

# Negotiating the “Negro Problem”: Stew’s *Passing* (Made) *Strange*

Brandon Woolf

“To the real question, How does it feel to be a problem? I answer seldom a word. And yet, being a problem is a *strange* experience,—peculiar even for one who has never been anything else, save perhaps in babyhood and in Europe.”  
—W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*<sup>1</sup>

“[Du Bois is] someone who developed the Germanic notions of world citizenship and world history, and I wanted to use that scale of writing as [a] way of de-provincializing American thought, de-provincializing European thought, and showing their complicity in the production and reproduction of racial hierarchies.”  
—Paul Gilroy, interview in *Transition*<sup>2</sup>

“I don’t know what this piece is. . . . One day it’s a rite of passage, the next day it’s a real serious thing about the consequences of being an artist, some of it’s about this illusion of [black] authenticity.”  
—Stew, quoted in the *San Francisco Chronicle*<sup>3</sup>

The lights are dim at the Belasco Theatre: 111 West 44th Street, just off the Great White Way. Four members of the Los Angeles/Berlin-based rock band The Negro Problem

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I would first like to thank all of my friends and family, who tolerated my incessant, if not obsessive, listening *and* singing along to the *Passing Strange* soundtrack for the past few years. Professors Linda Williams, Brandi Wilkins Catanese, and Catherine Cole were incredibly generous with their time, their ideas, and their encouragement. Heartfelt thanks to my graduate colleagues who participated in the “Gotta Sing, Gotta Dance” seminar where this essay found its start, and to those in the “Colloquium” where it found its second life. Many thanks to Michelle Baron, Virginia Preston, and the thoughtful audience members of the “Transnational Identifications: (Mis)performance, Theatre and Form” panel at PSI #15 in Zagreb, Croatia, where I first presented this work publicly. Shane Boyle, Dennis Johannßen, April Sizemore-Barber, Caitlin Marshall, Lauren Mancina, and Jennifer Allen have been the most gracious editors and challenging critics. Thank you to Annie Dorsen for taking the time to answer all of my questions. And, of course, I am indebted to Stew for his patience, his support, his music, and his friendship.

<sup>1</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Dover Publications, 1994), 1 (emphasis added).

<sup>2</sup> Tommie Shelby, “Cosmopolitanism, Blackness, and Utopia: A Conversation with Paul Gilroy,” *Transition* 98 (2008): 117.

<sup>3</sup> Stew quoted in Sam Hurwitt, “From Punk Rock to Musical Theatre,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 22 October 2006, PK-18.

cross the stage and take up their instruments.<sup>4</sup> Enter Stew, the band's front man and the Narrator of *Passing Strange*. Short, stout, sporting a well-groomed goatee, he struts out in uniform: black pants and sport jacket with the sleeves pushed up onto his forearms over the French cuffs of his bright, fire-engine-red collared shirt with two buttons open at the neck. Black-and-white Converse All-Stars of course, a black fedora, and funky, thick-rimmed plastic glasses with yellow-tinted lenses. He picks up his Gibson electric guitar—reminiscent of B. B. King's Lucille—glances out to the audience, gives a nod, a coy smile, a count off, and then . . . the guitar roars.

Although *Passing Strange* has played to rave reviews,<sup>5</sup> it is clear from the very first note, the very first light change, and the fact that the band sinks half-way down into the stage after wailing away at the "Prologue" that this is not a typical Broadway musical—certainly not a typical black musical, not even a typical rock musical. After fourteen measures of catchy guitar, bass, and drum licks, Stew's raspy yet expressive baritone confirms that we are in for a very different kind of "musical" experience: "Now you don't know me, / And I don't know you, / So let's cut to the chase, / The name is Stew."<sup>6</sup> Stew: acclaimed underground-rock balladeer, "Afro-baroque"<sup>7</sup> cabaret artist, traveling Weill/Bacharach-esque troubadour, first-time playwright, ringleader of The Negro Problem, all-around troublemaker. This band has been on the road "[f]or ten thousand days of one-night stands,"<sup>8</sup> and what a long, *strange* trip it's been: from the "L.A. Arteest Café,"<sup>9</sup> to the hash bars of Amsterdam, to Kreuzberg, West Berlin, to the "Travelogues" on the stage of Joe's Pub in New York, to the Sundance Theatre Laboratory, the Berkeley Repertory Theatre, the Public Theater, and beyond. Bill Bragin, former director of Joe's Pub and official "instigator" of the project, explains that Broadway was a long shot:

*Passing Strange* was an unconventional hybrid of ensemble theatre piece and rock concept album, . . . an all-black cast and experimentalist director, layered with complex themes about the mutability of racial identity, what it means to be an artist, the love between a mother and a son, a search for self and a search for home.<sup>10</sup>

Having defied almost all expectations, however, The Negro Problem has fearlessly taken up court at the Belasco to tell us "where it's at."<sup>11</sup>

<sup>4</sup> My reconstructions of *Passing Strange* are a composite of my viewings of the three major stages of the production. I first saw the piece live at the Public Theater in New York in May 2007. I have subsequently seen video footage of the world-premiere production at the Berkeley Repertory Theatre. Finally, I attended a screening of Spike Lee's documentary of the Broadway run, which premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in February 2009. I have also re-watched the film, which was released on DVD in January 2009 and aired nationally on PBS as part of the Great Performances series on 13 January 2009.

<sup>5</sup> Full disclosure: Elizabeth Wollman's performance review in *Theatre Journal* was decisively mixed. The present essay, however, works to *complicate* Wollman's central thesis: "[F]or all its flaws, *Passing Strange* goes places musicals—'rock,' 'black,' whatever—have not ventured." See Wollman's performance review of *Passing Strange*, *Theatre Journal* 60, no. 4 (2008): 635–37.

<sup>6</sup> Stew, *Passing Strange: The Complete Book and Lyrics of the Broadway Musical* (New York: Applause Theatre & Cinema Books, 2009), 1.

<sup>7</sup> Bill Bragin, "Foreword," in *ibid.*, ix.

<sup>8</sup> Stew, *Passing Strange*, 1.

<sup>9</sup> A track on Stew's 2003 album *Something Deeper Than These Changes* (Image Entertainment).

<sup>10</sup> Bragin, "Foreword," xii–xiii.

<sup>11</sup> Stew, *Passing Strange*, 1.

