



**Such Stuff podcast
Season 5, Episode 6: Shakespeare and Race 2020**

[Music plays]

Imogen Greenberg: Hello and welcome to another episode of Such Stuff, the podcast from Shakespeare's Globe.

At the moment, it can feel a bit like there are two parallel timelines: the strange suspended moment that we're in and the other version that we might have been living. As best as possible, we're trying to bring all those planned events and conversations – as well as the spirit of the Globe – across the divide, from that alternate reality to you today.

So this week, we turn to the question of Shakespeare and race. In the last few years, the brilliant Professor Farah Karim-Cooper, our very own head of higher education and research, has put the question of Shakespeare and race – both in scholarship and in performance – centre stage at the Globe.

In 2018, she kicked off this programme with a week-long festival, and a series of events has followed to carry on that conversation. Well, round about now, we should have been gearing up to host international scholars and you, our wonderful audiences, to engage with the subject once again.

Not to be deterred by the small matter of the Atlantic Ocean stretching between them, Farah caught up with two stars in the field of Shakespeare studies and race to discuss what they're working on at the moment, where the conversation around Shakespeare and race is today and where it should be heading in the future.

Here's Farah to introduce them properly.

Farah Karim-Cooper: I'm Farah Karim-Cooper, head of higher education and research at Shakespeare's Globe. In 2018, Shakespeare's Globe hosted its first ever festival dedicated to the



topic of Shakespeare and race. Why did we hold this event, you may be wondering? Well, because the way in which Shakespeare has been performed, taught and studied for decades has been primarily through the lens of whiteness. For many years, in Shakespeare studies, scholars of colour have been examining the ways in which Shakespeare and his contemporaries thought about race and how they engage with perceptions of otherness. For too long, this work has been marginalised. The festival marked the Globe's commitment to this topic and to the role the Globe can play in racial justice in performance and in education. Several questions were on our minds and continue to be on our minds as we explore the topic. Such as: how does Shakespeare's work engage with race, racism and people of colour? What was the early modern experience of race and otherness? How do modern productions of plays that are preoccupied with race tackle this topic now? How do theatre artists engage or not engage with it? Do actors, directors, designers, composers, writers and musicians of colour have access to the same opportunities to pursue a career in theatre and to maintain their careers as their white colleagues do? This month, if it had not been for the pandemic and lockdown, we would have hosted another Shakespeare and race event, this time in collaboration with colleagues from the University of Sussex. This podcast will take up some of the questions we hoped to address there.

So shortly we'll hear from Dr Noémie Ndiaye, Assistant Professor in the department of English Language and Literature at the University of Chicago, whose important work on performing race would have been the focus of her talk. Our other speaker is a returning guest to this podcast: Professor Ayanna Thompson, Director of the Arizona Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies and the first African American President of the Shakespeare Association of America. She's currently co-editing *Titus Andronicus* with Curtis Perry for the Arden Shakespeare. So I'll be asking her about Aaron the Moor and the complexities of his character in Shakespeare's earliest and bloodiest tragedy. While you listen, please remember that although our doors are closed, our hearts and minds are still open, so please donate if you can so that we continue to tell Shakespeare's stories.



[Music plays]

FKC: I'm here with Professor Ayanna Thompson, she's a bigwig in our field and I would describe as one of the sort of stars of Shakespeare and race. So one of the discoveries I've been making is that while I think we have more of a voice in the field of Shakespeare studies, the study of race is still marginalised. So I wonder if you could talk about why and what is the value to students and audiences now to consider race either in the classroom or on stage. So just take the first part of the question.

AT: Great. Well I think that Shakespeare and race didn't really come together as a topic until black studies, African American studies and critical race studies were established, primarily in American institutions, but of course I'm thinking about like Stuart Hall's work in the UK. But scholars up until that point who were trained in Shakespeare were not trained to look at the texts through a lens that allowed race to be a throughway for interrogation. And I'm thinking about some of the work that Sierra Lomuto has done as a medievalist and she's been looking and tracking the ways that many people of colour were discouraged from thinking about race in medieval texts. And in fact she even tracked Stuart Hall as a potential medievalist because he was looking at these texts early on and saying I think there's something going on around race and the scholars at the time dissuaded him and so he helped found a whole entire new field which then created the space for scholars like me. So my training as an undergraduate and as a graduate student was primarily in postcolonial studies, African American studies, and the modern British novel. It wasn't until after my coursework in graduate school that I switched over to become an early modernist and even then I wasn't a Shakespearean, I was doing restoration drama. So I've kind of kept moving backwards in time. At first in my career, I felt very embarrassed that I wasn't trained properly as a Shakespearean but now I've come to realise that my training was really beneficial because I was able to bring different theories, methodologies and like ways into text and performance that my



colleagues did not necessarily have. And I think that was what was needed to help open up the field.

