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978-1-009-50088-3 — Women Making Shakespeare in the Twenty-First Century
Kim Solga
Excerpt
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1 Introduction: Women Making Shakespeare Now

It's a wintry evening in Toronto, March 2019. I've taken students from my history of performance theory seminar to see *Prince Hamlet*, created by Why Not Theatre. Dawn Jani Birley plays Horatio, who in this adaptation is our storyteller. She seamlessly code-switches between her character in the story and her character *as* the story: she exchanges dialogue in American Sign Language (ASL) with her best friend Hamlet (Christine Horne) while also narrating the whole play in ASL, in her own translation. Later, in interviews with Birley, with director Ravi Jain, and with Why Not co-artistic director Miriam Fernandes, I will learn just how complex, fraught, and generative the process of building this play was, and I will learn about Birley's commitment to a very specific form of intersectionality (see Section 3). Right now, though, I'm riveted like my students as we experience a familiar story in a very unfamiliar register. At the intermission, one student tells me her high school did *Julius Caesar*, not *Hamlet*; this is her first one. She's a bit worried because it's not traditional, conventional – "correct." I tell her it's the best first *Hamlet* anyone could ever encounter.

At the same moment in time – March 2019 – across the Atlantic at Shakespeare's Globe, Lynette Linton and Adjua Andoh have co-directed *Richard II* in the Sam Wanamaker playhouse (Linton and Andoh, 2019), in the Globe's first ever all-women-of-colour production (see Section 4). Andoh, lately of *Bridgerton* fame and a long-time leading woman on UK stage and screen, plays Richard in a production jam-packed with cultural references to multiple parts of Africa, the Caribbean, and Asia. This is not some blanket attempt to locate the play in the Global South; it is a series of very specific choices designed to centre the women "at the bottom" of the empire's "heap" (in Andoh's words in the *Such Stuff* podcast, Shakespeare's Globe 2020). The cast are radiant in the ambient candlelight as it flickers across the bamboo screen that lines the back wall of the playing area; they can be at home all across this stage precisely because the work of designing for them, lighting and costuming their bodies, photographing, filming, and marketing their performances has been done by women of colour just like them. Later, I'll read interviews with Linton and Andoh and hear of the multiple challenges they faced to assemble their cast and crew and resource their needs properly; I'll also read about the incredible sense of ownership and belonging the cast were able to feel, over both space and story, once those needs were finally met. Right now, though, I am fixated by the photographs that line the playing space. Above the actors' heads, images of the cast and crew's grandmothers and other women ancestors look down, shining forth their strength and courage.

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Now it's August 2022. I'm sitting masked in the Studio Theatre at the Stratford Festival (in Stratford, Ontario, Canada)[1] watching *1939* (2022) a new play co-written by Jani Lauzon (Métis) and Kaitlyn Riordan (see Section 2). The plot of *1939* takes place in a residential school, where young Indigenous children are housed by the Crown and the Catholic Church. The King and Queen of England are planning a visit to Canada, and the children of this school will put on a production of *All's Well That Ends Well* to showcase their skills. The performances are wonderful, but the story feels too gentle, at first, for the politically charged subject matter. (The violence perpetrated at residential schools in Canada was the subject of Canada's first Truth and Reconciliation Commission [2008–15].) I'm a frequent Stratford audience member and I'm used to seeing the Festival produce work that strives not to offend other frequent audience members, who are often older, white, and affluent. It feels to me like this is one of those shows. An hour later, however, I feel my inherent bias shift as I experience the play's climax. The student actors in *All's Well* become fed up with the "dime store Indian" production they are stuck in; they cast off their faux headdresses and perform a loud and joyous round dance in the middle of the Studio stage. Later, I'll learn that this production's is the first round dance ever performed at the Festival. Right now, though, as I leave the theatre I visit the community healing space that Lauzon and Riordan have set up to support audience members who want to talk about what they've witnessed. I observe quietly as a group of older spectators wearing orange Every Child Matters[2] T-shirts speak with an Elder about the harm they carry from their own residential school experiences.

