



**Such Stuff podcast**  
**Season 6, Episode 2: How Whiteness dominates the study of Shakespeare**

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

This week we return to our series on **Shakespeare & Race**. Last week we dedicated an entire episode to the question of Whiteness. What it means, and why it's important for us to examine it in relation to Shakespeare.

In this episode, we take a closer look at the way Whiteness has dominated how we read Shakespeare from the first moment we pick up a Shakespeare play. For too long ways of looking at Shakespeare have been dominated by a concern with Whiteness but one that goes unacknowledged. In the field of Shakespeare studies, this has marginalised the voices, the concerns and the interests of scholars of colour. If we're reading Shakespeare in narrow ways, do we also teach Shakespeare from these same narrow perspectives, and pass the same narrow concerns onto another generation of Shakespeare readers and scholars.

Here's our very own Professor Farah Karim-Cooper.

**Farah Karim-Cooper:** This episode focuses on the Whiteness of Shakespeare. For many, it is obvious to say Shakespeare was white, but the word Shakespeare means many things- not just referring to the man from Stratford. It refers also to his canon of works, to the field of enquiry 'Shakespeare Studies', to the body of his performance history and to the industry, or more precisely, the cultural phenomena that is Shakespeare. Whiteness permeates all of these various meanings. In the field of critical race studies, Whiteness studies is emerging as an important way of coming to grips with systemic racism. To understand that to be white means



having a racial identity is to understand the privilege that comes with that racial identity. But most think of Whiteness as normal, non-racial, to the point of invisibility. But this is dangerous because it means that everyone else is othered or made strange. When actually according to **Richard Dyer's** book '**White**' - "whiteness needs to be made strange itself". So we'll be talking to Dr Ruben Espinosa, Associate Professor of English at the University of Texas El Paso, who coedited 'Shakespeare and Immigration' in 2014, which was a collection exploring the role of immigrants, exiles and refugees in Shakespeare's England. He's currently working on a book called 'Shakespeare on the shades of racism' and he is a member of the board of trustees for the Shakespeare Association of America.

We'll also be hearing from Dr Ambereen Dadabhoy, Assistant Professor of Literature at Harvey Mudd College. Her research focuses on cross-cultural encounters in the Early Modern Mediterranean, and race and religion in Early Modern English drama. Ambereen's work also seeks to bridge the past to the present, to illustrate how Early Modern racial and religious discourses and their prejudices still speak to the present day. Currently, she's working on a project that explores Early Modern anti-blackness from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic.

As we explore questions about Shakespeare's whiteness from the works to the discipline of Shakespeare studies, we'll also be thinking about how we can even begin to decolonise Shakespeare.

[Music plays]

**FK-C:** So I'm here with Ambereen Dadabhoy who is going to talk to us about the whiteness in Shakespeare. So I'm just going to dive right in and ask how you became interested in Shakespeare? And particularly, how you became interested in the topic of Shakespeare and race?

**Ambereen Dadabhoy:** So I wish I could say that those are two



related questions, and they are a little bit, but the way I became interested in Shakespeare was really through a college class and I went to Cal State Long Beach, so I went to a large public institution, and this Shakespeare class probably had like 35 students in it, the mode of instruction was lecture and my professor really was this incredible dear older white man who stood at the lectern and pontificated at us, and he just made me fall in love with the words that he was so in love with. It wasn't my first introduction to Shakespeare, obviously, we have to read Shakespeare in high school in the US curriculum, but really that was the moment where I thought about this as something that could be a career path. I don't have any academics in my family so I didn't know about what that would look like, and maybe I would've changed my mind if I would've known what that would look like, but that was really what solidified it for me and then thinking about Shakespeare in the context of Whiteness in terms of my scholarly journey was really when I was a graduate instructor and I was teaching a course on race, gender and power in Renaissance drama, and I've talked about this story many times in many contexts. My students in that class were really hesitant to talk about Blackness in Othello. Getting them to even get as far as they did which was to simply restate what the play says about Othello being noble despite his colour felt like it was a lot but it also felt like a failure, and so coming out of that experience I decided to explore this further and that became the topic of my dissertation. I graduated from my PHD in 2008, so things have changed rapidly in how we write about him and think about race from that point to this point. So at that point, I was really thinking about others, I wasn't necessarily interrogating Whiteness because that wasn't what the critical tradition was. What I was looking for was a kind of presence, I was looking for accuracy, I was looking for all the wrong things about so-called others because I wasn't looking at how others were being made regardless of accuracy to serve a purpose for English audiences, right to cement for the English what it meant for them to be English and the way that Whiteness worked in that process, and how was also in service of kind of building an empire, they certainly didn't have one but they knew what an empire looked like from Spain, from the Ottomans, from their complex history in Ireland. Right so they were able to



conceive what that would look like and what that would look like through the labour of people who could be identified as racially not white.