FKC: Why do you think that scholars were discouraged from studying race, what is the issue? Because we still have an issue in academia in the UK, for example, where it's seen as a kind of sub-discipline but there's some anxiety around teaching race in this country, so I wonder if you could talk to that for a bit?

AT: Yeah, I mean I think to talk about race, to analyse race, to be fully versed in critical race studies, you have to be comfortable with race and I think that that does not necessarily happen naturally. In fact, I think there are lots of ways that our society discourages that so if you want race to be a part of your critical landscape then you have to work extra hard because it's not something that like you're like now I feel comfortable raising in [laughs], you know, a multiracial room the issue that this text has like an incredibly racist subtext [laughs].

FKC: Just for our listeners, what is the value of thinking about race in Shakespeare? If you're an audience member going to see a production or if you're a student, studying in the classroom?

AT: Well I think the value might be different in those two situations, right? So I'll start with the student in the classroom. I think if you're a student in the classroom, you probably have come from your secondary education thinking that Shakespeare's world was all white and that if you're noticing some weird references to Jews and Blacks [laughs] or jokes about Jews and Blacks in the plays that, 'oh well he wouldn't have known anybody and so that's ok'. But actually the archive has been shown to be so much more rich, so much more diverse, that I think in the classroom the goal should be to show the early modern world in the technicolour it was, right? It was not a homogenous space, the theatre's were not a homogenous space. And not necessarily harmonious, right? [Laughs]. But still exploring what it means to live in an ever expanding and diversifying world, which we are still in. I think in the theatre today, audience members expect to see some actors of colour on the stage, but they're not really well versed in what it means to see



them on stage or what are the performance modes being employed and why? And I think that should be the goal for theatres, is to invite audiences to think about like what are the casting techniques that we're using, what is our approach to diversity on the stage, is it working for you? Are there different models that you want us to employ and why? I would love that to be more of a dialogue?

FKC: Yeah, so you obviously think there's a lot more work to be done in this area from casting to reception?

AT: Absolutely. And it comes from, again, having the conversations that people may not be trained to have. And may feel very uncomfortable about having. I have just, over the course of my career, just made myself not feel uncomfortable talking about it. And even when people are like 'no I never see race on stage' and I'm like 'really?' [laughs]. I'm OK encountering people whose opinions are very different from mine but I want to have the conversation and I want us to be able to have the conversation in informed terms, right? And so that does mean getting people up to a different level of discourse than I think they're used to when they're watching television or films or whatever which are different semiotic modes but also many times try and gloss over some of those issues. I think theatre's the best place to have these dialogues because you're in a communal space and you can talk the people next to you. We're missing that now, intensely, intensely [laughs].

FKC: Speaking of theatre, one of the most I suppose exciting productions that I've ever been to at the Globe was our production of Titus Andronicus, which has I think Shakespeare's earliest representation of a moor, Aaron the moor. And you're editing the play with Curtis Perry at the moment. I wondered if you could talk a little bit about Shakespeare's first portrayal of a moor, of a black African and how he's been received and also maybe how should we receive this character?