Where what's at? The state of the "Negro problem" itself, or at least one man's version of that problematic. *Passing Strange* is Stew's refusal. It is his refusal to accept the traditions of (black) musical theatre, the strictures of racial authenticity, and any neat and tidy process of identity formation. Stew's "I don't know what this piece is" is also his refusal to accept any attempt at singular, stagnant, positivistic interpretation, his resistance to "'freezing' this mason jar of theatrical funk-fluid that was decidedly thawed, often bubbling, and always sweaty."<sup>12</sup> He refuses to understand *Passing Strange* as anything other than one big and powerful song, "one big enough to walk into, yell at the top of your lungs in, big enough to dance around in. We can even throw a wine glass at the wall."<sup>13</sup> *Passing Strange* is the semi-autobiographical tale of Stew's "pilgrimage"<sup>14</sup> in and through song, and its song(s) forge a time and space in which he searches for an authenticity, a Real—with a capital "R"—that is necessarily multiply defined, multiply located, unstable, in motion even.

This essay maps the varied problems of problematization for which *Passing Strange* is arguing by charting the piece's often-contradictory passages and trajectories. I employ a dialectical and diasporic vocabulary to situate Stew in problematic yet productive relation to critical interlocutors like W. E. B. Du Bois and Paul Gilroy, among others, in order to articulate the complex relations between racial and national identity that *Passing Strange* performs. Finally, the essay works to understand Stew where he is most at home, "between the clicks of a metronome"<sup>15</sup>: between black and white, between music and theatre, between the US and Europe, between past and present, between fictional representation and lived experience.

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In the epigraph with which I began, Du Bois subtly problematizes the "Negro problem" itself in his refusal to answer the question, "How does it feel to be a problem?" Perhaps for Du Bois to answer the question directly would be to acknowledge the "problem" as problem, to authenticate the creation of a term like the "Negro problem" in order to understand, demarcate, and discuss the horrors of racism in turn-of-the-twentieth-century America. To validate such a term would be to treat racism as something that *can* be understood, demarcated, and discussed, and to answer the question would be to treat racism as a "problem" that can be located, isolated, analyzed with logic, solved. To answer the question would thus mask the severity, the irrationality, the "insanity,"<sup>16</sup> and the evil at its root.

<sup>12</sup>Stew, "Melt This Book," in *ibid.*, xvii.

<sup>13</sup>Stew, "The Sundance Diary: Phase 1," available at <http://www.stewsongs.com/diary.html> (accessed 15 November 2008).

<sup>14</sup>Stew, *Passing Strange*, 11.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>16</sup>My reading of Du Bois's refusal is inspired by Theodor W. Adorno's problematization of the "Jewish problem." While my intention is not to conflate the "Jewish problem" with the "Negro problem"—a problem for an entirely different essay—I find Adorno's methodology instructive. As he says: "Surely, it has contributed monstrously to the anti-Semitism of this time that someone invented the expression 'the Jewish problem,' which enabled even the greatest insanity . . . to appear nonetheless from the outset as something in a problematic form, meaning something upon which it is earnestly worth reflecting, instead of having called this insanity by its name." My transcription/translation is from a televised interview with Adorno that appeared in Meinhard Prill and Kurt Schneider's 2003 film "Adorno: Wer denkt, ist nicht wütend," on ARTE/Südwestrundfunk (SWR).

Does Du Bois's treatment of the "Negro problem" in *Souls* and other writings capture the irrationalities, the intricacies, and the violence of the racism—the strange experience of problem-hood—he hopes to document? Or does Du Bois, the social scientist, adopt the very positivistic approach that is part of the "problem" itself? To think through the possibilities, it is necessary to consider his travels across the Atlantic to the European continent, the only place, as he tells us, where he was not bound by the chains of problem-hood. Notably, Du Bois began to conceptualize the "*Sturm und Drang*"<sup>17</sup> of the "Negro problem" in Germany between 1892 and 1894.<sup>18</sup> In fact, it was during his tenure at the Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität in Berlin that he was first able to "feel that dichotomy which all my life has characterized my thought,"<sup>19</sup> but would not appear in writing until his return to America. It was thus by means of his time in Germany that Du Bois was first able to posit his complex dialectic of identity formation as a dialectic of race and place: "[H]ow far can love for my oppressed race accord with love for the oppressing country? And when these loyalties diverge, where shall my soul find refuge?"<sup>20</sup>

The dichotomy, or "double consciousness," that for Du Bois lies at the heart and "soul" of the "Negro problem" is articulated in his oft-quoted passage: "[T]wo souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder."<sup>21</sup> This "two-ness"—always American, always "Negro"—certainly has a dialectical quality of sorts. At times, Du Bois appears to conceive of a more idealist rendering of this dialectical doubleness. When he explains that the African American might "merge this double self into a better and truer self,"<sup>22</sup> he seems to envision an idealist construction in which contradictions are overcome or sublated, yielding a new moment and space in which it is possible "for a man to be both a Negro and an American."<sup>23</sup>

Elsewhere, however, Du Bois appears to conceive of a more negative dialectic: one that challenges the idealism of *Aufhebung*, of overcoming contradiction, and denies the possibility of any grand sublation between poles in constant tension.<sup>24</sup> In these moments, his "warring" souls thrive in their nonidentity, in their constant state of flux,

<sup>17</sup> Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 6.

<sup>18</sup> The first essay to directly address the impact of Du Bois's time in Germany on his intellectual development was Francis L. Broderick, "German Influences on the Scholarship of W.E.B. Du Bois," *Phylon Quarterly* 19, no. 4 (1958). The subject has received more sustained attention in recent years, including numerous essays in a special issue of *boundary 2* (vol. 27, no. 3 [2000]). For an even more recent synthesis, see Barrington S. Edwards, "W. E. B. Du Bois between Worlds: Berlin, Empirical Social Research, and the Race Question," *Du Bois Review* 3, no. 2 (2006).

<sup>19</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Autobiography of W. E. B. Du Bois: A Soliloquy on Viewing My Life from the Last Decade of Its First Century* (New York: International Publishers, 1968), 169.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 2.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Ronald A. T. Judy, editor of the special issue of *boundary 2* on Du Bois, seems to support this reading: "In fact, the Negro who sits at the edge of the essay is very much about the meditation of boundaries, and not in the sense of contemplating the pragmatics of border crossings between two well-defined camps or nations confronting one another. On the contrary, the celebrated 'doubleness' of the Negro is about being in a situation of ceaseless movement and ruses. Being a problem, being the Negro problem, that is, involves style." See Judy, "Introduction: On W. E. B. Du Bois and Hyperbolic Thinking," *boundary 2* 27, no. 3 (2000): 14.

pushing out to the extremes and privileging the immanence of non-reconciliation. In these moments, his dialectic of identity formation is one that eludes identity itself: "He would not Africanize America; . . . He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism."<sup>25</sup> In this negative conception, the "double self" is never merely a narrative of merger, of both, but is always simultaneously both *and* neither/nor.