**FC-K:** Wow. I think what's really interesting about your journey, it sounds very similar to mine in the sense that as you study Shakespeare as it's delivered in the critical tradition as and also performance tradition, you become invisible to yourself almost as a scholar of colour and you kind of adopt and adapt to this sort of Whiteness. And so it becomes a real of revelation, doesn't it, when you realise actually I want to talk about Shakespeare from a very different perspective. You've written really eloquently about the Whiteness of Shakespeare and I wonder if you could talk a bit more about the way Shakespeare is read, how whiteness manifests and dominates the reading of Shakespeare.

**AD:** Thinking through all the experiences that I've had since writing my dissertation and even when I look back at that project, I can see in that project the way that I have situated myself not as a scholar of colour interrogating these issues, but impersonating the persona of an objective scholar of Shakespeare. Right, that is not raced, that is not gendered, that is not situated in a class identity right, so I assumed a position that is foreign to me, and now when I read those words I would like to change everything about that project. And so a part of the Whiteness that arises when we are reading Shakespeare, I think is in how he has been positioned for us as this kind of universal, right Shakespeare speaks for all of us, and in having that power to speak for all of us we never really think about the identity of the speaker. And so Shakespeare has been positioned as a transcendent figure, without race, without gender, without politics, without anything- and that's an incredible position to be in so that you are never questioned for your ideological agendas because Shakespeare doesn't have any, it's just Shakespeare. But if we actually think about the fact that Shakespeare was a white man and that was whiteness was important to the work that he's writing then we have to actually take seriously those moments in Shakespeare where race comes up and we sort of gloss it over. So



I'm thinking about like moments in like **Much Ado** where Claudio says he would marry Hero's cousin even if she were an Ethiopie, right, what does that mean? If we've read **Kim Hall's 'Things of Darkness'** we know exactly what that means, but if we haven't read it, we're just maybe in the moment of teaching or in the moment of reading, writing it off as some sort of apparition, or this is some sort of old-fashioned language that's not relevant to us, or it doesn't mean what we think it means, right and that instinctual what we think it means and the writing off of it I think is very much the position of reading through Whiteness, which is a position of ignoring race until it becomes something that we can't ignore anymore. In **Othello** we can't ignore it anymore and yet I've still seen scholars and I've witnessed productions where people say we didn't want this play to be about race and it which case I ask why did you decide to do this one instead and not **Cymbeline** if you wanted to talk about violence against women or not **The Winter's Tale** if you wanted to talk about jealousy. Right we pick up **Othello** for a reason and if you're not gonna read race well you have to think about what kind of privilege you have in deciding that you can't see race anymore, and that's the same privilege in deciding that Shakespeare gets to speak for all of us, because his white male position can always be rendered transcendent whereas my position as a Pakistani Muslim woman I can only ever speak for myself.

**FK-C:** Yes. I think what you were saying about the line from **Much Ado**, about the Ethiopie, I was going to add that in a performance that will get cut, directors in rehearsal room don't know what to do with that line, and a lot of actors of colour I've spoken to and talked about how often their white directors don't know how to cope with that in the room so it just gets ignored and it gets alighted and of course that is the- the privilege that you're referring to. That's a really interesting perspective from, you know the angle of reading Shakespeare, but I'm wondering if you can talk a bit about how sort of Whiteness comes into play when you're teaching.

**AD:** Yeah so the Much Ado example I think still speaks to this because before we get to that moment of Claudio saying he would



marry her even if she were and Ethiopie during the wedding scene after Hero's been repudiated, her father says that he wishes she would've fallen into a pit of ink, right, so there's already that blackening happening rhetorically in the text that is then sort of manifested in this phantom Ethiopie that recurs at the end of the play. So I, in fall of 2019 I did a course called #metoo Shakespeare, in that course we talked about issues of gendered violence, but we also talked about issues of racialised and gendered violence and while we don't have any women of name characters in Shakespeare who are women of colour, we, we do have a sort of shadow text with all of these references. Right and so I often assign parts of '**Things of Darkness**' to my students and in this #metoo Shakespeare course we did end up reading a lot of comedies because they are about marriage and because within those plots of appropriate marriage there is a lot of rhetorical and real violence enacted against women, and a lot of that also relies on conjuring up an other in order to achieve the final happy marriage at the end. So my students are the ones who actually point out all of these moments, right and to sort of collect and archive them, and then sort of see how we, what the whole point of this kind of rhetorical conjuring of the other meant in terms of what the play is trying to expose to us about the desirability of women and the fears of patriarchy. So I really think that we confront Whiteness all the time in our teaching, especially as scholars of colour, right, walking into the room I'm confronting Whiteness in a certain way because I don't look like through my skin any other scholar of Shakespeare that's on the Claremont Colleges Campuses, so in that way I'm already different and other and then the object that I teach is this colossus of English Literature who is also white and yet universal, and so I'm confronting that through my reading of Shakespeare but I think it's important that we highlight for our students that when we are reading these texts or when we are trying to analyse them there's actual work being done in the text to establish what culture and society are and a lot of times that is through these others and so we are getting the formation not of these others but a formation of a white culture and a white society, and what it means to be English



and appropriately English.

