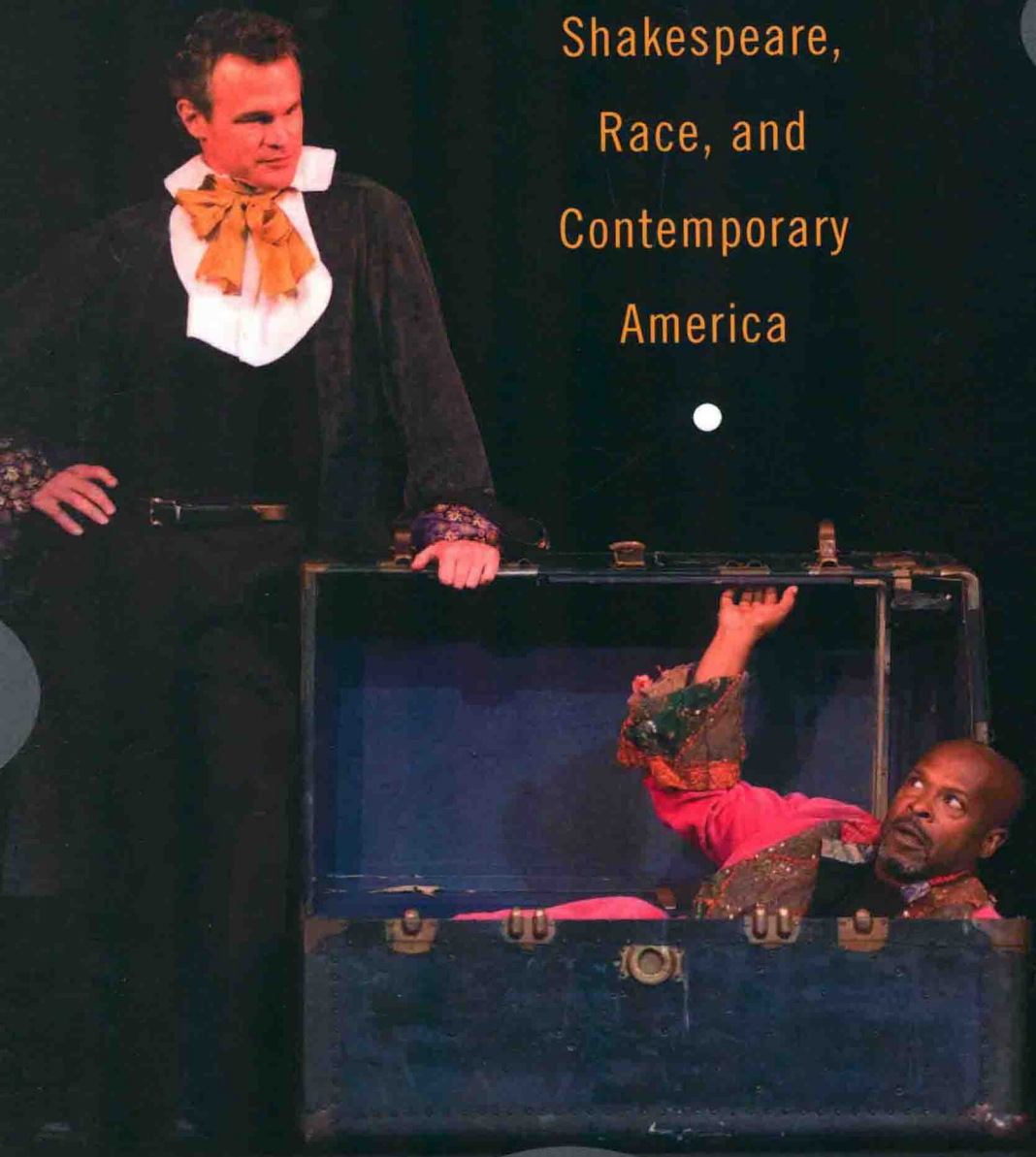
PASSING STRANGE

Shakespeare, Race, and Contemporary America



AYANNA THOMPSON

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This book is dedicated to
all the race men and women
who keep the conversation going

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All citations from Shakespeare in this book are taken from the Norton anthology. *The Norton Shakespeare: Based on the Oxford Edition*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt et al. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997).

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FIGURE 1.1 Stephen Paul Johnson (Touchstone) and Paul Bates (Audrey) in The Hudson Valley Shakespeare Festival's 2007 production of *As You Like It* (directed by John Christian Plummer). Photo by Walter Garschagen.

