, etc.

Choosing Islamic and Afrocentric names was a way for African Americans to reclaim their stolen and lost heritage. Since naming is a form of power, a renewed interest in African heritage emerged and so did the desire to exercise that power in addition to the newly won freedoms of the Civil Rights Movement. African American children went from being named Carl to Kwame, Karen to Keisha. These names became as much identifiers of race as Black English, or Black slang, or Black Music.

Here sociology and linguistics intersect. Sociolinguistics is the study of language and society. One can pose the question: Do Afrocentric names reveal more about the bearer than race? In the aforementioned study by Levitt and Dubner, they pose the question: “What kind of parent is most likely to give a child such a distinctively black name?” (3). The answer is the parent of a Rhonesha or a Roshanda is usually an “unmarried, low-income, undereducated, teenage mother from a black neighborhood—who has a distinctively black name herself” (185). Thus, these names not only reveal the bearer’s race but also his or her socioeconomic status as well. That is a considerable amount of information embedded in a first name.

Moreover, it appears that black names have a significant social impact on the bearers of such names. According to a 2003 article in Psychology Today: “Job applicants
with African-American sounding names are far less likely to get a call back as are similarly qualified ‘white’ candidates” (Parma). And one could pose the question: Is there a correlation between poverty and black names? Is there a correlation between low educational attainment and black names? If so, why? Although it is not the focus of this paper, one could compare and contrast the names of middle class black children to the names of those from the lower classes. At this point this writer’s hypothesis is strictly anecdotal and not based on significant data, but one suspects that middle class boys and girls are more likely to have traditional names than their poorer peers. The boys from middle income families are more likely to be named William, David, Michael, or John. There are a number of juniors and treys. For the girls names such as Ryan, Ella, Annette, or Elizabeth are more likely. Both the girls and the boys are more likely to live in two-parent households and their parents are more likely to be college graduates. One upwardly mobile middle class mother named her two sons Winthrop and Wellington, respectively.

A change in African American values emerged in the 1980s. Traditionally (from the end of slavery through the 1960s) African Americans placed a high value on education and valued it as a means of upward mobility. Also, African Americans such as James Farmer, Jr. and Barbara Jordan who had impeccable diction and enunciation were greatly admired by most African Americans. Then, in the 1980s black students who spoke Standard English and earned good grades were suddenly denigrated by their peers as “acting white” or “trying to be white.” Good grades and good grammar and good diction were equated with whiteness; poor grades, poor grammar or “Ebonics”, and poor diction were equated with blackness. Perhaps this shift in values can be traced to higher black unemployment rates, more neighborhood and family disorganization, and the emergence of hip hop culture.
Surprisingly, one of the most successful black family shows, *The Cosby Show*, was not well received by some inner city blacks. Some young people did not believe that any black people lived like the Huxtable family. Since they had only seen poverty, crime, and dysfunction, they believed that all black people lived that way. For them an upper middle class black family was a fantasy. After all, only white people live upper middle class lives. One suspects that *The Cosby Show* probably was watched mainly by middle class black and whites.

Never one at a loss for words or opinions, Bill Cosby weighed in on what he considers African Americans’ self-inflicted ills. He said: “With names like Shaniqua, Taliqua and Mohammed and all of that crap...And all of them are in jail” (NAACP). Cosby also criticizes poor blacks for having babies out of wedlock, speaking ungrammatical English, dropping out of school, and for wearing pants that are two or three sizes too big. Cosby speaks of black accountability which puts him in the same camp as Booker T. Washington and Elijah Mohammed. He urges blacks to return to values of pride, hard work, and striving for excellence.

This urban provincialism and negativity can be attributed, in part, to the successes of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and integration. Because of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and other legislation, more African Americans were able to enter the professions and the corporate world and thus earn higher salaries. Due to open housing legislation, successful blacks could now buy a house anywhere; they were no longer limited to the black neighborhoods that were created by racial segregation. Unfortunately, this meant that only the poor and uneducated remained in the inner city. Poor black children often saw few black professionals as role models. As a result, this segment of the population
became increasingly marginalized and isolated. Therefore, there are now two black Americas, separate and unequal.