**FK-C:** I think it's again really interesting what you were saying about being a teacher in a classroom full of students who might have a very different expectation about what a Shakespeare professor might look like. You know if you don't have the elbow patches and the grey beard then you know you have more work to do to convince your students that you have the authority in terms of your knowledge to stand there and talk about this, and that is a real challenge that I think a lot of white scholars don't necessarily appreciate, and as you say also dealing with this colossus that is Shakespeare. So thinking about this colossus then, how do we move forward to read Shakespeare through the lens of anti-racism and suppose attached to that question, is the question that we're asking all of our podcast participants which is how do we decolonise Shakespeare, what does that mean to you?

**AD:** Those are fantastic questions. I think that for the first one to be anti-racist this first step is that we acknowledge that race exists in the period. That some of his texts not just have racial thinking but they are in fact racist so, there is such a barrier to even approaching these texts in this way in our field in general. You can't even have an inclusive classroom if you're not willing to accept that race exists in this period and not hide behind history or anachronism or all of these other things. So that for me is the first step in thinking through what it means to be anti-racist. And to answer the second question at the same time, I don't know if we can de-colonise Shakespeare, because Shakespeare is at the centre of a colonising curriculum. Right if we think about the point of education in India for the British Empire to turn these natives into civilised subjects, and the fact that we use Shakespeare, or Shakespeare was used- not that we- that fact that these people used Shakespeare to do that then it already is implicated in colonial and imperial methodologies and violences. I don't think we can decolonise Shakespeare, I think we can again be attentive to the imperial histories of Shakespeare, and to be attentive in that way means that we recognise how Shakespeare has been used and how these texts are malleable in this way, and





maybe use these, the logics of these own texts to challenge those relations of power and domination. Those efforts come through again having a professor that is not all white. It comes through performance tradition that is attentive to race and colour conscious and really bringing through our histories as people who might have suffered under empire in how we interact with Shakespeare. So I taught a global Shakespeare course a couple years ago and we read three plays, **Hamlet**, **The Tempest** and **Othello**, and we read two adaptations of each play from different traditions and for **The Tempest** we read Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's '**A Grain of Wheat**' which is so transgenically related to the plot of **The Tempest**, like **The Tempest** comes up in the narrative. But it is really about Africa or Kenya in the last days of British rule. And that's what **The Tempest** is about to right, the island in the last hours of Prospero's rule but really thinking about not Shakespeare at the centre but this other narrative which is a narrative of colonial violence, recovery and recuperation and how we can marginalise Shakespeare to tell that other story.

**FK-C:** Ambereen, thank you so much for taking part in our podcast today. It's so great to welcome you back, because I remember you were one of our speakers in the first Shakespeare and Race festival that we held in 2018 so welcome back and thank you so much.

**AD:** Thank you Farah, I really appreciate it.

[Music plays]

**IG:** We asked four emerging scholars all doing their PhDs about their experiences. What's it like to be a scholar of colour in the field of Shakespeare Studies?

**Shani Bans:** Hi my name is Shani. I am a PhD Student in the English department at UCL and I work on Shakespeare and optics.

**Hassana Moosa:** My name is Hassana Moosa.





**Wendy Lennon:** Wendy Lennon.

**Nour El Gazzaz:** Hi I'm Nour El Gazzaz. I'm a PhD student at Royal Holloway University of London and I study critical race theory and material culture in Early Modern Drama.

**WL:** How is Shakespeare read through a lens of Whiteness?

We are given the impression that Whiteness is both everything, powerful, beautiful, central and at the same time it's underexamined presence makes it nothing, invisible. Kim Hall's '**Beauty and the Beast of Whiteness**' notes that we are taught not to see the issues of privilege and white privilege and power. Through this lens there is also a very subtle but looming sense that Shakespeare in text and in performance only belongs to certain people. A sense of ownership that results in the marginalisation in scholars of colour and race studies as if it's a sub-discipline.

**NEG:** To me the lens of Whiteness in Shakespeare is a policing system that ensures the quote/ unquote purity of Shakespeare by a demographic of white middle-class gatekeepers. These include practitioners, directors, publishers, teachers, scholars and theatre-goers, as though the ownership of Shakespeare is determined by white skin and its corresponding culture, ideologies and norms. To me the lens of Whiteness is a policing system that soothes the white fear of black uprising, a black usurping of Shakespeare, a great English icon. Finally to me the lens of whiteness is a policing system with at least three subdivisions, white authority, white privilege and white supremacy. It's important to draw distinctions between the three as white people are not a homogenous group. Not all white people are the same, a courtesy that is not often extended to their black and brown counterparts however all three subdivisions and there may be even more must be interrogated in order to start dismantling this lens of Whiteness.