And the only way to do something more substantial onstage—then and now—is to discuss one of the defining features of the American experience: race. I don't know how anyone, black or white, in America can stand up in front of an audience with a microphone and never mention it. It's as if there's an elephant in the room, and it's spraying out elephant diarrhea all over everyone, and no one's mentioning it. It's surreal. My impulse is always to call people's attention to the situation. *Uh, the elephant? Shitting on you?*
—PAUL MOONEY[1]

Shakespeare can serve as an important signifier for the "native" and minority cultures in a variety of locations as well as in conditions of contingency and flux. Of course, there are no overall guarantees of a progressive outcome.
—JYOTSNA SINGH[2]

It's like Shakespeare, with a nigga twist.
—AKALA[3]

1

Introduction

THE PASSING STRANGENESS OF SHAKESPEARE IN AMERICA

LIKE THE BLACK American comedian Paul Mooney, I find it impossible to ignore the shitting elephant in the room. Notions, constructions, and performances of race continue to define the contemporary American experience, including our conceptions, performances, and employments of Shakespeare. When I teach Shakespeare in my university classes, when I see a contemporary Shakespearean production on film, the stage (see Figure 1.1), or the Internet, when I hear and see allusions to Shakespeare in commercials, television shows, and the popular media, I see race: whiteness, blackness, Hispanic-ness, Asian-ness, the normatively raced, and the deviantly raced. It is always there; it is always present; it always impacts the way Shakespeare is being employed. And, like Mooney, I am always surprised when others don't mention it—the good, the bad, and the ugly—because race is the giant elephant in the room. Thus, *Passing Strange* is my attempt "to call people's attention to the situation." It is my attempt to bring contemporary race studies and contemporary Shakespeare studies into an honest and sustained dialogue.

It is probably worthwhile at this early moment to define what I mean by "Shakespeare" and "race." Both terms are loaded in unique ways in popular American parlance, and I want to be sure that their multivalent meanings are understood from the beginning of this book. While William Shakespeare was a sixteenth- and seventeenth-century British playwright, his name is not consistently employed in common discourse to refer to this historical figure alone. Rather, Shakespeare is often used to mean his now-canonical body of work: a synecdoche of sorts in which the name Shakespeare stands in for his entire creative output. But the name is also employed to signify a mythical fantasy about the author as a symbol for artistic genius, or as a symbol for the difficulty of the work created by that genius. While some scholars employ quotation marks to denote the difference between the historical figure, Shakespeare, and the symbols his name may evoke, "Shakespeare," I am not convinced these differences can be easily, or neatly, disentangled in contemporary American parlance. Therefore, I do not employ the quotation marks, even when I am clearly evoking Shakespeare-as-symbol.[4] I think it is important to keep all of the meanings, references, and ambiguities in play just as many of the modern employments of his name capitalize on these multiplicities. It is all Shakespeare.

Race likewise has multiple, and at times contradictory, uses in contemporary American discourse. While, in the most basic sense, race is the categorization of humans into groups based on heritable traits, many Americans have a limited notion of heritable traits as only referring to skin color (black, white, brown, etc.), facial features (lips, noses, eye shape/size, etc.), and hair type (straight, curly, kinky, etc.). Based on these traits, many would identify the races as white/Caucasian, black/African, and Asian. At times Hispanic/Latino/Chicano and Native American/American Indian are identified as races, and at other times they are identified as ethnicities. When Americans use the word race, it is often difficult to discern what they include in the term and what they exclude. If this is not muddled enough, there are times when race is also used to signify a set of cultural practices, such as specific ways of speaking, cooking, eating, and socializing and the historical narratives created that relate to these cultural practices. And there are also times when race is used to denote only nonwhite people, as if white Americans have no race.[5] While I do not agree with all of these uses, I want to keep the multivalent meanings for race in play, as with my use of Shakespeare, within *Passing Strange*. Part of the tension that arises when one discusses Shakespeare and race together is that one must interrogate which definitions are being employed, and which are being elided, at any particular moment.

So when does the pairing of Shakespeare and race occur? And when it occurs, is it worthy of a book-length examination? Is the pairing not just a sign of the social

progress being made in contemporary America? It is generally assumed that contemporary Shakespeare studies and Shakespearean performance have benefited from an attention to, and the incorporation of, race studies. Our increased knowledge about the complexity of the Renaissance world (through increased international trade) and our incorporation, or explicit rejection, of that knowledge in modern performances seems to have enhanced our understanding of Shakespeare. Although there are still skeptics who argue that it is anachronistic to analyze depictions and constructions of race in Renaissance texts, many others have integrated aspects of race studies into their research and performances.