Just as Du Bois's dialectical conceptions were forged in his passages between the United States and Germany, Stew narrates his own messy passages between these same poles. Stew is not interested in a new space or a space between. These new *spaces* would cater to the idealist temptation for rest, for merger, for sublation. Instead, *Passing Strange* renders a musical critique of any neat-and-clean idealist rendering of "double consciousness" and explores the negative—and hybridized—nature of black identity formation. The piece performs a musical politics and poetics of (dis)location privileging immanent tension and productive non-reconciliation. For Stew, it is the movement between poles that is productive. It is in and through his refusal to settle, to stop working, that identity is forged, that music is made, and that the—a—"Negro problem" is both surpassed and further problematized.

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The opening third of *Passing Strange* provides the dramaturgical fodder and necessary exposition for Stew's critique. Playing both the Narrator and the adult version of the protagonist, Stew sets the scene: 1976, South Central Los Angeles, a "big two-story, black middle-class dream. / With all the mod cons, the manicured lawns, / Some savings bonds, a Boy and his mom."<sup>26</sup> Note the absence of the warring souls and unreconciled strivings; there is no seething tension, no dissonant African American condition in this "colored paradise where the palm trees sway."<sup>27</sup> In Stew's estimation, Du Bois's dialectical poles—African and American—have come to a standstill in the suburbs, in the achievement, the sublation, of a bourgeois ideal. Blackness has been concentrated, commodified even, into sets of "Negro mores":<sup>28</sup> soul, football, funk, Alex Haley's *Roots*. Stew and his younger protagonist alter ego, known only as Youth, lament *this* "Negro problem," this fixed, domestic, black bourgeois imaginary, which has become for Stew the all-too-dangerous norm. As Youth's high school girlfriend Edwina instructs him (just before they break up): "After we marry and you've got a job in the corporate sector, you'll buy me a sprawling two story house fulla African sculptures from tribes we know nothing about, kente cloth couch covers, and Malcolm X commemorative plates lining the walls of our airy, peach-colored, breakfast nook!!!"<sup>29</sup>

As the prologue fades, the all-black cast enters slowly, remaining in shadow far upstage as Mother stands in the doorway upstage left. Youth sleeps downstage right, curled up on one of the sleek black-and-natural-wood chairs that make up the sparsely uniform set. Then comes the "Negro dialect": "Wake up, pillow-huggin' son o' mine. / Iss yo turn ta rise 'n' shine. . . / Leave dat dangerous dream be. / Jump outta dat bed 'n' come a churchin' wit me!"<sup>30</sup> Despite Youth's whiney protest, he does not have

<sup>25</sup> Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 3.

<sup>26</sup> Stew, *Passing Strange*, 2.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

much choice: "Mama says you gotta go."<sup>31</sup> Where? To the "Baptist Fashion Show"<sup>32</sup> (the first musical number after the prologue). With a light change and an imaginary influx of "silk ties, shiny purses, fancy hats and jewels,"<sup>33</sup> the scene shifts seamlessly to the "Christian catwalk"<sup>34</sup> of a church on Adams Boulevard.

This familiar setting recalls Henry Louis Gates's penetrating 1997 *New Yorker* article on the "Chitlin Circuit," in which he critiqued playwright August Wilson for failing to acknowledge a long-standing tradition of "popular, independent, and crowd-pleasing African American" theatre.<sup>35</sup> Further, Stew's lyrical description of "brownskin-ded ladies in their oversized crowns, . . . / And those high yellow girls in their skin-tight gowns"<sup>36</sup> aligns closely with Gates's ethnographic description of the middle-class audiences who flock by the thousands to see this genre of theatre: "These people are styling out, many of them having come from church: you see cloudlike tulle, hatbands of the finest grosgrain ribbon, wool suits and pants in neon shades, . . . Dobbs hats, Kente-cloth cummerbunds and scarves. . . . Broad Street is a poor substitute for a models' runway."<sup>37</sup> Since the appearance of Gates's essay, the prominence of what is often called inspirational theatre, black Broadway, gospel theatre, or urban theatre<sup>38</sup>—championed most recently by figures like Tyler Perry—has reached staggering heights.<sup>39</sup> Gates explains that these plays stick to a tried-and-true, "standard combination of elements; that is, it's basically a melodrama, with abundant comic relief and a handful of gospel songs interspersed."<sup>40</sup>

Linda Williams's work on the importance of melodrama in the history of racial representation and performance in the United States complements Gates's essay in characterizing the precedent Stew invokes. *Passing Strange* is structured within a recognizably melodramatic frame, beginning with requisite characters that "embody [the] primary psychic roles"<sup>41</sup> in melodrama as Williams understands it: Youth, the Pilgrim, the "Good Son" and his Mother, or Mammy, who is made the "villain" for asking Youth to conform to a particular form of blackness, for asking him to go with her to the Baptist fashion show. Mother is a primary source of Youth's anxiety throughout the play: "Why don't you want to be around your own people?"<sup>42</sup> "What is wrong with a comfortable home, a loving family and sunshine all year round?" "All of the above," he replies.<sup>43</sup> Youth is looking for understanding and a different kind of home.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Rashida Z. Shaw, "Insert [Chitlin Circuit] Here: Teaching an *Inclusive* African American Theatre Course," *Theatre Topics* 19, no. 1 (2009): 69.

<sup>36</sup> Stew, *Passing Strange*, 7.

<sup>37</sup> Henry Louis Gates Jr., "Dept. of Disputation: The Chitlin Circuit," *New Yorker*, 3 February 1997, 49.

<sup>38</sup> Campbell Robertson, "The World of Black Theatre Becomes Ever Bigger," *New York Times*, 21 February 2007.

<sup>39</sup> Tyler Perry's *Madea Goes to Jail* took in \$41.1 million in February 2009, giving Lionsgate its biggest-ever opening weekend; see Dade Hayes, "'Madea' Tops Weekend Box Office," *Variety*, 22 February 2009.

<sup>40</sup> Gates, "Dept. of Disputation," 50.

<sup>41</sup> Linda Williams, *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O. J. Simpson* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 40.