**SB:** So I've been thinking a little bit about the wording of this question and I kind of want to break it down into two points. The first



being, I'm not sure you can really read Shakespeare through the lens of Whiteness because lens implies a focus, to be focusing in or homing in on something, whereas Whiteness it permeates throughout society in a way that is not really the focal point or the lens with which we see the world it is the world, if, that makes sense. Which brings me to the second point about the question which is how Shakespeare's read through the lens of Whiteness where Whiteness itself is invisible. So where lens implies focus Whiteness implies a lack of colour. The task then becomes how do we make Whiteness visible. How do you sort of stop to see it as a colour, it's actually not seen as a colour so when we read Shakespeare we don't tend to read Shakespeare through the lens of Whiteness. We might read it through the lens of gender or when we say read it through the lens of race it is normally through Blackness or minority ethnic groups. Shakespeare is essentially the old white guy, so we read Shakespeare as white I wouldn't say through the lens of Whiteness. Shakespeare is loaded with connotations of Whiteness, patriarchy, hegemonic normative white backdrop- that is what it's set against. Without perhaps meaning to it marginalizes and excludes ethnic minority groups because Shakespeare is heavily loaded with Whiteness, you cannot escape it.

**NEG:** Can you give us an example of a time in your career when the white lens through which we read Shakespeare was made explicit eg. by colleagues or conversations around you.

This question is a challenging one if I'm honest because there are so many moments of this happening to me and around me by white scholars in the academy some of whom I still interact with today so I won't give any specific examples. I do however want to address the consequences of what happens when this white lens of Shakespeare studies polices students of colour. PhD students, in general, have relatively little authority in the field in comparison to more seasoned professors for example. Students of colour have the added burden of needing to ingratiate ourselves and our work whether it's race research or not to our white counterparts, we have



to tone down our Blackness, we have to tone down our Brownness, so that we are palatable to our white colleagues, superiors, cohort, even students if we are lucky enough to take on some teaching during our PhD research. We have to be palatable because our work is consumed by the white academy and if our work is not sweet enough the academy spits us back out. When the white lens is made explicitly clear, especially in all white spaces it takes all my might to suppress primal scream at how much I have to perform a half version of myself, and a diluted version of my race work.

**SB:** The very obvious one for me as an Asian Indian decent academic in Shakespeare. I would go to conferences at the start of my PhD and there would be an assumption made that I was working on Indian Shakespeare, to the point that some people wouldn't ask me what I was working on, they would just begin talking about it under the assumption that I was working on it because I'm Indian, right. So I think this white lens through which we read Shakespeare became really obvious to me in the sense that if you're a person of colour, a scholar of colour working in Shakespeare, the assumption there is you must be adding value to scholarly research because of your race so you cannot really escape your race but because it's so much implied in people's approach to you the assumptions people make. And I think I feel that that slightly robs you of your identity and I think that that's the kind of dangerous for many reasons, particularly for early research career and PhD students because it then makes things well should I be working on that and is it in my sort of duty, is it my duty to be working on that. What it does when somebody comes to you and puts you in that box to educate them about Indian Shakespeare because you are Indian, what that does is cause a lot of diversion of energies, it's really exhausting and perhaps not necessarily something I need to be entertaining. The other way of thinking about this is when people say to me "oh but I don't see you as Indian, or I don't see you as a person of colour, I don't see colour" and this is a very the UK approach of colour-blindness and I do think colour-blindness is a form of racism which is effectively erases your experience of being a person of colour and, you know, I think



I've made some people feel quite uncomfortable if I mention that I'm a person of colour or that I'm a first-generation immigrant, or when I moved here I didn't speak a word of English and there's a sort of uncomfortability and a hypersensitivity, they would rather retort back with "I don't see colour, I just see you as everybody else" and you, you know the kind of off-handed "Ah Shani you're playing the race card" which is almost a hypersensitivity to the conversation about new things. Or I get a sort of if it's not hypersensitivity a refusal to understand, there's a lot of sort of gaslighting, so if I was to point out issues of reading Shakespeare through the white lens I'd sort of been labelled, and I've seen this happen to other colleagues not necessarily myself, is being labelled as obsessed with race, as being too aggressive or gaslighted for being too crazy to make certain assumptions. Assumptions are made, microaggressions are thrown into conversations. Being completely oblivious of those things being done by the white academic. And that's mainly I think an issue in conferences where you don't really know people and academia is very much what do you do, what do you work on, and that defines you, but for scholars of colour your colour defines you beforehand and what you do is defined by your colour or assumed by your colour.