This Element is an attempt to understand how and why artists like Dawn Jani Birley, Jani Lauzon, Adjua Andoh, and Lynette Linton choose to work with Shakespeare and his contemporaries – the early modern "classical" canon – at a moment in time when theatres around the world are striving toward equity, inclusion, diversity, and decolonization. I uplift women creators from equity-owed communities as I learn from them about how they transform plays we know to be patriarchy-affirming, ableist, and often racist into vehicles for community storytelling and models for radically inclusive and difference-centred ways of making. I use an ethnographic methodology (more on that a bit later in this section) as well as an intersectional feminist lens throughout, for all the women with whom I am in conversation necessarily make their art at the intersections of gender and ability, gender and race, gender and indigeneity,

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[1] For further details about the Stratford Festival, including its history and its role in Canada's settler colonial present, see Section 2.

[2] More information about the Every Child Matters movement and Canada's Orange Shirt Day can be found here: https://nctr.ca/education/every-child-matters/.

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and gender and the experience of transition. Ultimately, this Element is not about reading Shakespeare but about reading Shakespeare-in-process: the worlds I introduce us to are the worlds these creators build for themselves and their communities as they explore their complex relationships to Shakespeare in the creation room.

1.1 Investing in Shakespeare

Do you remember your first encounter with William Shakespeare? Did it feel like he was *for you*? I remember my first time; it was in junior high school. I was Mr F.'s star pupil in language arts class; on this day, whatever the lesson may have been, it ended with Mr F. invoking Shakespeare. We weren't studying any of the plays but I wanted to try reading them; I asked Mr F. for advice. He told me I should wait until I started high school. At the time I was ashamed; I thought he was telling me I wasn't smart enough to read Shakespeare by myself, that as a child of immigrants with no readers at home to guide me I wasn't ready for the great weight and power of The Bard. Now, in hindsight, I wonder if Mr F. was cannily deflecting. I wonder if Mr F. – an immigrants' kid like me – may have thought Shakespeare wasn't really for him, either.

Who "owns" Shakespeare? Who wants to own him, and why? Who is prepared to give up ownership to Shakespeare, and how do they even begin? What alternatives to "owning" Shakespeare might we discover if we turn away from our current industry model, in which Shakespeare operates as a form of global theatrical currency?

These are not rhetorical questions. Historically, the figure we call "Shakespeare" is an icon of colonial power, a figure whose works were used to advance the march of civilization across the British Empire in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. His plays and poems intentionally embed white supremacy (something I talk about in more detail in Section 4), and they have long been used to demarcate firm lines between "high" and "low" culture at the theatre, as well as to structure hierarchies based on social status and educational experience beyond the stage.[3] Today, Shakespeare continues to sit in pole position atop the sector we broadly label "the culture industries." For many theatre makers and lay theatre fans, he remains, foremost, a figure of elite, literary authority. As W. B. Worthen writes in *Shakespeare and the Authority of Performance*, "While the theatre is often described as licentious, promiscuous, innovative, imaginative, or merely haphazard in its representation of texts, to think of performance as conveying authorized meanings of any kind, especially meanings authenticated in and by the text, is, finally, to tame the unruly ways of the stage" (Worthen 1997, 3). In contradiction to the inherent instability (and democracy!) of playtexts cobbled from sides (actors' individual parts) and quartos edited by several hands into bound folios and eventually "complete works" over the course of the long early modern period, Worthen argues that both scholars and practitioners of elite Shakespeare (think the Royal Shakespeare Company [RSC]) use "the stage" as a place authorized to produce "authentically Shakespearean meanings" (3) – meanings from which both scholars and practitioners then borrow authority in turn, deploying their grasp of Shakespeare as powerful cultural capital to be spent elsewhere.