<sup>42</sup> Stew, *Passing Strange*, 77.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

Only much later, in the face of her death, does Youth recognize Mother's virtue, her wisdom, and her love. According to Williams, it is this "recognition of virtue," combined with a pathos of "too late," that "orchestrates the moral legibility that is key to the melodrama's function."<sup>44</sup>

Stew's negatively dialectical interpretation of double consciousness compels him to cite this particular setting with its loaded history—the middle-class neighborhood, the church, the gospel hymns, the melodramatic mode, the Negro dialect—and to transgress beyond its bounds. Annie Dorsen, the director of *Passing Strange*, explains that it was necessary to take advantage of the "heavy audience expectation around black theatre," to start with "some kind of a recognizable comforting image, . . . because you sort of go, 'oh really?'"<sup>45</sup> Then, Dorsen continues, "we alert the audience that we're playing with code shifting and we also alert the audience that this is not going to be Tyler Perry, and it's not going to be *Raisin in the Sun*."<sup>46</sup> Yet those codes are essential too. While Rashida Shaw recently explored ways in which "the Chitlin Circuit serves most useful in explorations of identity and culture in contemporary African American performance,"<sup>47</sup> Stew feels bound by this particular iteration of contemporary African American culture and its limited understanding of black authenticity; bound by this refusal to "deal with the real."<sup>48</sup> As Gates claims, "these Chitlin Circuit plays carry an invisible racial warning sticker: for domestic consumption only—export strictly prohibited."<sup>49</sup> It is the "domesticity" of this middle-class life that is stagnant for Stew and, in turn, extremely limiting: "There is an acceptable black face and then there's an unacceptable black face. And they want to have the acceptable black face."<sup>50</sup>

*Passing Strange* quickly plays its way out of the stagnation that Stew hopes to critique. The irony, or tragedy, for Stew, is that the way out—the move beyond the merely "domestic"—is already present in the music itself. The pews of the church are filled to the brim with congregants in a passive, bleary-eyed trance, "listening and waiting / To be released from their collective frown."<sup>51</sup> Then all of a sudden the church organ starts to rumble, the choir chimes in, and the Reverend Jones begins to deliver his sermon in song. The look on Youth's face changes to surprise, to excitement, and to confusion as the Narrator's guitar mimics the pentatonic blues scale that the Reverend has just sung. "Could you repeat that?"<sup>52</sup> he asks. The Reverend sings again, and the Narrator repeats the scale—sharp, cutting, revelatory.

All of a sudden, as if in a daydream, the aisles of the church turn into the aisles of the Fillmore West: the Narrator cruises up and down his fretboard delivering those recognizable blues riffs; the drummer solos as if at a Muddy Waters concert. As the stage directions indicate, the Reverend "does his Holy Ghost, rock star preacher thang"<sup>53</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Williams, *Playing the Race Card*, 29.

<sup>45</sup> Annie Dorsen, personal interview with author, 25 March 2009.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> Shaw, "Insert [Chitlin Circuit] Here," 73.

<sup>48</sup> Stew, *Passing Strange*, 31.

<sup>49</sup> Gates, "Dept. of Disputation," 52.

<sup>50</sup> Stew, personal interview with author, 12 March 2009. Stew's invocation of black face is not accidental here. He is very interested, as we shall see (specifically in the second act), in the mutability, flexibility, and inter-changeability of different "modes" of identity and masquerade.

<sup>51</sup> Stew, *Passing Strange*, 8.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

and the congregants dance around singing and clapping as if their gospel choir has morphed into a crew of James Brown and/or Rolling Stones back-up singers. Just as we begin to feel this “Church Blues Revelation” for ourselves, the “freight train” forges ahead toward an even more dramatic climax: the “church piano and organ fall away, revealing a percussion-based rhythm, which overtakes the congregation, including Youth and Mother, and finds them dancing in a style most African indeed.”<sup>54</sup> Panting, out of breath, and unable to contain his excitement, Youth pulls Mother aside and exclaims, almost screaming over the raucous excitement: “Mom, I can feel the spirit and it’s real! Check it out: Reverend Jones is singing the blues! And what we’re doing is call and response—we brought it over from the motherland! Mom, we’re all just a tribe of bluesy Africans and church ain’t nothing but rock and roll.”<sup>55</sup> Not thinking twice, Mother winds up, and as she slaps Youth’s cheek the music stops abruptly.

Stew claims a conscious forgetting, and denial, on the part of middle-class African Americans (at least in mid-1970s Los Angeles), which is why Mother is so taken aback by Youth’s assertion that church spirituals, African tribal music, and the blues are all connected in some way. There simply were certain kinds of singing and dancing, certain kinds of freedoms that were not allowed in church, and yet the origins of the music—or, at least, evidence of the music’s hybridity—are present in the chord progressions themselves. Stew recalls that

[t]he only thing worse than being African was being some shiftless blues guy. So to me, what makes this music powerful [is] this blues element, this African element, [“this spiritual thing”] mixed with this European chordal, diatonic sensibility. The whole package is what’s powerful. And the kid kind of sees the whole package.<sup>56</sup>

In that moment of wide-eyed surprise—that moment of “could you repeat that”—Youth sees a fundamental interconnection among supposedly disparate elements, and the slap that awakens him from his daydream represents an imperative or credo against which the rest of *Passing Strange* is actively working. Youth sees the complexity and radical potential of black American culture, as well as the danger of a strictly African American musical tradition, a strictly African American double consciousness, a strictly African-American-equals-black authenticity. As Stew explains: “You have to look at all this stuff and look at how great it is, but if you’re denying these things, there’s got to be a problem there. And the problem isn’t the things you’re denying. Those things aren’t a problem. You’re the problem.”<sup>57</sup> This is Stew’s “Negro problem.” *Passing Strange* works to drive a performative wedge between African and American, refusing to allow an emphatic coincidence of race and place to go unquestioned, and attempting instead to reanimate the dialectic of identity formation by moving incessantly between its poles.

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Youth struggles to escape the bonds of his oppressive—he dares to call it “slave”-like—middle-class lifestyle: he smokes pot with Mr. Franklin, his eccentric “Baptist rebel” choir teacher, forms a punk-rock band called the “Scaryotypes,” drops acid,

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Stew, personal interview.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

and dares to dream of a different life. There is nothing “authentic,” nothing “real” in Los Angeles for Youth; his existence is merely masquerade. As Mr. Franklin explains to him while they smoke their first spliff together in a blue VW Bug atop Arlington Hill: “[I]n the end we’re just two brothers . . . passing. Like your high yellow grandma back in the day, only we’re passing for black folks. Good, lawn trimmin’, tax payin’, morally upstanding, narrow-minded Christian black folk! Now ain’t that a bitch?” Youth responds, somewhat prophetically: “Black folks passing for black folks. That’s a trip!”<sup>58</sup> A trip is just what we get—and not just an acid trip. Youth embarks upon a trip beyond the tightly patrolled borders of the North American continent, beyond the chains of a rooted, stagnant African American authenticity.