It has yet to be debated, however, whether race studies and racial activism benefit from Shakespeare. *Passing Strange* analyzes how well and how comfortably Shakespeare and race fit together in the American imagination through an examination of specific moments in contemporary film, novels, theatre, prison programs, programs for at-risk youth, Internet postings, and scholarship. Far from offering one set of answers to these questions, *Passing Strange* demonstrates both how and why instability is the nature of the relationship between Shakespeare and race in American popular culture. In fact, *Passing Strange* might just be a manifesto advocating for the maintenance of that instability, but more on that later.

Two anecdotes exemplify the push and pull between Shakespeare and race in the American imagination. Anecdote One: At a recent Shakespeare conference, a scholar delivered a paper about the need for Shakespeareans to get out into "the community" to deliver Shakespeare to "the people." She told a story about an illiterate, black, recovering drug addict who was learning to read by studying Shakespeare's plays. Her message was that this black man was being *freed by* Shakespeare; he was being freed from the shackles of his illiteracy and drug dependence through the richness of Shakespeare's language and stories. In her story Shakespeare was constructed as an essential tool in both this black man's recovery and advancement.

Anecdote Two: At the same conference I asked a colleague about another black Shakespearean whom I had not seen, and my colleague said, "It's great, isn't it? She has been *freed from* Shakespeare to focus on race." My colleague's message was that our friend was finally free to pursue a project that was devoted to issues of racial justice; she was freed from the shackles of Shakespeare to investigate topics of real and immediate social relevance. In this comment Shakespeare was constructed as an essential obstacle in the pursuit of racial justice.

These anecdotes neatly encapsulate the linguistic and theoretical extremes of the debate this book seeks to address. The notion of being *freed by* Shakespeare encourages espousing and promoting an uncomplicated view of Shakespeare's cultural capital: Shakespeare can uplift the people because his works are aesthetic masterpieces that speak to all humans, in all times, in all cultures. The notion of

being *freed from* Shakespeare constructs Shakespeare studies as an obstacle that must be overcome to conduct research on contemporary race issues: Shakespeare can oppress the people because the promotion of his universality makes white, Western culture the norm from which everything else is a lesser deviation. Or to frame the extremes in another way, while it is often assumed that Shakespeare's plays are not only universal and timeless but also humanizing and civilizing, it is also assumed that Shakespeare may actually disable the advancement of racial equality. As Jyotsna Singh (cited as the second epigraph for this chapter) saliently warns, when it comes to Shakespeare and Shakespearean appropriations, "there are no overall guarantees of a progressive outcome."

Of course, these are the extremes of the debate. *Passing Strange* examines the greyer areas between American constructions of Shakespeare and American constructions of race by asking: How is Shakespeare's universalism constructed within explicit discussions and debates about racial identity? Is there a value to claims to an essentialized racial identity for Shakespeare (e.g., Shakespeare was black, a woman, a Jew, etc.)? How should Shakespeare's Moors be performed on the contemporary stage, and how does, or should, our understanding of the original staging practice of blackface impact these ideas and practices? Of what benefit is the promotion of Shakespeare and Shakespearean programs to incarcerated and/or at-risk persons of color? Are the benefits merely tied to the aesthetic value of Shakespeare, or is there some other value that providing access to Shakespeare's works affords these populations relative to their life experiences and circumstances? Do Shakespeare's plays need to be edited, appropriated, revised, updated, or rewritten to affirm racial equality and relevance? Do the answers to these questions impact our understanding of authorship, authority, and authenticity? How do performances involving actors of color affect contemporary notions of Shakespeare's racial politics, and does the medium employed (film, television, stage, Internet, etc.) alter these receptions? What does the history of Shakespearean scholarship and performance tell us about the possibilities for employing Shakespeare as a theoretical and practical tool for negotiating *contemporary* race relations?

I include one line from the chorus to the song "Shakespeare" from Akala, a young, black hip-hop artist, as the third epigraph for this chapter because the lyrics clearly articulate the distance between the popular image of Shakespeare and the popular image of black culture. "It's like Shakespeare, with a nigga twist" implies that Shakespeare does not already have a "nigga twist" within it. Whatever the "nigga twist" is imagined to be, it must be added to Shakespeare. This book explores the way the distances and proximities between popular constructions of Shakespeare and popular constructions of racial identity are forged. It asks who and what benefit from thinking about adding a "nigga twist" to Shakespeare.