**HM:** So I tend to find that the white lens tends to be most in focus at seminars or conferences or forum settings in general, which given the nature of the field at the moment can be dominated sometimes by white voices and in particular I think when the white lens is focused on what we might call classical ways of approaching Shakespeare, Whiteness seems to be attached to an oblivion or even a blissful ignorance of kind. Particularly of the kinds of access that students and audiences might of had to particular resources and styles of training. So I've seen and experienced situations where Whiteness allows a speaker to assume certain levels of knowledge or a certain grasp of language and theory or a certain of network relationships which are just not part of a reality for so many students, and students who are interested in Shakespeare from underprivileged backgrounds or just students who haven't had access and a historical relationship to this training, and this might



include second language English speakers, many of whom tend to be black or minority ethnic students and sometimes students are the first in their family to attend university and they don't have these long-standing relationships with academic Shakespeare and the higher education setting. On the other hand, I think the effect of the white lens more recently has become most obvious in conversations where race and colonisation have been put at the centre of the discussion, and again these rooms tend to be dominated by white voices at least in the experiences that I have had, and I often find myself to be one of maybe two or three people of colour in these rooms and in these spaces if not the only person, and you very quickly become aware of this of the fact that you are non-white and in one recent event that I attended that was meant to be about the colonial pedagogy, a lot of the conversation ended up being about the discomfort and anxieties of being white and trying to teach Shakespeare and race to students, where actually the conversations they should have been having or things that I was interested to learn would've been related to strategies people are using to teach early modern race and how they are approaching having to teach students to unlearn concepts. And in these conversations, it was really obvious how the white lens constricts understandings of the broader decolonial agenda and particularly its relationship to power and hierarchy because decolonising Shakespeare is not just about being apologetic and preferring **Othello** over **Hamlet**, it's also about interrogating the structure of higher education institutions that especially perpetuate inequality and imbalances of power, as well as recognising the varied socio-economic and racial, cultural and gender subjectivities of students and how best- not only to consider these- but also to emphasize these realities moving forward in order to decolonize Shakespeare and also to use Shakespeare as a decolonizing tool. Self-awareness is, of course, an important part of this process but it isn't the process itself and although it was of support and important commitment to decolonising Shakespeare needs to manifest in actions.



**NEG:** Can you give us an example of what it might be like to read Shakespeare for the first time without the framework of whiteness.

It's freedom. It is the freedom to read, write, rewrite, edit, excise, perform, appropriate and adapt Shakespeare. Ayanna Thompson calls it "destabilising Shakespeare" in her book **'Passing Strange'**. Kim Hall in her introduction to Keith Hamilton Cobb's **'American Moor'** writes quote "black love of Shakespeare is a site of profound struggle and Othello its most vexed object" unquote. I wish to return to an unvexed, uncomplicated love I once had for Shakespeare when I read him for the first time in High School. I was fourteen years old. But the price of change is pain, and the struggle remains profound.

**HM:** I think one important way to read and recognise Shakespeare outside of a frame of Whiteness is to explore translations of his material. So by this, I mean both language translations- where the English has been translated to another language, as well as cultural translations which we often see through performances and adaptations which move Shakespeare's plays to non-western, non-european, non-white contexts and histories. I think we need to draw from the strategies of drama to inform the way we read Shakespeare in his textual form. I recently heard South African actor John Kani reflect on his experiences as a young man reading a translation of Julius Caesar in isiXhosa, which is one of the official languages of South Africa. And he basically describes how powerfully this translated version of the text resonated with him because of the energy of the language and he relates how, by comparison, he found Shakespeare to be really underwhelming. Kani, of course, has an especial affinity to Shakespeare's plays and he's known to speak about their ability to bring people together. I think it indicates the way that connections to Shakespeare can become much stronger when people are presented with channels for connection and identification. This creates real promise for the decolonisation of Shakespeare. Some other examples of translation which come to mind are **Sulayman Al-Bassam's 'The Al-Hamlet Summit'** which repurposes Shakespeare's **Hamlet** to explore years



of religious and political extremism in the Arab world and, so maybe a comparative study of Al-Bassam's texts and Shakespeare's original could be very meaningful to think about how the university recognised ideas from Shakespeare's **Hamlet** and translated it into the new performance in a way that allows a new culture to lay some claim to these powerful literary tropes. Similarly a text like Aimé Césaire's '**Une Tempête**' which sets or repurposes Shakespeare's **The Tempest** for a setting of colonised Caribbean and this text is a really useful companion to read alongside the original, especially because Caliban's subjectivity is re-written by Césaire to empower him. These adaptations are a really strong starting points for thinking about how to read Shakespeare without a white lens, primarily because they remind us that it's not ever really possible to deny other people's ownerships of texts, so you can dictate the narratives of a text and even erase some of these features as the white lens sometimes tends to do but you can never lay total claim to it, there is always gonna be room to challenge those claims, and that's what I think translation cultural and literary and linguistics sort of allows to happen.