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[3] Scholars have been examining Shakespeare's relationships to colonialism, to the development of post-colonial identities in former British colonies and settler colonial nations, and to racism and white supremacy for several decades. Path-breaking texts include Ania Loomba and Martin Orkin's (1998) *Post-Colonial Shakespeares* and Loomba's (2002) *Shakespeare, Race, and Colonialism*; Kim F. Hall's (1996) *Things of Darkness* and her special issue of *Shakespeare Quarterly* focused on early modern race studies, edited with Peter Erickson (Erickson and Hall 2016); Ayanna Thompson's (2011) *Passing Strange* and *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Race* (Thompson 2021); Arthur L. Little, Jr's (2022) *White People in Shakespeare*; and Farah Karim-Cooper's (2023) *The Great White Bard*.

This marks the second key function today of the figure we call "Shakespeare": he is by now a global industry that promises access to significant social status and economic gain. "Shakespeare", as Why Not's Ravi Jain put it to me, "is Kleenex":[4] ubiquitous, familiar to everyone, useful to have around if you need a sell-out. "Shakespeare" is money in the bank. And this bankable ubiquity is one very good reason why so many people – people whom we might otherwise imagine would want nothing to do with colonialism's star export – are still interested in making and consuming Shakespeare's plays in the wake of #MeToo, Black Lives Matter, Land Back, and other decolonization movements. But it's also not the whole reason.

This is something I want to be clear about right up front: for the artists in this Element, Shakespeare is also a writer, an artist like them. At the end of the day, his legacy is also personal. These artists are women of colour; they are Black and Indigenous women; they are trans and non-binary women; and they are Deaf and blind women. They are committed anti-racists; they are disability justice advocates; they are advocates for trans rights. They fight every day for accessibility, inclusion, and decolonization – for them, that fight is personal. And they love Shakespeare; they choose him in this fight. Shakespeare's plays lie embedded in their early memories of reading together with family (Alex Bulmer; Emma Frankland; Yvette Nolan; Jani Lauzon) or working with an inspiring teacher at school (Dawn Jani Birley; Nataki Garrett). Shakespeare represents, for them, not the locked gate of high culture but rather an early experience of *access*. His words – alongside the cultural power they hold – are a part of how these women became the artists and leaders they are today.

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[4] M. Fernandes and R. Jain, personal interview, 7 December 2021.

But then, at some point (often more than one), every one of these women *also* received the message that Shakespeare *just wasn't for them*, after all. At drama school, in auditions, or in the persistent challenges they face when trying to make work on their own terms even now, at some point the gate to Shakespeare closed. These artists, as we'll see throughout this Element, make their work at the coalface, the exposed seam of contradictions that haunts us every time we try to account for the "authority" attached to Shakespeare. Their art and their fight benefit from recognizing both how it feels to claim a figure like Shakespeare – to love the verse with which "he" is synonymous; to see their own imagination and artistic potential refracted in his works – and also what it feels like to have access to those works and their accrued cultural authority taken away, as those with greater social, historical, and embodied privilege say, *It's not that you're not good, it's that you just don't fit the part*. These artists actively choose Shakespeare as a fellow traveler toward equity and social justice, but they combine their personal interests in everything "he" might be with a strong political awareness of how the very idea of Shakespeare has always been organized and gate-kept for the benefit of some and at the expense of others. Their love is necessarily dissonant, and their artistic processes – intersectional; cosmologically Indigenous; decentralized and non-hierarchical; committed to resource-sharing and mentorship – proudly foreground that dissonance as an equity-seeking move.

The question of just who or what "Shakespeare" is, what "his" authority means and can mean in the future, thus remains an open one – malleable, transformable, even transformational. As we meet these artists and explore their practices in the pages ahead, let's hold close the question of which Shakespeares they choose to activate, how, and for whose benefit.