What is the origin of these new and sometimes unconventional names? One student whose name is Mykeisha (pronounced Mˈi Key Sha) said she is named after her father whose name is Michael Keith, hence Mykeisha. Other names are possibly combinations of family names. As in the case of Mykeisha, girls often receive names that are combinations of their father’s name. Other names are a combination of both the father’s and the mother’s name. Still other names are creative inventions of the parents. Nevertheless, these names are not value free; they carry what Becker calls stigma.

The stigma of one’s name may have an impact on the way a student is viewed by his or her teachers. The typical black public school student will have teachers who are white, female, and middle class. The decrease in the number of African American teachers can be attributed to two factors: the relatively low pay for teachers and the successes of the Civil Rights Movement and Affirmative Action. Once the only professions open to African Americans were teaching, the ministry, social work, and postal work. With the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the enforcement of anti-discrimination laws professions once closed to African Americans opened up. While it is a mark of progress that more African Americans have earned law, medical, accounting, business, journalism, and science degrees, on the other hand this leaves a paucity of blacks in the teaching profession. The calculus is undeniable: why incur thousands of dollars in student loan debt to be a teacher whose peak earning is around $50 to $60 thousand, when one can be an attorney or certified public accountant with an earning potential of at least six figures?
Once again one can infer that a teacher will treat Rebecca differently than she treats Roshanda. According to economist David Figlio, a researcher at the University of Florida, “…teachers see certain names as signals that students are from low-income homes, and in turn they do not expect the children to perform as well as their classmates. Those expectations become self-fulfilling prophecies” (ASBJ 6). Figlio continues: “…a child named Dwayne is more likely to be recommended for the gifted program than his brother, Da’Quan, even if their test scores are the same” (7). Apparently, names carry considerable weight and can adversely affect teachers’ perceptions of their students.

Figlio divides names “associated with low socioeconomic status into four categories: (1) names that begin with prefixes such as “lo”, “ta”, and “qua”; (2) names that end with “suffixes such as “isha” or “ious”; (3) “names that include an apostrophe”; (4) “…a long name with low frequency consonants…such as x, y, z, and q”(8). One could add a fifth category: the use of brand names of luxury cars such as Porsche. These categories apply to many, if not all, of the names given to girls.

Here are some examples in each of the categories. In category one are names such as Lorida, Lovaye, and Lowrendeestra (Ghetto Baby Names). Others taken from my class rosters are: Tamarra, Tahondra, Quandra, Quasha (which is actually an African name), and Quandrella. Category two names include Precious. In Sapphire’s novel, Push, the protagonist is a teen aged girl named Precious who is not only illiterate but also has two children as the result of rape and incest. Personally, this writer has taught two students named Precious; they both were in remedial English classes. Some names with the isha suffix are: Quenisha, Tomisha, Tyroneisha (the father’s name is probably Tyrone), and
Denisha. One might note that the names are often euphonious which might be a trait of an oral culture.

Figlio’s third category of black names “include an apostrophe” (8). One could conjecture that the apostrophe might be confused with the French diacritical mark, the accent aigu which is used with e’. Perhaps the parents believe that this mark confers a high class status on the child. Some examples are: O’Shonda, Rog’Keisha, and Mi’qua (pronounced Mi’qua). The apostrophes have no apparent effect on the pronunciation, so one can guess that the function of the apostrophe is merely decorative.

Finally, Figlio’s last category is “…a long name with low frequency consonants…such as x, y, z, and q” (Ibid). Examples are Yahatashee, Deshamanequa, Zabon, and Xaquista (Ghetto Names).

Still another category would be girls who are named after luxury automobiles. Therefore, some girls are named Porsche, Mercedes, Lexis, and Rolls Royce. In the 1970s, there was a Rhythm and Blues singer named Rose Royce which is marvelously alliterative. The beautiful granddaughter of Duke Ellington is named Mercedes Ellington. Some where there must be a girl named Escalade.