**SB:** To read Shakespeare without the framework of Whiteness, I think and I may be wrong but would be to read Shakespeare as a white person right. I white person who doesn't see colour because again Whiteness is not normally seen as a colour or a race it's seen as sort of the norm, the invisible. In the same sense of saying we don't see colour which effectively erases the experiences of people of colour, I think in turn if we are treating Whiteness as a colour I don't think you want to read or teach Shakespeare without acknowledging its Whiteness. I'm quite sort of conflicted about this question because I think at one point I was thinking ah well wouldn't it be great if we could read Shakespeare without the framework of Whiteness, where you know every culture and every race was represented, however that would be erasing a history of Whiteness that I think we do have to acknowledge, I think what it comes down to is if we make Whiteness visible in Shakespeare's plays and instead of focusing on anti-Blackness what if we consider Shakespeare's characters from a critical lens of anti-Whiteness and





what might that look like. But I'm conflicted by this question because the other way I was thinking is if you were embracing every race and culture I think there's something in Shakespeare's works that because one of the questions I've been thinking about is why on earth are so many different cultures and ethnicities still adapting this white old man, and I think that one of the answers to that is that Shakespeare does speak to different cultures and it can be appropriated with the right people working on it in that the power of adaptations, of appropriations, of translations, that might be something of reading Shakespeare without the framework of Whiteness.

[Music plays]

**FK-C:** So I'm here with Dr Ruben Espinosa of the University of Texas El-Paso. Thank you so much Ruben for your time and for being here with us today.

**RE:** Thank you for inviting me Farah, it's a treat to chat with you for sure so thanks so much.

**FK-C:** In this episode we're talking about the Whiteness of Shakespeare, so I'm gonna start by asking you to tell us about your particular journey to Shakespeare and race studies.

**RE:** So it's two-fold right I guess my journey into Shakespeare like most people was through High School engagement with Shakespeare. At some point in High School I took a drama class and was prompted to join the drama club, in the process I remember they announced they were gonna be staging **A Midsummer Night's Dream** and Dead Poets Society had just come out and I was a big fan of it, it strangely felt like an affinity to that movie and you know Neil in that movie obviously auditions for the role of Puck, thinking back on that to think about these brown kids as on the border, right, engaging with Shakespeare, my affinity for that through a movie that centres Whiteness, it's you know all these white boys in a prep school, right, it could not be a more different



experiences for us right. It's only now that I think back on that, that's like wow my entry to Shakespeare. You know after grad school I cut my teeth on a book on new historicism and it felt comfortable and the work there was ok, I felt like my work on Shakespeare and immigration finally things started to matter to me and I could just pivot to, you know, contemporary views of Shakespeare and that's been it since, and you know in terms of race studies I felt for the first time my work as meaningful. I remember when my first book came out I imagined in my mind seeing it at the SAA book display how important and significant that would be and it was so anti-climactic, I remember standing there looking around that room and thinking like who am I writing for, you know, so then I went into a bit of a funk. Thankfully, through race studies, I came out of it. So that's been you know my journey into that.

**FKC:** That's a really amazing story because so many of us scholars of colour we swallow this pill of Shakespeare where we sort of go, oh god I want that, I want to do that, I want to preach it on that mountain as well you know. And when you get to that mountain, if you get to that mountain, if you get to the top of that mountain, you realise about all the gate-keeping all the way and you actually think well this mountain wasn't built for me.

**RE:** It's wonderfully stated, and I could not agree with that more. I mean I feel like for a long time, you know I think about the SAA and feeling like so uncomfortable and so you know just kind of.

**FK-C:** That's the Shakespeare Association of America that you're referring to which is a big scholarly organisation with something like 2,500 or 3000 Shakespeare scholars as members.

**RE:** I didn't feel comfortable in my skin there, and you know I use that phrase deliberately, I really felt like I did not belong. Once I found my community then you know a different level of confidence and purpose emerged, but I think that's right and I think it's challenging those perceptions I think that's so important for us.



**FK-C:** I wonder if you can talk a little bit about the context in which you're teaching Shakespeare, you know when I've heard you give talks and when you've spoken about the work that you do with your students it's so fascinating, so I wonder if you could sort of talk a little bit about that.