1.2 Sustainable Investments

In a recent essay about Shakespeare and decolonization, Andrew Hartley, Kaja Dunn, and Christopher Berry ask, "Can [the history of Shakespeare as a tool for performing white cultural superiority] be circumvented or – better yet – rewritten, and what means might be attempted to accomplish this decolonizing process?" (Hartlet, Dunn, and Berry 2021, 171). My guiding question, "Who owns Shakespeare?", reframes this question to shine light on a paradox.[5]

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[5] Excellent recent scholarship on Shakespeare and decolonization can be found in the pages of *Shakespeare Bulletin*, especially the Winter 2021 special issue on Shakespeare and social justice edited by David Sterling Brown and Sandra Young (2021). See also Kemp (2019) on trans

Shakespeare, especially when he is held up as a synonym for "great theatre" untouched by crass materialism, is always, first and foremost, about money, resources, and power. Our current economic climate is governed by neo-liberalism, a form of global financial capitalism that places ultimate faith in free markets to determine the distribution of resources and ultimate responsibility for economic failings on individuals. This framework primarily benefits those who already have significant resources; it values shareholder expectations over labour force needs and encourages individual wealth accumulation over community support and the equitable distribution of capital (Harvey 2005). Neo-liberalism's runaway success since the early 1980s has guaranteed that, no matter where you live, access to resources will be tied in some way to race, class, gender, and the other key status markers that determined how much you had to begin with.

In 2017, I published an essay called "Shakespeare's Property Ladder" (Solga 2017). In it I investigated how Britain's directorial landscape, as late as 2015, remained reluctant to allow all but the most "bankable" women artists the opportunity to direct major Shakespeare plays in mainstage venues. The inspiration for my title came from high-profile British director Katie Mitchell. In a 2011 National Theatre (NT) Platform discussion with Dan Rebellato, Mitchell explained why she has refused to direct Shakespeare across her substantial international career. She reflected on her one and only Shakespeare, *Henry VI: The Battle for the Throne* (at the RSC, 1994). She chose *Henry VI* specifically because it was obscure, less likely to provoke comparisons to past productions at the RSC, and thus less likely to draw the ire of the old guard at the RSC whom she knew regarded her youth, gender, and experimental practice with suspicion. She told Rebellato: "[There is a] deep sense of ownership of this material, maybe related to gender, owned maybe by men more than women (maybe)" (Mitchell and Rebellato 2011). This sense of ownership is exactly what Worthen would call, three years after Mitchell's *Henry*, the bulwarking of Shakespearean authority, and – as Mitchell might have predicted – RSC stakeholders excoriated her choices in *Battle for the Throne*, accusing her actors of sloppy verse speaking and her design concept of being contrary to Shakespeare's intentions. From that point on, her response to Shakespeare became: why bother?

Mitchell's declaration at the National still feels daring to me, however couched her language; it takes courage to tell the establishment to sod off and tenacity to go the distance on your own terms. But walking away from power is

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dramaturgies in the early modern canon and Nora Williams (2022) on "incomplete" dramaturgies in the search for inclusive casting.

only possible when power and privilege are, on some level, yours already; as a white, cis-, Oxford-educated woman whose international star was in 1994 already rising, Mitchell lost comparatively little from turning her back on Shakespeare's currency. What of those without that level of existing privilege? What of those for whom the route isn't around Shakespeare but through?

The idea of ownership that I'm animating here has two valences. One is economic, to do with how resources are distributed in the staging of Shakespeare and whose interests that distribution serves. The other, however, is political, to do with both whom we think of when we think of his works – and also who *doesn't* come to mind. Shakespeare's political ownership is often tied to what are called the "universal" qualities of his characters and themes. But who comes to mind when we think of Shakespeare's verse? White, classically trained bodies, speaking in a very specific (British-accented) manner. Calling Shakespeare "universal" sounds inherently inclusive, a way of devolving access to everyone; several of the artists in the pages that follow would agree. But, as Ayanna Thompson reminds us, the very notion of "universal" Shakespeare has operated, historically, as a slick cover for the perpetuation of white colonial ownership. In her essential book about Shakespeare and race, *Passing Strange* (2011), Thompson writes that arguments about Shakespeare's timeless and placeless qualities have often been strategically connected to white supremacism via the practice of "colourblind casting," a version of tokenism that invites actors of colour to participate in productions of the plays only on the tacit condition that they not bring their own histories and experiences into the creation space with them (see also Catanese 2011). After all, if the production doesn't "see colour," and Shakespeare is already "for everyone," those stories can't be relevant, right? Thompson (2011, 38) notes that when we make this argument, "Shakespeare is taken to mean two contradictory, but not mutually exclusive, ideas: the exclusivity of Western civilization *and* the fantasy of the racial homogeneity of that civilization." In other words, Shakespeare's cultural capital – his economic power as a titan of today's culture industries, not to mention his legacy power as a civilizing emissary of the British Empire – derives directly from the assumption that his works and their authority "exclude everything that is not Western," but also that Western "civilization, culture, and society, which Shakespeare helped to create, have nothing to do with issues of race" (Thomson 2011, 38).