The law of inversion is the poorer the child the more grandiose his or her name will be. Kennedys are named John, Edward, and Robert, but a poor inner city black child is more likely to be named Tayshaun or Da’Quan. It is indeed ironic that one of the richest men in America and in the world is named William Henry “Bill” Gates III. Just plain Bill and he is a billionaire. Perhaps as my friend and colleague, William Hamilton, suggests all
that poor parents have to give to their children are rich names; society has taken
everything else except their creativity.

Do these names make black children the object of ridicule and derision? At this time
empirical data does not exist on this issue; however, one can speculate. It is probable that
teachers have difficulty pronouncing some of the names. The spellings can vary even for
the same name. One suspects that middle class blacks as well as whites may find some of
these names humorous. As a result the teachers may look at these children with
condescension. For example, one child in the late 1970s was named Marijuana. Some
parents, out of ignorance, do not know the meaning of the words. A history professor has a
student in her class that has the name: malaria. One mother in an urban area named her
daughter vagina. For the child to have to carry such a name throughout life seems
tantamount to child abuse. Any name that makes a child the brunt of jokes or an object of
derision does that child a disservice.

Another question that comes to mind is college admission and preparedness. More
research needs to be done in this area. It is strictly conjecture that all things being equal, a
child with a black name is more likely to matriculate at a community college with open
admissions than to a four year institution unless he or she is an athlete. Also, it is likely
that students with ebonic names are more likely to take remedial math, English, and
reading. It is not the name that causes low educational attainment; it is the socioeconomic
status and educational level of the parents. Finally, one cannot rule out the adverse effects
of racism as well. In a perfect world, one’s name would not matter, but alas this world is
far from perfect and the specter of America’s past of racism, slavery, and segregation
haunts the nation even today.
The best theory to examine this is Becker’s labeling theory (19). Included in labeling theory is the concept of stigma. Do uniquely black names constitute a type of stigma? Based on Marianne Bertrand’s and Sendhil Mullainathan’s study on job interviews: Are Emily and Brendan More Employable than Lakisha and Jamil? A Field Experiment on Labor Market Discrimination distinctly black names are a real disadvantage for getting job interviews (“What’s in a Name?) The researchers sent out “nearly 5,000 [resumes]” for 1,300 “jobs advertised in the Chicago and Boston papers” (1). The results were surprising: “…resumes with ‘White-sounding names—like Jay, Brad, Carrie and Kristen—were 50 percent more likely than those with ‘Black-sounding’ names to receive a callback”(1). The researchers found that it did not matter if the black candidates had stronger credentials (1). Therefore, distinctly black names do constitute a type of onamastic stigma.

There are, however, examples of African Americans who have succeeded despite their having a non-traditional name. Exceptions exist to any rule or precept. Not all the bearers of distinctly black names are single mothers or uneducated, not all are unemployed or poverty stricken. A recent example is Ra’Tanya Willis-Freedman who was featured in the Courier-Journal’s Scene (September 25, 2010). Her picture is on the cover and there is a short feature on her life style (4). This “stay-at-home mom” is a former high school English teacher who has both a bachelor’s and master’s degrees. Currently she is writing her doctoral dissertation (4). She and her husband have two sons, one of whom is named Noa’Sosa. The family lives in an affluent part of Louisville’s East End. She is also a former Mrs. Kentucky. Another successful person with a distinctively African American name is...
Sadqua Reynolds⁴, who is a judge. Another successful person is K’Yon Pointer who was one of fourteen firefighters promoted to sergeant (Courier-Journal B4). Nationwide there are many successful black people who have distinctly black names. Perhaps the best example is the president of the United States, Barack Hussein Obama who superseded both race and an uncommon name to become the first black president of America. Other examples exist such as former U.S. Congressman Kwame Mfume, or a Kentucky judge named Sadqua, or a successful dentist named Kwon. The key to success seems to be more education and hard work. Maybe unique black names should be compared to other ethnic names such as Schwarzenegger or Pitino. Moreover, Asians have been successful without completely anglicizing their names: Elaine Chou, Susan Oh, Jackie Chan, and Denish D’Souza, the darling of the conservatives, are just a few that come to mind. Admittedly, they have anglicized their forenames.