**RE:** Of course, I feel like if you haven't been to El Paso it's hard to imagine a place like this. It's a border city right and I think people have perceptions of border cities in the US, but it is truly one that melds with Juarez in Mexico, I mean if you cross the bridge in downtown El Paso you literally step into downtown Juarez and so it's very very fluid in terms of that, obviously now the border is closed for the most part you know it's that difficult. But in terms of thinking about borderland experiences that is the unique nature of what Mexicans see, what they experience, it's how they come to everything that they do and obviously Shakespeare is so binational, bicultural, bilingual, identities right a fraught nature surrounding all of that Gloria Anzaldúa talks about it as feeling like you're on in two places at once, and not quite belonging in each and so I try to bring those ideas to bear in my teaching and have my students really consider as they come to the work itself. It becomes a complex and I think a very very enriching and in strange ways experience for them. You know the border crisis added a layer where students felt energy and desire to engage with the community because it was horrific. A lot of our students are Mexican nationals who actually live in Juarez and who'd cross over daily to come to school, for a period of time below the US Mexico bridge they were housing, housing is the wrong term, they were caging immigrants and keeping them in these makeshift camps you know with tents underneath that bridge and so if students were crossing over I mean this is something they would see on a daily basis and not to mention the other horrific past ten years of cartel violence in Juarez, these kind of emotional psychological tolls on them you know are important and I don't want to look away from them. This is a topic I think we need to be discussing in our classrooms and so that's where my emphasis is, I try to create a space where students feel comfortable talking about you know what this border means and how it is, and it's only



become more complex since then. You know Patrick Crusius the white terrorist who drove from Dallas Texas to El Paso to you know in his words kill as many Mexicans as he could, it opens an opportunity to think about what rhetoric is out that allowed him to do this both at our state leadership level, Greg Abbott had sent out a memo prior to that saying that we need to defend the border, of course we know that you know the person at the very top of our own government here has right denigrated Mexicans to no end so. You know those feelings I think of a kind of a precarious existence within their nation or the nation in which they are attending school here right, are- are important topics for us to consider and so you know getting students to really think about that and something that I think often they are not willing or wanting to think about has been both a challenge but also I think a hallmark of the classes that I teach.

**FK-C:** I wish I was in your class. I mean how do they respond to Shakespeare in that context then, what is their a reaction to his work and to you know the white Shakespeare?

**RE:** Paul Gilroy writes about the dislocating dazzle of whiteness. It is certainly in place whenever they approach Shakespeare, and I often ask them you know I say Shakespeare and you think what? Often what is the driving force for them is they think like his universality right? He speaks across history and across time right, but also across cultures and you know when I ask how? that becomes the stifling question here right and really it is an opportunity at the very start to dismantle those perceptions here, right, that still is difficult and I can't pretend that at the end of every semester you know all students get it you know there's a lot of pushback, a lot of resistance, a lot of students feeling like that's not the Shakespeare I want to study I came here to learn why he's the bard, right, I came here to experience some kind of universal truth and it is a matter of saying look if it's not meaningful to you then it's not meaningful you gotta really think about that if you don't see yourself in literary work what is the point? Thankfully I have so many scholars to draw from I mean I was in a recent conversation



where critical race studies of Shakespeare was being described as an emerging field right and I will blame myself for not speaking up but thankfully a colleague of mine, you know, very casually said you know I've made the same mistake to calling it an emerging field but we have to recognise it's not an emerging field it's been around for a long time and so, there's a lot out there for students to read and they, I guarantee they have not thought about Shakespeare in that way and when they do it's just this kind of moment of awakening and I love to see that. One recently told me about Vanessa's work she said you know I wanna grow up to write like her right and to be her, and it's such a wonderful thing to behold.

**FK-C:** I wanna ask you about how the Whiteness of Shakespeare and Shakespeare studies might pose a problem for students of colour especially students who want to move into the field at post-graduate level, I wonder if you can unpack for me what that Whiteness is and the challenges of it.

**RE:** For sure I think that there's a reluctance to question Whiteness, in general Whiteness, but also Shakespeare's Whiteness and specifically the structures that elevate Whiteness over everything else here right for our students and so as a result that Whiteness becomes somewhat invisible right and taken for granted and so these are the structures that I think I invite students to think about. And it's not very difficult I mean if we're reading Kim F Hall early on you know they begin to see already how the works are perpetuating perceptions of white supremacy and we hear something like white supremacy and suddenly it has teeth, suddenly it has meaning for them and they begin to think about that and we can't pretend that Shakespeare isn't for many just this monument to Whiteness and so I think scrutinising that monument, dismantling that monument, toppling that monument and in this moment that is critical but also giving students a sense of ownership over that and to make them recognise that Shakespeare's longevity is because through generations people have made Shakespeare into what they feel, you know, he should be and why not you? That has been a way in to think about Shakespeare. We show popular films, they're gonna



see Shakespeare's white right? Baz Luhrmann's film I think is a great example you know you have Mercutio on some level where you play with language and you know you think about you know how 'dost thou make minstrels of us' here right and how that matters if it's a black man saying those lines, and you know on the one hand you know these are great opportunities and on the other then you have the portrayal of Latinx you have the whitewashing of Hollywood in place where many Latinx's were played by white actors and so. You know so students are necessarily thinking about that and once that's brought to their attention then they begin to see wow these are pretty big structures right and Shakespeare has both helped to create those structures right but had an opportunity to question them.

**FK-C:** And you know the Globe's been guilty of doing that as well, you know that presenting a culture as opposed to being inclusive.