Akala's song, however, is also important within this project because the dissemination of his material and the popularity of his work grew out of a twenty-first century technology and medium: a video on YouTube. Because in *Passing Strange* I am deeply invested in gauging and engaging in American popular culture, I employ disparate, nontraditional sources: not just film (which can rightly be considered a traditional form now) but also nontraditional performance spaces (like prisons and the Internet). Shakespeare's American cultural value and legacy cannot be weighed through performances in traditional venues only. One must look beyond the theatre (and the movie theatre) to see a more complete picture of the popular American construction of Shakespeare. When one colorizes this picture—that is, when one adds the dimension of race to the portrait—it is imperative to examine less traditional venues like a black hip-hop artist's video on YouTube. *Passing Strange*, then, expands the material focus of Shakespeare studies to include lesser-studied areas of cultural creation *and* distribution.

ON THE MEANING OF "PASSING STRANGE"

When Brabanzio complains to the Duke of Venice that his beautiful, Venetian daughter, has been tricked into marrying the "extravagant and wheeling stranger" (1.1.137), Othello the Moor, the Duke demands that Othello explain how this relationship came to be. Othello promises to deliver "a round unvarnished tale" (1.3.90), relating how he "won" Brabanzio's daughter (1.3.94). Then he reveals that it was "the story of [his] life" (1.3.128) to which Desdemona was attracted: "She'd come again, and with a greedy ear / Devour up my discourse" (1.3.148–149). Othello explains that after the course of several months:

> My story being done,
> She gave me for my pains a world of kisses.
> She swore in faith 'twas strange, 'twas passing strange,
> 'Twas pitiful, 'twas wondrous pitiful.
> She wished she had not heard it, yet she wished
> That heaven had made her such a man.
> (1.3.157–162)

Based on this encouragement from Desdemona, Othello says, he dared to woo her more openly. He, thus, makes it clear that it was the story of his adventures from his "boyish days" (1.3.131) to being sold into "slavery" (1.3.137) to his encounters with "the cannibals that each other eat" (1.3.142) that wooed Desdemona: "This only is the witchcraft I have used" (1.3.168). And the Venetian Duke approvingly responds, "I think this tale would win my daughter, too" (1.3.170).

From this famous passage in Shakespeare's *Othello* (c. 1603) we get the oft-cited phrase, "passing strange." Here I begin with a discussion of the Renaissance understanding of the phrase, but I also explore and exploit the phrase's expanded and stretched use over the centuries. In the Renaissance, the adverbial use of "passing" (modifying the adjective "strange") meant surpassingly, preeminently, or exceedingly. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, this meaning is now extremely rare and is only used poetically.[6] In *Othello*, however, Desdemona uses the phrase to indicate that Othello's story is exceptionally unusual. Interestingly, Shakespeare plays on the multiple meanings of "pass," both the adverbial and verbal uses, just a few lines later when Othello says, "She loved me for the dangers I had passed, /And I loved her that she did pity them" (1.3.166–167). The verb form of "pass" here signifies a survival (to outlive), but we can also hear the echoes of the meaning of loss and death (to pass beyond). The Renaissance audience may have heard ambiguities written into Othello's narrative of his winning of Desdemona: exceptionality is tied to both survival and loss.

The richness of the phrase "passing strange" has made it a frequently cited Shakespearean passage, even when the text and plot of *Othello* are not included in the allusion. Of course, there are far too many to cite here, but I briefly mention three from the nineteenth century to exemplify the phrase's appropriation to express moments of exceptionality. In her 1849 novel *Shirley*, Charlotte Brontë has one of her characters comment on the nervousness exhibited by a young woman. Miss Helstone remarks, "[P]assing strange! What does this unwonted excitement about such an everyday occurrence as a return from market portend? She has not lost her senses, has she? Surely the burnt treacle has not crazed her."[7] According to Miss Helstone, the madness brought on by eating burnt treacle is the only thing that could warrant such outlandish behavior; everyday occurrences, on the other hand, should not produce such "passing strange" behavior.

Similarly in Robert Louis Stevenson's 1888 novel *The Black Arrow*, Dick notes that it is "passing strange" that his stakeout is being observed by others.[8] Again, the appropriation of the phrase signifies the exceptional nature of the event: it signifies an occurrence that no one could predict. And in Thomas Hardy's 1891 novel *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, the narrator describes the meeting of Alec D'Urberville and Tess Durbeyfield as an accident of timing: "In the ill-judged execution of the well-judged plan of things the call seldom produces the comer, the man to love rarely coincides with the hour for loving. . . . Out of which maladroit delay sprang anxieties, disappointments, shocks, catastrophes, and passing-strange destinies."[9] In Hardy's appropriation, one's fate can be rendered exceptionally unique precisely because of the "ill-judged execution" of life's significant events. For Hardy, "passing strange" signifies the very nature of life.