So how do we dismantle these deep-seated power structures, structures that let us pretend that doing Shakespeare is about skill and talent (rather than money, education, or inherited privilege) and that access to his work and its inherent acclaim is unfettered (rather than systemically racist, classist, and gendered)? In these pages I seek a wide range of possible answers in the testimony and examples of artists already engaged in the work of this dismantling, and from the fieldwork I was privileged to undertake I can offer three guiding principles for us to bear in mind.

First, we must confront the reality that Shakespeare has not been "for everyone," *ever*. Only when those historically excluded from the feeling that Shakespeare is "for them" are given a proper opportunity to lay claim to Shakespeare, to call Shakespeare "universal" on their own terms (see Knowles 2007, 63; Fowler and Solga in press), can we achieve equity. Importantly, "equity" here does not mean a generic equality of access to Shakespeare's works or Shakespearean stages; it means generating the scaffolds required to provide formerly marginalized artists and creators a fairness of footing so that they might even begin to imagine what access to Shakespeare and the "classical" canon could mean *on their own terms*. Equity in this sense is about resource, it is about democratizing notions of story, and it is about uplifting voices that have been too long silenced.

Thus my second guiding principle: the Shakespeare industry, having profited from it so fully, needs to make good on the idea of a "universal Shakespeare" by transferring money, material resources, rehearsal and creation space, and the power to hold that space safely, into the hands of historically excluded artists. Again, this does not just mean "giving space" to such artists; it means sharing without condition and supporting without insisting on control, using company models like those pioneered by Nataki Garrett at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival (OSF)[6] (Section 4) and by Why Not Theatre in Toronto (Section 3). Decolonization is not a metaphor but an active and intentional practice of returning land and resources taken without consent (Tuck and Yang 2012); making Shakespeare properly equitable therefore requires those of us with power and privilege to "share everything," as Why Not's motto states, "because more artists means more stories" (Why Not Theatre n.d.b). This resource return must prioritize hiring and mentoring strong leaders from equity-owed groups, and then supporting those leaders fully as they undertake their stated mandates so that they might build a ladder upward. Every one of the examples in this Element will demonstrate how important artistic leaders of different genders, abilities, and racial experiences are to uplifting the next generation of such leaders, making the move toward Shakespearean equity not just possible but sustainable.

Finally, we need to meet in story. Shakespeare's plays are all based on stories taken, magpie-like, from other sources, and this is story's power: it is communal, adaptable, accessible. Story is how we make ourselves and how we build our

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[6] See the OSF's "Mission and Vision" at www.osfashland.org/company/mission-and-values.aspx [accessed 27 March 2023].

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communities; it offers a way to reimagine our worlds. Playing "with words and story" is how we make things better for everyone,[7] how we "change the story for good" (Why Not Theatre n.d.a). Shakespeare's most significant power, for many of the artists in these pages, lies in his capacity to "play with words and story" and then inspire others to do likewise. Their Shakespeare isn't (just) a guru or a boss but also a fellow storyteller, another participant in a democratic devising process. As Adjua Andoh writes:

> I have a belief that when people have ownership of what they're engaged in, they commit to it. They're not doing it to please teacher. They're not doing it because they're scared, they're doing it *because it's theirs*. . . . the variety of people who came [to *Richard II*] with something deep and precious and it's like everybody put it in your bank account. And they said, 'Here's my investment', and then when we did the play, we drew on all our investments to make it work. (Andoh 2021, 23)

1.3 Changing How We Tell the Story; Changing Whose Stories We Tell

My goal in this Element is to amplify the voices of women-identified creators who are actively making Shakespeare differently, in line with the principles I outline in Section 1.2. I strive to relate the fundamentals of their creative practices, the social ethos and the political goals behind those practices, and wherever possible I let these creators speak in their own words. This Element is not, therefore, about representations of Shakespeare's plays that look or sound or feel different, more inclusive, decolonized; it's about what happens long before the stage lights come up on those productions.