**RE:** Yeah to be certain I mean there's a lot this can be pulled out, and it's a moment Farah I know you know this, I mean it's a moment now where people are reckoning with specifically here in the US right with the kind of racist violent history that has defined people here for so long.

**FK-C:** Your work on social justice, I know that that is really really important to you and where I quote you is when you talk about 'do we need Shakespeare, no Shakespeare needs us' and that was a really powerful thing that you said so I wonder if you could talk a little bit about what you mean by social justice?

**RE:** You know in terms of social justice and what I mean by that and where at least where my efforts are, I absolutely think that this is the only way to make Shakespeare relevant for students and to really make it relevant specifically for students in this particular region. If you can't come out of a class feeling like you have as much access and legitimate understanding of Shakespeare of anybody else here right then it's not useful, and the reason for that is not just a sense of like ok well I get Shakespeare right but rather



instilling a sense of confidence in our students that they might not otherwise have. And I point to the case in Tucson, Arizona where High School students were taking a Mexican American studies class, these students stood up to a Republican aide for the then superintendent of the school district, Dolores Huerta who was a civil rights activist she got to speak to students and say you need to wake up you're becoming voters you know you're responsible and she's like it's time to recognize that republicans hate Latinos, I'm quoting her directly, and it was a moment you know it was a moment where these students felt like you know yeah she was right. When the superintendent heard this he sent his own aide to say that you know that republicans didn't hate Latinos right, to kind of correct that and the students instead of listening they all turned their back on the speaker and they raised their fist in this kind of poetic throwback to Tommy Smith. Right it is a great moment but the result of that was at the superintendent found that it was his obligation to dismantle the Mexican American studies programme, the reason Shakespeare's involved in that is because **The Tempest** was part of that teaching. The teachers had to under penalty of law and ridiculous fines like upwards of six figures if they broached the topic of race or colonialism then they could be found guilty of this so then they had to identify all the books that might lead to these conversations right, and **The Tempest** was one of them, so Shakespeare was implicated in this. The long and short of it is that a year later after this programme was dismantled a study from the University of Arizona found that where in this Mexican American studies programme had higher graduation rates, higher college enrolment, the measures of success were greater for them and so by dismantling this was stifling right, that growth and so it's no secret that having a kind of strong sense of self-confidence in one's ethnic cultural identity will give one that ability to move forward in these ways. It's an opportunity for me every English major has to take a Shakespeare course, if it's with me we're going to talk about these particular issues.

**FK-C:** You know something you said really highlights the importance of how we teach Shakespeare because of that structure





of Whiteness Shakespeare is on the curriculum and has to be taught, everybody has to take a Shakespeare course and so the responsibility as the person delivering that is great.

**RE:** Yeah absolutely that's often you know day one to ask them to recognize, you do know that this is the only sole author class that you are required to take, and suddenly they're like yes but because it's Shakespeare right? Let's question that right yeah.

**FK-C:** Yeah, so what we've been doing in these podcasts is asking all of our participants one question which I'm just gonna throw at you. You know we're thinking about decolonizing Shakespeare and at the Globe we're really trying to sort of meditate on what that means, and I wonder if you could tell me what that means from your perspective- what does it mean to decolonise Shakespeare?

**RE:** For me it goes back, I might sound like a broken record here, people of colour certainly people black and brown individuals, feeling a sense of ownership over Shakespeare that he is part of the legacy so for me here on the border we often talk about this in terms of linguistic identity and it's such a fraught issue here. So often people say we should be studying Cervantes here on the border right instead of Shakespeare and it's a quick fix right it's an idea that somehow students will identify with a Spanish author, odds are if they're gonna be reading Cervantes it's gonna be in translation and not to mention you know he's also the coloniser, I mean you're thinking about you know the entities from which they both arrive and so the process of decolonisation is really reckoning with the fact that these languages this literary heritage that comes from both sides has been in many ways mobilised to ploy, to render our students in the present moment as lesser than here right, if they do feel that not only do they have access to Shakespeare but legitimate views of Shakespeare that have something meaningful to offer then that's half the battle, that's understanding the oppressive structures that have defined them and turning that and thinking about Shakespeare in a different way that, that in and of itself I think creates hopefully opportunities for the students to see them this



stems way beyond Shakespeare here right into their everyday lived experiences. That for me to decentre Shakespeare from this kind of white academy, do decentre Shakespeare from you know what we've been told Shakespeare is to question the gatekeeping of Shakespeare to, this allows us to think about all the ways gate-keeping works, and they arrive at these conclusions by themselves which is as good as it gets.

**FK-C:** Thank you so much it was so brilliant to have you on here and to welcome you back to the Globe.

**RE:** Yes thank you Farah for having me.

[Music plays]

**IG:** That's it from us but we'll be back next week with another episode in our Shakespeare and race series.

We'll be taking a closer look at our education system, from school through university and also in particular at drama schools.

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

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