While these types of nonreferential allusions help to keep the meaning of the phrase "passing strange" as "exceptionally unusual" in wide circulation, allusions that keep race at the heart of the allusion have tapped into the more modern sense of "passing." In Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), for instance, Marlow explains to his auditors aboard *The Nellie*, who are drifting on the river Thames, that even when he discovers the horrible atrocities that Kurtz committed in Africa (e.g., Kurtz's "pamphlet" that advises to "Exterminate the brutes"), he still cannot forsake him and relegate his memory to the "dustbin of progress."[10] Marlow explains,

> But then, you see, I can't choose. He won't be forgotten. Whatever he was he was not common. . . . No, I can't forget him, though I am not prepared to affirm the fellow was exactly worth the life we lost in getting him. I missed my late helmsman awfully—I missed him even while his body was still lying in the pilot-house. Perhaps you will think it passing strange this regret for a savage who was no more account than a grain of sand in a black Sahara. Well, don't you see, he had done something, he had steered; for months I had him at my back—a help—an instrument. It was kind of a partnership.[11]

Marlow begins by explaining that he cannot forget Kurtz because he was an extraordinary man of action, but he ends by explaining that he cannot forget his African pilot because "he had done something." Thus, he unites these seemingly disparate figures in his mind, and he is able to bridge his memories of them through the Shakespearean allusion from *Othello*. In this way, Marlow becomes the feminized Desdemona figure who struggles to relate his love for what should be (and in these cases are) unattainable figures (both sexually and racially). For Marlow, then, the appropriation of Shakespeare's "passing strange" signifies both the attraction and repulsion one feels when one acknowledges one's desire both to be Other and to be with the Other.

Although it is clear that Conrad is referencing Shakespeare, the American reader might hear echoes of a more modern usage. The modern usage of "passing," of course, is a uniquely American one that stems from the racial segregation of the Jim Crow era in which racial mingling was prohibited and clear racial identification was required. In this sense, to "pass" means to identify oneself as another race (usually black identifying as white for social and economic privileges). As Linda Schlossberg explains, "Because of [the] seemingly intimate relationship between the visual and the known, passing becomes a highly charged site for anxieties regarding visibility, invisibility, classification, and social demarcation. It disrupts the logics and conceits around which identity categories are established and

maintained—even as it may seem to result in the disappearance or denial of a range of 'minoritized' or queer identities."[12]

It is this racialized appropriation of passing that attracted Mark Stewart (aka Stew) to the phrase "passing strange" in *Othello*. As one of the creative forces behind the Broadway hit musical, *Passing Strange*, Stew heard important resonances in the Shakespearean phrase for his own narrative of self-discovery in Europe.[13] A middle-class black American who fled to Europe to escape "the limitations of being an American black artist only to tangle with the European fascination with 'the American Negro,'" Stew experimented with "passing for ghetto" in his European performances.[14] It was only when he began to work on the semi-autobiographical musical, however, that he discovered how appropriate the phrase "passing strange" was for his own life.

> I opened the comic book version of *Othello* that Maria Goyanes at The Public Theater handed me, and I opened it to the passage where Othello talks about how he wooed Desdemona. It moved me as close to tears as anything I'd ever read in my life. In that scene, Othello reminded me of a guy in a rock band who got the girl by spinning his rock-and-roll war stories. I thought "that's what the Youth in *Passing Strange* would do when he meets all these European girls." He'd tell them a stack of tales from a land they'd never been to, and—like all storytellers—he'd, uh, embellish just a bit. Obviously, the term "passing" has deep historical meaning for any African American my age [45] or older. My grandmother was light enough to pass. But the kid in this play discovers there's more to passing than just black folks passing for white. The term "passing" also has to do with time passing, of course.[15]

In Stew's musical, then, it is important to maintain the multiple resonances of the phrase "passing strange." He leads his audience back to Shakespeare's original usage which signifies the exceptionality, and perhaps fictionality, of Othello's narrative, but he folds into it the modern American anxiety about the performative and nonessential nature of racial identity. Throughout the musical the Youth struggles to find "the real," and ultimately experiments with "Black folks passing for black folks."[16] In addition, the musical is performed by an all-black cast, many of whom must perform/pass for the white characters in the scenes in Amsterdam and Berlin.

Harkening back to Marlow's feelings of desire for the unattainable Other expressed in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Stew also highlights the strange attraction-repulsion that comes through the notion of "passing." The desire to be other can be both attractive and repulsive because it requires both a creation and an