In order to centre artists in this way I use an ethnographic approach, drawing primarily from interviews I conducted for this research in collaboration with my research associate Dr Sheetala Bhat, as well as from interviews with artists and their collaborators broadcast or published elsewhere.[8] As a scholar trained in the reading and theorizing of literary and theatrical texts, I have had to learn a significant number of new things, both practical and ethical, in order to undertake this work in a wise way. My learning has also been, to some extent, an unlearning, a necessary recalibration of the unspoken centres and margins of scholarly work. How often have literary scholars, for example, been told that an author's intentions do not matter to the meanings of their writing? How many of us who work in theatre programmes know all too well the entrenched divisions and the subtle hierarchies that divide the “scholars” from the “practitioners” on faculty? How many of us have been trained to mistrust the convictions of the artists whose work we read or hear or see, to treat those convictions as either naïve or irrelevant to critique?

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[7] R. Arluk, personal interview, 21 January 2022.

[8] Full ethics approval for this research has been obtained from Western University's Non-Medical Research Ethics Board. All interviewees provided informed consent, either written or verbal, for the sharing of materials from their interviews included here.

Writing “Shakespeare’s Property Ladder” (Solga 2017) convinced me that the stories I wanted to tell about Shakespeare were increasingly not on the stage but behind and before it – stories about access, resource, power, and accountability. This in turn meant that my approach to talking about making Shakespeare had to change. In 2018, my colleague Dr Erin Julian and I shadowed Chinese-Canadian actor and director Keira Loughran as she strove to build a non-binary production of *The Comedy of Errors* at Ontario’s Stratford Festival. We chronicled our journey in a 2021 article about Loughran’s struggle to practise diversity thoroughgoingly at Stratford (Julian and Solga 2021). After composing our first draft we shared the article with Loughran, who offered frank and firm feedback that challenged many of our initial conclusions. That process of interlocution was difficult. It required us to recognize that Loughran’s intentions *did* matter to what we made of the resulting show; they required us to reconsider our criticisms of the process and the eventual production while holding her point of view clearly in mind alongside our own. This did not, I will stress, require us to change what we saw as some of the most fundamental problems the production faced, but it did require that we assess those problems multidimensionally and with compassion, while understanding that we were not the only stakeholders whose version of events mattered. Having a challenging dialogue about the fundamentals of collaborative practice, and about our points of disagreement over its core tenets, allowed all three of us to deepen our understanding of the issues at stake and to recalibrate how to communicate them effectively (see also Loughran in press).

This Element, like that essay, strives for both nuance and generosity. Its primary mode is relational, and it shares practitioners’ stories to make some claims about what is needed, both materially and politically, so that Shakespeare can become sustainably equitable, even possibly, someday, decolonial. I begin in Section 2 with Indigenous artists from Turtle Island: Jani Lauzon (Métis), Yvette Nolan (Algonquin, Irish), and Reneltta Arluk (Inuvialuk, Denesuline, Gwich’in, and Cree) and their entanglements with *All’s Well That Ends Well*, *Julius Caesar*, and *MacBeth*, respectively. In Section 3 I focus on intersections, exploring the making of *Prince Hamlet* with Deaf creator Dawn Jani Birley, the making of *R&J* (an adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* [Shakespeare 1597/1599]) with blind actor and voice coach Alex Bulmer, and the making of *Galatea* (a play by Shakespeare influencer John Lyly) with transwoman and force of nature Emma Frankland. In Section 4, I turn to two institutions helmed by