Stew’s critique of the inert, domestic models of double consciousness and his attempts to rethink the “real” in and through music and movement are reminiscent of Paul Gilroy’s efforts in *The Black Atlantic* to “complicate the exceptionalist narrative of black suffering and self-emancipation in the United States.”<sup>59</sup> By taking the Atlantic itself as a “single, complex unit of analysis,”<sup>60</sup> Gilroy works to transcend the limits of a nationally particular racial discourse in search of a more inclusive, more complex, more (negatively) dialectical blackness.<sup>61</sup> Questioning the one-way flow of black authenticity from east to west, from Africa to America, Gilroy writes: “The history of the black Atlantic . . . continually crisscrossed by the movements of black people—not only as commodities but engaged in various struggles towards emancipation, autonomy, and citizenship—provides a means to reexamine the problems of nationality, location, identity, and historical memory.”<sup>62</sup> For Gilroy, identity is an ongoing process of travel and exchange, a process of debate, interaction, disagreement, and consensus. His notion of the black Atlantic is an attempt to provide a systematic account of varied connections among Africa, Europe, and the Americas as a transnational, diasporic multiplicity that can only be described as a “chaotic, living, disorganic formation.”<sup>63</sup>

In a sustained (re)reading of Du Bois’s trip to Germany, Gilroy grounds his own arguments against a more idealist and stagnant version of double consciousness. In turn, he extends double consciousness to serve as an emblem of or structural placeholder for the “expressions of and commentaries upon ambivalences generated by modernity and locations within it.”<sup>64</sup> For Gilroy, Du Bois’s highly nationalist (even pan-African) impulses coexisted productively with the very impulse to transcend beyond the bounds of nation—by means of a trip to Germany, for instance. In a 2008 interview, Gilroy explains:

<sup>58</sup> Stew, *Passing Strange*, 25.

<sup>59</sup> Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 121.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>61</sup> Stuart Hall’s influential “What Is This ‘Black’ in Black Popular Culture” posits a similar formulation: “[I]n black popular culture, strictly speaking, ethnographically speaking, there are no pure forms at all. Always these forms are the product of partial synchronization, of engagement across cultural boundaries, of the confluence of more than one cultural tradition, of the negotiations of dominant and subordinate positions, of the subterranean strategies of recoding and transcoding, of critical significations, of *signifying*.” See Hall, “What Is This ‘Black’ in Black Popular Culture,” in *Black Popular Culture*, ed. Gina Dent (Seattle: Bay Press, 1992), 28 (emphasis added).

<sup>62</sup> Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 16.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

Why can't we live with that tension? We're not dialecticians. *He* was a dialectician, of a kind. But we don't have to be, you know? So I would rather live with that tension. That's what my book *The Black Atlantic* was supposed to be about, actually. . . . [T]he figure of diaspora for me offers an opportunity to live within that field of tension, as many people do, you know, who try to dwell in more than one place.<sup>65</sup>

We might be dialecticians, but of a different sort: the sort that, in line with Gilroy (though he does not adopt the vocabulary of negativity), sees the productive capabilities of a "politics of (dis)placement"<sup>66</sup> and works to understand the ways in which Du Bois inspires a (negatively dialectical) "poetics of race and place."<sup>67</sup>

Adopting the methodology of negativity within the poetic(al) realm of performance entails both citing precedent *and* transgressing beyond its bounds. Hence, interpreted negatively, Du Bois's call-to-arms for a "real Negro theatre . . . about us, by us, for us, and near us"<sup>68</sup> also entails its own undoing. Such an embrace of the negative helps to explain the careful effort that Stew and his creative team continue to exert to position *Passing Strange* as anything but a typical Broadway musical, even though, as we have seen, they make use of certain familiar tropes.<sup>69</sup> An embrace of the negative also illuminates the inherent irony in Stew's insistence that the piece is simply "one big song"<sup>70</sup> and his subsequent Tony Award for Best *Book* of a Musical.<sup>71</sup> Oskar Eustis, the current artistic director of the Public Theater and one of the show's producers, explains that "Stew's whole story is about crossing cultural and aesthetic boundaries, mixing genres and identities in a way that is really complicated and contemporary."<sup>72</sup> This "complicated" aesthetic is one of refusal, and *Passing Strange* refuses to be situated easily within a single genre, but instead sets varied genres against one another.

It is fitting, then, that George C. Wolfe's iconoclastic *The Colored Museum* provides pointed inspiration for *Passing Strange* in its overt attempts to both embrace *and* overcome traditions of black theatre. Wolfe considers his 1986 excursion through eleven controversial "exhibits" documenting the "myths and madness of black/Negro/colored Americans"<sup>73</sup> as both "an exorcism and a party."<sup>74</sup> In his incisive article on the piece, Harry Elam Jr. understands Wolfe's aesthetic as "both fueled and frustrated by African-American dramatic traditions."<sup>75</sup> He reads *Colored Museum* (with a hint of frustration)

<sup>65</sup> Shelby, "Cosmopolitanism, Blackness, and Utopia," 119.

<sup>66</sup> Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 111.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>68</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, "Krigwa Players Little Negro Theatre," *The Crisis* 32 (1926): 135.

<sup>69</sup> Co-composer Heidi Rodewald commented that "[t]he reason we're here is that we weren't trying to get to Broadway," quoted in Robin Finn, "When Brush with Broadway Ends, She'll Play On," *New York Times*, 20 June 2008.

<sup>70</sup> Stew, interview with Madeleine Oldham (dramaturge at the Berkeley Repertory Theatre), available at [http://www.berkeleyrep.org/season/0607/pa\\_archive\\_program.asp](http://www.berkeleyrep.org/season/0607/pa_archive_program.asp) (accessed 26 October 2008).

<sup>71</sup> In my interview with Dorsen, she spoke at length about the genesis of the piece itself. She described great, and at times very tense, fluctuations between conceptions of the piece as purely "based in music and movement" and as a more traditional text-based "play."

<sup>72</sup> Deborah Sontag, "A Musical Star Plucked from the Underground," *New York Times*, 21 May 2007.

<sup>73</sup> George C. Wolfe, *The Colored Museum* (New York: Grove Press, 1985), n.p.

<sup>74</sup> Wolfe quoted in Jeremy Gerard, "'Colored Museum' Is Author's Exorcism," *New York Times*, 6 November 1986, C16.

<sup>75</sup> Harry J. Elam Jr., "Signifyin(g) on African-American Theatre: *The Colored Museum* by George Wolfe," *Theatre Journal* 44 (1992): 291.

as both a "contradiction and paradox [that] simultaneously celebrates, satirizes and subverts the African-American legacy."<sup>76</sup>

Elam makes use of Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s influential notion of "signifyin(g)" to help explain Wolfe's "double voiced" (if not negative) process of "critique and revision," of repetition *and* revision with difference,<sup>77</sup> and it is this notion of signifyin(g) that illuminates the relations between *Passing Strange* and *Colored Museum*. Not only was Wolfe artistic director of the Public Theater when it commissioned *Passing Strange*, but Stew "made a point" of going to see *Colored Museum* repeatedly at the Lincoln Center Library for the Performing Arts. As Stew recalls, "I just thought, wow. George always uses this phrase: 'Artists give other artists permission to do things.' You see something and you go, 'Oh that gives me permission.' He totally, that play totally was like, okay, you know, we can go there. I can do exactly what I want and more."<sup>78</sup> In other words, Wolfe grants Stew permission to "signify" on *Colored Museum* through his Gilroy-inflected insistence on moving beyond African and American as the sole races and places with which to engage,<sup>79</sup> and through what Stuart Hall describes as the "[s]elective appropriation, incorporation, and rearticulation of European ideologies, cultures, and institutions, alongside an African heritage."<sup>80</sup> In *Passing Strange*, Hall's words are filtered through the eccentric mind of Mr. Franklin:

[A]s for this philistine fish bowl we're swimmin' around in? Shoot! If you wanna deal with Le Real, I'm talking Stockholm, baby, "Persona," yenko? I'm talking 'bout Rome and one of them "La Dolce Vita" parties, yenko? I'm talking 'bout Godard's Paris, baby, I mean cuz we a "Band of Outsiders" too, yenko? I mean I'm talking 'bout brother Al Camus . . . "The Stranger." Brother said "Algeria? See ya! Wouldn't wanna be ya!" OK? I'm talkin' little Jimmy Baldwin, baby—you gotta go to Another Country if you wanna get to Giovanni's Room!<sup>81</sup>

Thus with the single snap of a snare drum we meet two singing stewardesses, not unlike Miss Pat, the "black, pert, and cute"<sup>82</sup> stewardess from the opening moments of *Colored Museum*. "Celebrity Slaveship" has morphed into an equally ironic airplane ride eastward. Shackles are substituted for psychedelics and the *bossa nova* beats of 1960s French Pop, and the Narrator croons: "Naked girls at breakfast tables / Talking Hegel and Camus / While men dressed up in Gauloise smoke / Quote Marx right back at you."<sup>83</sup> Hence begins Youth's journey, his strange passage, his *Bildungsroman*: Amsterdam, Berlin, and back again, singing and searching.

\* \* \*

"Welcome aboard Air Amsterdam Flight Zero. . . . Non-stop to the Real. An intellectual arcade. Did I say he needed to get laid?"<sup>84</sup> For Youth, Amsterdam is an orgiastic

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 292.

<sup>78</sup> Stew, personal interview.

<sup>79</sup> *Colored Museum* does deal briefly—in one "exhibit"—with the legacy of black expatriates in France.

<sup>80</sup> Hall, "What Is This 'Black,'" 28.

<sup>81</sup> Stew, *Passing Strange*, 22–23.

<sup>82</sup> Wolfe, *The Colored Museum*, 1.

<sup>83</sup> Stew, *Passing Strange*, 38.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 39.

pleasure paradise of “all day café hangs”<sup>85</sup> and hashish on every menu. In spite of two show-stopping musical numbers, however, paradise soon becomes a bore and Youth moves on—into a fifteen-minute intermission. When the lights at the Belasco Theatre dim for the second time, Youth wanders across the stage, greeted by harsh, over-amplified, industrial-sounding guitar chords intensified by rolling drums and loud cymbal crashes and Stew’s now-threatening voice distorted through a megaphone. Youth has arrived in Berlin: “Swallowed if harmful.”<sup>86</sup>

The second act of *Passing Strange* stages an explicit re-animation and re-articulation of Du Bois’s dialectic, juxtaposing the United States and Germany and traversing the spaces and races between. It is only in this traversal—these passages between—that Stew edges closer to a re-articulation of the Real, a home in constant motion. As the guitar reverb fades, Youth is startled by a German Border Guard:

BORDER GUARD: Ausweis!!!

YOUTH: Huh?

BORDER GUARD: Identity! Your identity!!!

YOUTH: My identity?

BORDER GUARD: Pass! (*YOUTH attempts to pass him. BORDER GUARD grabs him, really pissed.*)  
PASS!!!

YOUTH: I don’t understand—

BORDER GUARD: Give-Me-Your-PASS-PORT!<sup>87</sup>

Youth’s seemingly innocent moment of confusion at Checkpoint Charlie is indicative of the more complex relation between national and racial identity for which *Passing Strange* is arguing. In the most literal sense, “identity” is strictly associated with Youth’s national affiliation: he is an American with an American passport, and he must claim this identity to pass through the border. Youth’s identity is also his pass(age) itself, formed in and through his movement from one place to another. In a third sense, Youth’s identity is his “pass,” his ability to masquerade as something other than what the picture on his passport says he is: African American. Youth’s confusion—his “I don’t understand”—implies that no one notion of identity is sufficient here and that the moniker “African American” is too reductive, too stagnant.

Before Youth can properly respond to the Border Guard’s request, a May Day riot erupts, enabling Stew to subtly establish the US–German poles between which he is operating. On the one hand, he explains that “the musical references were . . . trying to be as Berlin as possible. The sirens: The synthesizer is doing siren. We were trying to be like a punk-rock band with a weird keyboard player.”<sup>88</sup> And, in turn, the audience is immediately transported to: “May Day, May Day, There’s a riot going down, in a deep deep, dark corner of West Berlin town!”<sup>89</sup> Yet, on the other hand, the lyrics of the song undoubtedly invoke one of the most iconic (African) American records—and number 99 on *Rolling Stone* magazine’s list of the 500 greatest albums—of all time:<sup>90</sup> Sly and the Family Stone’s platinum-selling *There’s a Riot Goin’ On* (1971). Stone’s move

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 57–58.

<sup>88</sup> Stew, personal interview.

<sup>89</sup> Stew, *Passing Strange*, 58.

<sup>90</sup> *Rolling Stone*, “The 500 Greatest Albums of All Time,” 11 December 2003, available at [http://www.rollingstone.com/news/story/6598189/99\\_theres\\_a\\_riot\\_goin\\_on](http://www.rollingstone.com/news/story/6598189/99_theres_a_riot_goin_on) (accessed 18 April 2009).

from his signature psychedelic soul into a more “spare and bleak, fiercely compelling . . . anguish over the unfulfilled promises of civil rights and hippie counterculture”<sup>91</sup> was marked by the album’s stark, jarring, iconic cover: a close-up of the American flag, which has traded blue for black and stars for suns. Thus forging a hybridized US–German imaginary of May Day *and* civil rights riots, of leather-clad German revolutionaries *and* Black Panthers, Stew suggests the significance of his trip to Germany and the influence it had on his music. Simultaneously, however, he demonstrates how his ever-present (black) American “roots” mediate both the way he understands himself and the way he is perceived. Annie Dorsen posits the problematic succinctly: “[W]e were talking a lot about how identity and place intersect. Right? And so, how the meaning of blackness, the meaning of self changes depending on where you are. How much are you responsible for that change? How much do you alter yourself for the place? How much does the place project onto you? Expectations.”<sup>92</sup>