AT: I love Titus so much! It's always the first play I teach and it's always the production I want to see unlike Othello or some other plays which are really great in their own way but it doesn't have the



kind of level of vibrancy and tension that Titus crackles with. And the reason I always start my classes with Titus is because students don't usually have preconceived ideas about the play, they've never read it before in school and they've never seen a live production. So they come with incredibly fresh eyes unlike if you start with Romeo and Juliet or Hamlet or Macbeth. And it shocks them every time for its brutality, but also for the way that it is clearly working out issues of gender, race and sexuality and power structures. So I just think it's not perfect, right? But I do think Aaron is, he's come from another planet, right? [Laughs]. He delivers the first black power speech, like how could you not love this play? Like it's just so bonkers and horrible in every way. But I do think that's what drives me to go back to it each time. Unlike Othello where you start with someone who's seemingly got it all and then kind of destroys it himself through his being duped by Iago, Aaron's the one who's duping everyone around him and he's also the only one who tries to protect his child, so I think contradiction and his self awareness about his race and his position is what makes it even in 2020 a text that shocks students and makes them pause and then makes them re-evaluate Shakespeare and Shakespeare's lifetime [laughs].

FKC: You talked about him having delivered the first black power speech, can you talk a bit more about that?

AT: [Laughs] Well it's when he's presented with the biracial baby... that's the other thing, like, I'm like 'there's a biracial baby in this play', they're [students] like 'what?' and I'm like 'yeah, 1594, there's a biracial baby'. Like, what's happening? He doesn't make this up, clearly something's happening in his renaissance world that this is a possibility. So anyway, when the baby's presented to Aaron and he's expected to kill this baby, he's like 'no, are you kidding me?' and then he says this beautiful black baby is better than you white boys [laughs] because he's like he's got this stamp of paternity, he's able to conceal his thoughts through his blackness, he doesn't give everything away through the changing of colour. I mean these are all myths of course, right, because black people do blush, you know [laughs] like, these, he's still trafficking in older stereotypes but the fact that he's putting it into a discourse in which black is above white



and explicitly, that's remarkable and that's also like, you know, I can imagine the actor who got to play this part must have had so much fun because it wouldn't be what the audience expected at all.

[Performance]

Aaron: Let no man but I let no man but I
Do execution on my flesh and blood.

Demetrius: I'll broach the tadpole on my rapier's point.

Nurse, give it me, my sword shall soon dispatch it.

Aaron: Sooner this sword shall plough thy bowels up.

Stay, murderous villains, will you kill your brother?

Now, by the burning tapers of the sky,

That shone so brightly when this boy was got,

He dies upon my scimitar's sharp point,

That touches this my first-born son and heir!

What, what, ye sanguine, shallow-hearted boys!

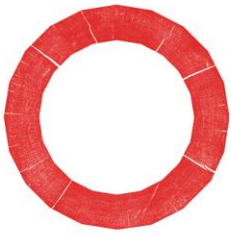
Ye white-lim'd walls! Ye alehouse painted signs!

Coal-black is better than another hue,

In that it scorns to bear another hue;

Tell the Empress from me, I am of age

To keep mine own, excuse it how she can.



Demetrius: Wilt thou betray thy noble mistress thus?

Aaron: My mistress is my mistress, this myself,

The very picture and vigour of my youth:

This before all the world do I prefer,

This despite all the world will I keep safe,

Or some of you shall smoke for it in Rome.

Demetrius: By this our mother is forever sham'd.

Chiron: Rome will despise her for this foul escape.

Nurse: The Emperor in his rage will doom her death.

Chiron: I blush to think upon this ignomy.

Aaron: Why, there's the privilege your beauty bears.

Fie, treacherous hue, that will betray with blushing

The close enacts and counsels of thy heart!

Here's a young lad fram'd of another leer:

Look how the black slave smiles upon the father,



As who should say, "Old man, I am thine own."

He is your brother, lords, sensibly fed

Of that self blood that first gave life to you,

And from your womb where you imprisoned were

He is enfranchised and come to light.

Nay, he is your brother by the surer side,

Although my seal be stamped in his face.

Nurse: Aaron, what shall I say unto the Empress?

Demetrius: Advise thee, Aaron, what is to be done,

And we will all subscribe to thy advice:

Save thou the child, so we may all be safe.

Aaron: Then sit we down and let us all consult.

My son and I will have the wind of you;

Keep there.

FKC: It's extraordinarily powerful and to think about it as the first black power speech I think is quite helpful. At the moment, you're writing about the history of blackface so I wonder if you wanted to first say a little bit about the book that you're writing.