According to Takawira Mafukidze, an African Studies scholar: “It is widely accepted in many part of Africa that a name is a religious mark of identification and a sign of honor and respect…The naming of a child is considered an important act; it has ritual ceremonies that go with it(Black World 4). He continues to explain that the names are taken seriously and are not”…chosen in a haphazard fashion. Great care and thought are taken when selecting them” (4). A fitting example of naming practices comes from the Akan peoples of Ghana. A child’s first name tells his or her gender and which day he or she was born. For example, “Male babies born on Sunday are named ‘Akwasi, Kwesi, or

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¹ Ms. Reynolds lost against a white female opponent in the November, 2010 election. It is impossible to tell whether or not her name was a factor in her loss.
Kwashie; and female babies may called Asi, Esi, or Akosua….For those born on Monday, the Akans can call them Kwadoo, Kwadzo(male) or Adwowa, Adzo (female). The Akans call children born on Tuesday Kwabena, Koblu (male) or Abena, Araba for females. Akan children born on Wednesday are named Kwaku, Kweku (male) or Akua, Aku, Akuba (female). Yan, Kwan(male) or Yoa, Yaba (female) are Akan names for those born on Thursday; Friday: Kofi [e.g. Kofi Anan, former UN Secretary-General] (male) or Afuua, Afí, Afiba (female); Saturday: Kwame [Kwame Nkrumah], Kwamema (male) or Amma, Ami, Ame (female). (4-5)

In contrast, African Americans have struggled with their group identity or collective name since the 1600s in North America. The Spanish word for black, negro, an adjective not a noun became the main signifier for people of color in the New World. For some reason, many white southerners had “difficulty” pronouncing the word—negro, so they said negra instead which easily degenerated into the racial slur, nigger. African Americans, nevertheless, maintained some onamastic ties to Africa and used the word in naming their institutions. For example, When Prince Hall obtained a charter from the Masons in England to start a lodge for black Americans; it was named African Lodge No. 1. When Richard Allen founded a new church in Philadelphia, it was named the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME); later, an African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church would be founded in New York City. Thus, African Americans maintained some tie to their ancestral home.

Although most African American slaves were illiterate and forbidden to learn to read or write, they participated in a rich oral culture that included Negro spirituals, folktales, folk medicine, recipes, proverbs, and formulas for voodoo and conjuring. This
oral culture has continued in urban America. Blacks have created such forms as playing the dozens or “crackin”, toasting, and rapping. Rap is just the most recent point on the long line of African and African-American oral culture. Rap artists utilize rhyme, metaphor, simile, hyperbole, and braggadocio in their performance art. This music has influenced not only black youth but also suburban white youth who have helped to make rap music a multibillion dollar industry. Often the names of the rappers are as colorful as their language. For example, the rapper Snoop Dogg has a name that is a triple entendre; dog is what young, inner city men call each other; doggy style is a sexual position, and then there is the more prosaic meaning of dog as a four legged animal. There was once a dance called “The Atomic Dog.” Snoop’s birth name is: Cordozar Calvin Broadus, Jr. P. Diddy or Puff Daddy is Sean Combs; Andre Young or Dr. Dre was a member of NWA with Ice Cube and Eazy-E. Queen Latifah’s birth name is Dana Elaine Owens; Christopher George Latore Wallace became Biggy Smalls, an oxymoron. In contrast, Tupac Shakur whose mother was a Black Panther started off with a distinct name. A rapper’s name is almost as important as his tracks.