Youth’s arrival in Berlin marks the start of a series of episodes of masquerade that call into question the processes of identity formation that the German Border Guard takes for granted. All of the European characters in *Passing Strange*, including the Border Guard, are Caucasian, yet each of these characters—the body liberationist, the neo-hippy, the militant music critic, the post-modern pornographer—is embodied by a black actor who also played a black character in the Los Angeles leg of Youth’s voyage. There is no whitewashing stage makeup, but these white European characters with black faces and bodies destabilize preconceived assumptions about fixed racial identities in *Passing Strange*. If black bodies represent black characters during the US leg of Youth’s journey, his European sojourns engender a new potential for “cognitive dissonance.”<sup>93</sup> “We’re so used to seeing white people have the power and the freedom to inhabit black personae at will,” says Dorsen. “[Y]ou rarely see black performers inhabiting white personae in that way.”<sup>94</sup>

Youth performs twice while in Berlin as an active investigation into his aesthetic development. The first number, fittingly titled “Identity,” embraces avant-garde, durational performance art as a means of exploring the flexibility and interchangeability of identity itself. As Stew explains: “[Youth’s] not trying to be white. He’s not trying to be German”;<sup>95</sup> he is, however, trying to break free from the “chains” of a particular brand of (African) American identity. On a dark stage adorned with glowing light-bulb sculptures and a 16-millimeter wind-it-yourself camera, Youth crawls around groaning, whining, screeching: “America is flowing, / Slowly exiting my veins.”<sup>96</sup> If it seems difficult to take Youth’s performance seriously, Stew insists that this artistic phase is not merely an act, a masquerade, a stereotype. The “big blues ending”<sup>97</sup> of “Identity” thus raises numerous questions. Has Youth failed to fully embrace the radically Marxist industrial-artnoise aesthetic of his peers at the Nowhaus art collective—one which most certainly works to eschew a history of commodified blues music? Or is the appearance of the blues riff a moment of clarity for Youth, in which he realizes that the blues will never quite leave him? Or does Youth realize that the blues actually

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Dorsen, personal interview.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Stew, personal interview.

<sup>96</sup> Stew, *Passing Strange*, 76.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 79.

have some fetish character (i.e., he might “get laid”) with this all-“white” audience of German radicals?

These complexities are made explicit in Youth’s next musical number. As Stew explains, Youth’s encounters with and eagerness to be accepted by his German community force him to reckon with his own positionality and proclivity for another kind of masquerade: blackface minstrelsy.<sup>98</sup> As a means of gaining entrance, Youth feels compelled to enact, though he does not don burnt cork, a stereotypically African American persona. In other words, Youth feels compelled to *pass* as African American by blacking-up in order to entertain his all-white (though really black) audiences. The result is a disorienting, comic, and somewhat disturbing minstrel-like, cabaret-esque musical number in which Youth touts the value of his “wunderbar hair,” since he is the “Black One!”<sup>99</sup> The Narrator explains sardonically:

He’s the real voice of America,  
And Berlin listened closely.  
Speaking as a Negro from there-ica.  
He was automatically . . .  
An expert on its evils.  
An authority on its crimes.  
And he could wax lyrical,  
His knowledge was almost empirical,  
Of oppression from the present back to slavery times.<sup>100</sup>

At a moment’s notice, Youth can invoke a certain “post-modern lawn jockey sculpture”<sup>101</sup> ideal, a certain ghettoized, black-oppression pundit status. He knows that he can never fully escape objectification, so he makes this fact work to his advantage. The number is an energetically staged, nuanced, and purposefully *problematic* history lesson in a physical vocabulary of popular black performance that incorporates basketball dribbling, the Moonwalk, Cabbage Patch, and Running Man, to name just a few.<sup>102</sup> Thus “The Black One” engages a long and complex history of blackface minstrelsy, and the engagement of black performers with that history.

The recent work of Louis Chude-Sokei and Daphne Brooks, among others, examines ways in which black actors have engaged in blackface performance as a means of critiquing and subverting minstrelsy and its racist representations of black culture. In his study of Bert Williams, Chude-Sokei explores how the black mask represents a complex space of subversive play whereby black actors were able to assimilate into a traditionally white mode of performance. Rather than rejecting outright the tragic and racist implications of minstrelsy, Williams transcended it by means of engaging it. Never appearing onstage without burnt cork, he did not hope to capture or mimic some notion of authentic black “soul,” but instead worked to reclaim a fictional white construction (or misappropriation) of blackness: the “stage Negro,” or “darker.” By performing the most authentic, the most stereotypical “coon,” Williams’s performances, Chude-Sokei argues, were direct contestations of an explicitly exploitative white tradition. Chude-Sokei’s other central intervention, also crucial for this reading of *Passing Strange*, is his claim that Williams injected an intra-racial, diasporic perspective into

<sup>98</sup> Stew, personal interview.

<sup>99</sup> Stew, *Passing Strange*, 80.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 80–81.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>102</sup> Dorsen, personal interview.

a dogmatically bi-chromatic (white and black) schema of race relations in the United States. As Chude-Sokei explains:

His minstrelsy was at least a double minstrelsy and featured a black West Indian immigrant transcending the racist characterizations of the white minstrel tradition by way of his remarkable invention and performance of an African American voice and persona. Bert Williams was black but his mask was African American.<sup>103</sup>

Williams's mimicry of the "real," "rooted" African American, as well as the white stereotype of the African American coon, anticipated Youth's performance as the Black One. In fact, the walls of the Belasco Theatre could not provide a more perfect space in which to cite Williams, as it was famed Broadway producer and director David Belasco himself who hoped to help Bert Williams abandon the burnt cork and give him the opportunity to "portray great tragic characters before a modern audience."<sup>104</sup> Thus it is fitting that the stage of the Belasco serves as a space for critically examining audience expectations around minstrelsy, masquerade, and passing itself.<sup>105</sup> For Stew, passing becomes, in one of its valences, an exploitative act, a mode of conscious manipulation; at the same time, passing remains a regression back to a past that Stew is working to problematize. This duality, this productive tension is more real than any singular interpretation: Youth cannot fully escape blackness as a filter through which he is seen; nor does he really want to. And that, Stew explains, "is the dance."<sup>106</sup>

It is by means of this ever-present schizophrenia, this "dance" between poles, that *Passing Strange* does its work. The aesthetic of the second act is not specifically (African) American, nor is it specifically German (or pan-European); rather, the piece takes these reference points as poles on a continuum that spans the black Atlantic. After arriving in Berlin, Youth is, like Du Bois, first able to comment on the stakes of his development: "My work is about reinvention. My work is about . . . transcendence. My work is about . . . the limits of blackness."<sup>107</sup> This reinvention happens by means of his explorations of and struggles toward hybridity: "So blackness is the main subject of your work," Youth is asked. "Uhhh . . . Yes and no. In other words . . . 'yo.'"<sup>108</sup> At another point, he jokes (or perhaps he is pseudo-serious) about the hybrid nature of his music. It is like "Dr. Caligari in a mud hut playing dominos with James Brown while watching Egon Schiele dance on the Soul Train kind of thing. Alles Klar?" Or like: "Hattie McDaniel chases Faust out of the ghetto for trekking mud into the kitchen of her psyche: it is a meditation on headscarves."<sup>109</sup> *Deutsch?* No. *American?* *Nein*. Neither/nor, yet always both.