AT: For a long time I've been thinking about what exactly is the relationship between early 19th century performances of Shakespeare and the birth of blackface minstrelsy and the historical reality is that it's not a linear trajectory and so this has been the way that scholars have dismissed a relationship between say performances of Othello and then Jumping Jim Crow. But through my research, what's become apparent is that all the suspected fathers of minstrelsy, because there's more than one, there's like five who are like kind of the main players who are suspected of really having a hand in creating blackface minstrel productions in the early 19th century, it turns out that all of them worked in the same orbit, like literally in the same venues and that all of them were involved in Shakespeare in some way and that they all knew each other. So there's this kind of weird social network in which Shakespeare and minstrelsy are really operating together, so it's not like a linear, it's not like... you can't say, I can't say the first jumping of Jim Crow happened at a performance of Othello, actually that's not true. But I can say that everyone who was involved in creating minstrelsy also performed in Shakespeare and knew each other and so the ties around it are pretty close.

The other thing that I've discovered is that the way that Shakespearean performances were praised before minstrelsy and after minstrelsy shows a split in the performance tradition between imitation and then what became like a kind of embodied and mental virtuosity that often centred around productions of Othello and I think that there's a relationship there that points to the ways that performing blackness changed.

FKC: Er you don't have to tell us the answer but have you seen connections between this weird thing in which you know, political figures today have this sort of history, there's a picture that emerges of them in blackface at a frat party or... are you seeing connections between this strange phenomenon of why all of these people have blackface in their histories and the work that you've been doing?

AT: So I think the only connection is you know, and this is not my original argument but Eric Lott's book Love and Theft talks about



the way that blackface operates in desire and repulsion, right? Like so it's a thing you want to kind of mock the most but it does stem from like an immense desire to perform that? That's there's a lot of love in minstrelsy. Like weird, sick, warped love, but love nonetheless. And I think the crossing over to be something else whether it is cross dressing or cross racial impersonations, while hurtful and pretty damaging, does for many people represent fun. And I think that that's a kind of imitation and mockery that goes together that was part of the minstrel tradition but also stemmed out of what was a Shakespearean performance mode, which was imitation. I think the most strange history for me is that that means that black people are caught out all together. So in order to perform Othello a black actor is caught between either doing a blackface minstrel type of performance or the impossibility of him being the virtuoso which is a white performance mode. So I think that that's the connection for me and I don't know if I could make a larger connection to politics or power but I'm sure there's something in there [laughs].

FKC: That's so fascinating. Thank you so much for joining us on this podcast. I know I'll probably invite you back next year when we do another Shakespeare and race podcast. But in the meantime, thank you so much.

AT: You're so welcome. It's always a pleasure to talk to you.

[Music plays]

FKC: I'm here with Dr Noémie Ndiaye. She is in my opinion, a star and a rising star in the field of Shakespeare and race. I wanted to ask you a few questions. So I wonder if you could just talk to me briefly about your own academic journey and how your interest in Shakespeare developed and particularly in Shakespeare and race?

NN: Yes of course. So I started my academic journey in France, being French, where I was an English major interested in drama, but at the same time - and maybe you don't know this about me already - I was going to acting school for three years. So I was



taking classes for 12 hours a week and then spending just as many hours in rehearsal. So my interest in drama has always been grounded in literary analysis, theoretical interests and the performer's perspective. As a French black woman, when I was going to acting school, casting was always a question and I remember training, practicing one particular part that my acting instructor had given me, which was the lead role in *Saline*, which is a contemporary African tragedy, I mean it's written by Laurent Gaudé who is not an African playwright but it's set in Africa in a a-historical, mythical setting which is problematic in itself but that's not the point. The point is that I was training for that part and I remember walking in to my acting instructor's office to get some feedback on my performance and I remember her telling me... she was a fabulous queer white woman... telling me Noémie, this is not working. You are not quote unquote 'being African enough'. And with that line she actually made a gesture towards her face that was, it was a little vague but what it evoked was something either like a mask or like cosmetic blackness, something I could put on my face that would somehow help me find the part and tap into whatever she referred to as African-ness. And so on that day, I learnt two really important things [laughs]. The first one was that there is such a thing as performative blackness and whatever that is, as a black woman I was not delivering it. So I had to keep working on it, I had to keep trying to deliver something that would feel more authentically, efficaciously black within a given set of performance conventions. And the second thing I learnt is that performance techniques of racial impersonation such as black make up or black mask still hold some power in the collective imagination of the theatre industry today. And so I keep thinking about the fact that my teacher never really completed her gesture, she interrupted it? Either because she saw my face or [laughs] because she realised something about the contradictions that informed, that she had inherited, right, and that she was recirculating. And I think throughout my doctoral dissertation and throughout my monograph in progress, what I'm trying to do really is understand that gesture and its interruption.