One wonders whether or not Hip Hop has not also influenced black naming practices. Maybe the names are a way that the parents exhibit a certain swag or style. It might just be today’s type of “cool.” A name could be an attention getter and a way for a people often ignored or invisible in the world to be noticed. Ralph Ellison’s “invisible man” not only had no description, he had no name. He was representative of the millions of black people in America who had no names and no place in the country’s history. Then, in the 1960s African Americans began to demand and fight for first class citizenship. Part of this movement included the fight for Black Studies which included the contributions of Blacks
to American history and culture. This marked a move from invisibility to visibility. Today
the group that benefited the most from the Civil Rights Movement is the black middle
class. The lives of the black poor were hardly touched by the movement and this group
constitutes the majority of the people who give their children distinctively black names.
The inner city lives of poverty, crime, gang warfare, and drugs are the content of rap
music. The rappers in addition to athletes and musicians are the heroes and role models for
inner city youth. Therefore, it would not be surprising if parents named their children after
these role models.

Using semiotics one wonders whether names are signs. One definition of a
sign is: “A sign is anything (e.g. a word, image, sound, object, gesture, or substance) that
can be used to express a meaning” (Semiotics 2). Here the analysis becomes tricky. If the
name, itself, is a sign, what are the signifier and the signified? Moreover, the denotation
and connotation are significant. In some instances, the denotation may obscure, but one
can discuss the connotation i.e. “The various social overtones, cultural implications, or
emotional meanings associated with a sign” (2). What do black names signify?

One assertion is clear and undisputed: these names signify race, if not
socioeconomic status. Perhaps that is the reason that people create or use these names.
These names are uniquely black. White America has been influenced by and has often
copied Black America in music, dress, and speech. Just as blacks have chosen unique
names it is just a matter of time before some whites begin to imitate or appropriate black
names for their children, too. One example in popular culture is in the Twilight series. The
daughter of Bella and Edward is named Renesmee. “Renesmee’s name is a composite of the
names of Renee, Bella’s mom, and Esme, Edward’s adopted mother”(Courier-Journal 19).
Renesmee sounds like Ronesha or Mykeisha. For blacks these names create a connection to family, neighborhood, and race.

The crux of the problem has little to do with names. Race prejudice and economic inequality still plague African Americans. Since the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 African Americans have made gains. The black middle class has grown. More blacks attend and graduate from college yet inequalities still exist. Short of reparations, many African Americans can never catch up to their white counterparts.

Isabel Wilkerson writes in *The Warmth of Other Suns*:

> The disparity in pay…would mean that even the most promising of colored People, having received next to nothing in material assets from their slave ancestors, had to labor with the knowledge that they were now being underpaid by more than half, that they were so behind it would be all but impossible to accumulate the assets their white counterparts could...Multiplied over the generations, it would mean a wealth deficit between races that would require a miracle windfall or near asceticism on the part of colored families if they were to have any chance of catching up or amassing anything of value(85 ).

Another source: *The House We Live In*, a documentary explains that the federal government with complicit in the creation of racial economic inequity. When the GI Bill was created both black and white veterans used this to buy houses; however, when a white GI’s children inherited their father’s house it was worth over $100,000; the heirs of the black GI inherited houses that were worth only about $20,000. The root of the problem lies in segregated housing and redlining by financial institutions. In the 1940s, ‘50s and ‘60s, many blacks could only buy houses in designated black neighborhoods. Houses in these areas often depreciated or appreciated very little over a period of thirty to forty years.
In conclusion, the new names of African Americans constitute a fascinating sociolinguistic phenomenon. These names are distinct markers of race and socioeconomic class. What’s in a name? Everything and nothing. For some the name coupled with race and class will be one more obstacle to upward mobility, employment, and success. For a select few the name will not matter for it will be superseded by talent, motivation, and ability. At last, Shakespeare said it best: “Tis but thy name that is my enemy. Thou art thouself, though not a Montague. What’s Montague? It is nor hand, nor foot, nor arm, nor face, nor any other part Belonging to a man. O, be some other name! What’s in a name?” (*Romeo and Juliet, II, ii, 40-45*).
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