<sup>103</sup> Louis Chude-Sokei, *The Last "Darky": Bert Williams, Black-on-Black Minstrelsy, and the African Diaspora* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 44.

<sup>104</sup> Mabel Rowland, ed., *Bert Williams, Son of Laughter: A Symposium of Tribute to the Man and to His Work, by His Friends and Associates, with a Preface by David Belasco* (New York: English Crafters, 1923), xii–xiii.

<sup>105</sup> "[T]he Black One' . . . works like gangbusters on Broadway in a way it never did at the Public, because that of course is one of those stages where that . . . minstrel style of performance was; that's what you saw black people doing on that stage. We're right there in the belly of the beast, where that kind of objectifying, Stepin' Fetchit-y kind of stuff was applauded, and in the Golden Age that was the shit" (Dorsen, personal interview).

<sup>106</sup> Stew, personal interview.

<sup>107</sup> Stew, *Passing Strange*, 75.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>109</sup> From the world premiere of *Passing Strange* at the Berkeley Repertory Theatre (2006). This text was ultimately cut from the Broadway production.

\* \* \*

“[H]ow far can love for my oppressed race accord with love for the oppressing country? And when these loyalties diverge, where shall my soul find refuge?”<sup>110</sup> Refuge is not the goal—for Stew at least. As the snow begins to fall one cold Christmas night in Berlin, Youth toils away at one of those “Why’d She Leave Me?”<sup>111</sup> songs. He strums, he hums. Then, in the flash of an eye, the years have flown by and Stew, the Narrator, assumes center stage alone to sing that show-stopping ballad Youth was not prepared to write so many years ago. Both the melody and lyrics are chilling: “Every day I build a mask / Up to the task, / Another song, you see.”<sup>112</sup> Stew sings of a life lived as an artist, on the road, mining his experience, his pain, and the pain of others for material: “This music always rescues me, / There’s a melody for every malady, / Prescription: Song, you see.”<sup>113</sup> He sings of a life that disappoints those who yearn for more than his art—those who yearn for his love—and of the day he received that dreaded telephone call about Mother’s death (it comes just after the conclusion to this song). Stew regrets that he “will never see [Mother] again,”<sup>114</sup> that he never received her endorsement for the life he has chosen. He regrets that he “lost track of her pain,”<sup>115</sup> but he does not regret his path. Instead, his recognition that he cannot bring Mother back only strengthens his resolve, his confidence, his faith in his art: “So I finally found a home, / Between the clicks of a metronome, / In a song, you see.”<sup>116</sup>

As he confesses *and* concludes, as he regrets *and* revels, Stew slowly extends his right arm, his clenched hand, and his index finger pointing stiffly upward, mimicking the discreet, precise movements of a metronome. With a crinkled brow, Stew glares at his own gesture in both disbelief and approval, pushing his glasses up onto his forehead as his hand abruptly stops ticking. The pendulum morphs into an open palm that extends toward the audience, both asking for understanding and informing us of his realization: “I feel a bit ashamed / Since I’m still here marooned,” he wails.<sup>117</sup> In spite of his confusion, pain, loneliness, and regret, he must continue writing, singing, traveling; he must continue to “dance to [his] own metronome, / Till chaos feels like home.”<sup>118</sup> As the scene smoothly transitions into Mother’s funeral, Youth asks: “[W]hy lose faith in the only thing that can [bring her back]? I will see her again. . . . Because life is a mistake that only art can correct. I will see her again. . . . Every night . . . Cue Music.”<sup>119</sup> What music? The music of *The Negro Problem*, the music that will become *Passing Strange*:

I just hop back on that train . . .  
 And keep working,  
 I keep working,  
 I keep working. . . .  
 [T]hat’s how the song goes  
 Ah, but the problem is it never stops.<sup>120</sup>

<sup>110</sup> Du Bois, *The Autobiography*, 169.

<sup>111</sup> Stew, *Passing Strange*, 93.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

As Stew explains: "It's kind of like—yeah—I think it's finally articulating that split between this is where I live, but I live in this kind of unreal place. Kind of unreal place. Kind of. Kind of. I mean, you know, you can't live in a song. You can't live on stage. And yet that's where you feel most at home."<sup>121</sup>

Thus in *Passing Strange*, "refuge" is the time, the space, and the journey of sound between the clicks of the metronome. It is the work, the music, the refusal that forces polar modalities into productive, perhaps warring, tension. "Refuge" thwarts the one-way flow of black authenticity from east to west, and reverses the flow. Stew is interested in a passage beyond the tenets of a static African American blackness; he is in search of a "truth darkness cannot explain."<sup>122</sup> Along the way, he both references and refashions some of the strategic formal tropes of black (musical) performance in order to challenge the limits of a black identity that is over-dependent on a more traditional, or at least more stagnant, reading of Du Bois. In spite of the pain that often accompanies it, Stew's ideal is one of ceaseless negative dialectical motion, one of crisscrossing, "routed,"<sup>123</sup> if not uprooted frenzy: "Up and down from town to town, / Tour van wheels go round and round."<sup>124</sup>

Gilroy might just as well have been describing Stew's journey when he calls the process of black identity formation a "changing same that strives continually towards a state of self-realisation that continually retreats beyond its grasp."<sup>125</sup> In his rereading of Du Bois, Gilroy finds a "transgressive rejection of both American and African American nationalisms."<sup>126</sup> In the void, he rediscovers Du Bois, a "weary traveler," setting out on a journey eastward across the black Atlantic, a journey to the European continent. Du Bois's apt conclusion to his *Souls of Black Folk* reads: "And the traveler girds himself, and sets his face [eastward] toward the morning, and goes his way."<sup>127</sup> Stew has made the passage eastward; he has made the passage back again; he has made the passage strange. And as the lights fade in the Belasco Theatre for the final time, Stew's soulful voice invokes Du Bois, only—as we should expect—in reverse:

Cuz the Real is a construct . . .  
It's the raw nerve's private zone . . .  
It's a personal sunset . . .  
You drive off into alone.<sup>128</sup>

<sup>121</sup> Stew, personal interview.

<sup>122</sup> Stew, "Identity," *Passing Strange (Live Original Broadway Cast Recording)*, Ghostlight Records (2008); this line is misprinted as "darkness truth cannot explain" in the published script (Stew, *Passing Strange*, 76).

<sup>123</sup> Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 28.

<sup>124</sup> Stew, *Passing Strange*, 98.

<sup>125</sup> Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 122.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

<sup>127</sup> Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 164.

<sup>128</sup> Stew, *Passing Strange*, 101.