FKC: That's so interesting. Can you remind our listeners what the title of your forthcoming book is? Because I think it's a wonderful title.

NN: Thank you. The title of my monograph in progress is *Racecraft: Early Modern Repertoires of Blackness*.

FKC: I really love the word *racecraft* and I wonder if you could tell us more about that word and about the history of performing blackness.

NN: What I'm trying to do in that monograph is look at the major epistemological shift that takes place at the end of the sixteenth century all across Europe when blackness becomes a racial category which was not the case before. Hitherto blackness was thought of as one form of difference among many other forms of differences but when blackness becomes racialised, it means it becomes thought about as a form of difference that is special, it is essential, it is hereditary, it is inescapable and most importantly, it justifies the specific positioning of that group of people in an uneven social hierarchy. So that's the major epistemological shift I'm engaging with and obviously we are still trapped in the aftermath of that. So what I'm trying to do as a performance scholar is try and understand how theatre participated in the dissemination of that shift. How, as a mass media, because it was one of the major mass media of the time together with church services, theatre contributed to changing the habits of regular people. Not folks who were privy to scientific discourse, not theologians, just people who would like and go to the theatre every now and then. So *racecraft* is a pun on *stagecraft* and it refers to the ability of *stagecraft* to shape those new habits of mind. The processes through which racial thinking can take over, can quote unquote 'hijack' the mind. The main process through which this kind of hijacking can take place is what I call a performative story of blackness. So that's what I'm looking at when I'm looking at *stagecraft* and *racecraft*, all techniques of performance that were used by white actors, amateurs and professionals, to perform blackness, I'm looking at performative stories, I'm looking for narratives.



So just to give you an example and perhaps the best known example. When you think about the demonic, when you think about framing the skin that is rendered cosmetically black as diabolical as is the case in Titus Andronicus for instance, when you think about that strategy of demonisation that frames the meaning of blackface, then what you do is lead spectators to associate the black man with a figure, the devil, that historically has been conceived of as a destructive force that will tear apart the fabric of Christian societies. So that's a way of actually articulating a narrative, a performative story of exclusion that has very clear political impact. Another example, when you feminise this, when all of a sudden as happens around 1610 in England, you turn your cosmetically black characters into women then you are getting your spectators to look at that cosmetically black skin through the lens of the succuba, right, which was a black female demon forcing Christian men to have sex with them in their sleep. Doing that at a time that inaugurated the mass rape of black woman under the regime of collar bay slavery in the Atlantic is to articulate a narrative of inversion that can vehicle taboo desires for interracial sex. So that's the kind of performative stories of blackness I'm looking at.

And the techniques of racial impersonation are varied. I've been talking about the cosmetic, but I'm also very interested in the vocal or the acoustic regime and that includes techniques such as accent, what I call black speak, what it means to speak with an African accent, whatever that is. But also I speculate timbral impersonation so what you would recognise as the Amy Winehouse effect, right, [laughs] how can you actually sound black on stage regardless of whatever you say or how you say it. And finally I'm interested in the kinetic regime or how can one move black, dance black and what is the kind of habits of mind that this will elicit.

My contention throughout the book about the history of performative blackness is that those performative stories always tell audiences the stories that they need to hear at a specific place, specific time, specific cultural moment. To give you just one example, in 16th century Spain, we don't find the demonic at all because we're

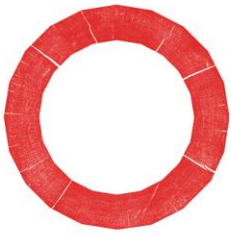


dealing with a society that is already slavery based, that's been practicing collar bay slavery for over a century like the rest of Iberia, so they don't need this kind of exclusionary story that we encounter in Titus Andronicus. What they needed was a story that justified slavery. The poetics that are deployed around cosmetic blackness are framing its meaning to suggest that those black characters are to be associated with commodities, with animals, pets or pests, with edible goods or with luxury commodities such as ebony or jet to talk about the black characters that are considered quote unquote 'most valuable'. So different poetics, because different needs.

Ultimately, the point that I'm trying to make throughout the book is that early modern theatre was enmeshed in the racial struggle. So why does racecraft matter in that struggle? Because that, in my opinion, is what allowed plays, all plays to cater to the greatest number of spectators, that's what allowed plays to do one thing and it's contrary: to racialise its characters via racecraft but also to develop plots that independently could push against rigid racial conceptions.

FKC: That is extraordinary. I'm really fascinated by what you're saying about the impersonation of race on stage and how you know, most people think about it only in terms of blackface or in terms of colour, but actually there are so many signifiers for racial identity. So just to close, I just want to ask you a bit about our field of Shakespeare and race, and what I've talked about on this podcast in various other episodes as well, is the fact that it still feels like quite a marginalised area of research and that often if you are studying Shakespeare or writing about Shakespeare and certainly writing about Shakespeare and performance, and writing about the body, that often people are coming from a place where everybody must have been white in early modern England. And it's kind of a normative position to write from. So I wonder if you can talk about why you think our field is struggling to take the mainstream as it were?

NN: That is a very good question. I would say that I consider myself very lucky to be coming as a second generation, pre-modern critical



race scholar, so I feel that a lot of the extraordinary hard work of getting some institutional scholarly recognition for that field has been done by our predecessors, by you, by Ayanna Thompson, by Kim Hall, so I do feel like I am coming at a moment when the field is actually garnering some recognition. I'd be curious to hear your thoughts but it feels like the situation is very different from ten years ago in that sense, and various groups and institutions and platforms are to be credited for that. I think it's absolutely tremendous that the Globe is actually doing this series since 2018 that's been garnering a lot of attention here on this side of the Atlantic. I think this is a moment, actually, that we can use to further enrich and diversify our own field. So whiteness studies is one new paradigm that is really taking up at the moment. I personally think that going transnational and comparative is one exciting direction that we have. I think we can do terrific work when we emancipate ourselves a little bit from Anglo-centrism and there are, you know, historical reasons why Anglo-centrism has been very prevalent in our field. It comes from Shakespeare studies, which in itself rarely looks beyond the Anglophone world so it makes sense. I think it's through comparison that we can see the English case better, distancing ourselves a little bit from Anglo-centrism, from Shakespeare-centrism, a little bit [laughs]. We will see better what is specific to Shakespeare if we pay more attention to the landscape in which he's operating and what other playwrights are putting out there. And I would say that for all of those new directions in which we can go, I think that the collaborative models that performers, that professional performers are giving us can be actually very, very useful and are probably the way forward.

FKC: Fascinating. I think what you've given us there is not only optimism for the field but also a direction, various suggestions of places to go because what we'll have hopefully are a lot of graduate students who are listening to this podcast and really wanting to dig into this field and find a direction. So I just want to thank you so much for your time and to say we're so sorry that we couldn't hold this event this year but we're hopefully going to do another one next



year and we'll definitely send you an invitation to that one. In the meantime, thank you so much.

NN: Thank you, I had a wonderful time and I can't wait for that edition of the conference. Thank you, thank you Farah.

[Music plays]

IG: That's it from us, but you can find out more about the work of all three of our wonderful scholars from today's episode online. Check out the Globe's blog to find articles by Farah on the subject. You can also listen to a previous episode of the podcast recorded when we held the Shakespeare and Race conference at the Globe back in 2018.

The speech by Aaron that you heard was from our 2014 production of *Titus Andronicus*. It's available to rent and download online at globeplayer.tv, along with a huge catalogue of our other titles so do check them out to stream a touch of groundling magic into your own home.

And as Farah said, in these unprecedented times, our doors are temporarily closed, but we are finding and creating ways to stay connected and hopeful with you. As a charity that receives no government subsidy, we need donations to help us to continue to thrive in the future. Please donate what you can to help us explore how Shakespeare can continue to inspire hope and creativity.

You've been listening to *Such Stuff* with me, Imogen Greenberg and Professor Farah Karim-Cooper.

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