

**Ambitious Acts:
Contemporary Black Feminist Performance Adaptation**

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

In the time presaging and following the We See You White American Theatre movement, initiated by the eponymous 2020 manifesto authored by a collective of BIPOC theatre makers demanding the integration of antiracist practices into the American theatre industry, terms like *conceptual casting* and *identity-conscious casting* have taken root in the theatre lexicon as symbols of inclusion. But the types of actors being brought to the stage are as broad as the potential narratives they're tasked to tell. Thus, while these casting terms are celebrated for broadening access, they risk reducing "representation" to the moment of hiring and thus obfuscating the transformative and meaningful representational work that specific identities can perform under specific theatrical circumstances.

In *Ambitious Acts: Contemporary Black Feminist Performance Adaptation*, I home in on one such circumstance that warrants cultural consideration. I show how contemporary Black women actors embodying canonically white characters can stage theatrical interventions as a qualitatively distinct form of "non-traditional" representation. These women's performances adapt the theatrical repertoire by confronting the unique historical burdens and possibilities attached to Black womanhood in American culture. I argue that these women reimagine the canon through the lens of Black feminist self-theorization, their performances functioning as both critical and autoethnographic acts that stage the encounter between personal and cultural history. Drawing on Black feminist theory, Performance Studies, adaptation studies, performance historiography, critical ethnography, and autoethnography, I introduce the concept of contemporary Black feminist performance adaptation to show how Black women performers use embodiment to critique and rewrite the racial and gendered logics of the canon from within. One of the organizing questions is what this practice makes possible for Black women's ambition to name a dramaturgical stance, a claim on canonical space, and a form of Black feminist world-making. The performers herein embody new, Black feminist possibilities for ambition, power, and representation in a time when the question of Black women's value and rights are at the forefront of the cultural zeitgeist.

I do not argue that Black women's presence automatically transforms canonical roles. Black feminist performance adaptation is a specific epistemological and dramaturgical practice for which colorblind models of casting cannot account. The case studies herein attend to and make claims about intersectionality and its interpretive significance for the performers and the productions.

The book's scope is equally specific about what it does not examine: practices that travel under the names of "inclusive casting" or "identity-conscious casting" but operate differently in kind: all-Black productions of canonical works, such as Kenny Leon's *Much Ado About Nothing* (Public Theater, 2019) or *The Wiz*, in which collective racial reframing is the production's explicit project; and works in which racial identity is a premise of the text itself rather than something a performer brings to a role the canon wrote without her in mind, such as *Hamilton*. Also excluded are instances of colorblind replacement casting, such as Norm Lewis's historic tenure as the Phantom in *Phantom of the Opera* (2014), in which a Black performer inhabited a canonical role with no production-level interpretive reframing. This book specifically theorizes the individual Black woman performer's epistemological and dramaturgical labor within/upon a production and the distinct cultural and historical knowledge that labor reflects and produces.

Central to the project is the concept of *autoethnographic Black feminist acting*: a performance practice in which the actress's own lived experience, cultural epistemology, and intersectional subjectivity function as the primary interpretive lens through which she inhabits, critiques, and transforms a role. It is an intellectual and political praxis in which embodiment generates new forms of cultural and historical knowledge. This method runs through all four chapters and is put to its most direct test in the book's final chapter, in which I perform and theorize my own one-woman adaptation of Kierkegaard as an act of Black feminist autoethnographic performance and aesthetic becoming.

The book's case studies span the American theatre's most institutionally significant venues and repertoires, from Broadway to the American Repertory Theatre and the West End. It includes productions that have shaped public discourse well beyond academic circles and warrant sustained theoretical attention. These are not "all Black" productions of historically "white" works. Most are, in fact, predominantly white productions, produced and directed partially or fully by white men. It attends to how Black women performers are (or are not) able to bring their full epistemological and cultural authority to bear on traditionally white lead roles. The performances of Whitney White in *Macbeth in Stride* (2021), Ruth Negga as Lady Macbeth in Sam Gold's *Macbeth* on Broadway (2022), Rebecca Naomi Jones, Sasha Hutchings, and Gabrielle Hamilton in Daniel Fish's *Oklahoma!* (2019), Audra McDonald in George C. Wolfe's *Gypsy* (2025), J. Harrison Ghee in *Some Like It Hot* (2023), and Cynthia Erivo in both *Jesus Christ Superstar* (2025) and Kip Williams's one-woman *Dracula* (2026), all of which possess profound scholarly significance and deserve sustained theoretical attention.

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Chapter Summaries**Introduction:**

The introduction establishes the book's central argument, situating Black feminist performance adaptation within the years surrounding the We See You White American Theatre Movement (WSYWAT). It first establishes the historical precedent for this kind of work, when Diana Sands made history as the first Black actress to be cast in a major Broadway play without regard to race in Bill Manhoff's *The Owl and the Pussycat* in 1964, and then proceeded to become the first Black actress to play a traditionally "white" role in Bernard Shaw's *Saint Joan* in 1968 at the Vivian Beaumont Theater. I then draw a line of historical connection by locating a similar contemporary iteration in Condola Rashad as Joan on Broadway in an all-white cast of *Saint Joan* in 2018. This situates the book's 2013-2026 period as it argues that this specific historical conjuncture, bounded by the founding of #MeToo and Black Lives Matter and the ongoing aftermath of the WSYWAT movement, produced a concentration of Black women in canonical roles that is historically legible as a meaningful phenomenon and warrants an emergent analytical framework. I interrogate the sociopolitical climate of the American theatre industry as it relates to Black women's representation, acknowledging the paradox that every single case study in the book, though they exemplify important Black feminist performance work, was directed by a man.

Next I articulate the book's organizing question: How do contemporary Black women and femme performers, embodying white roles of the American theatre canon, impact said canon; and what new possibilities for ambition and power they enact in the process? I offer the concept of Black feminist *embodied adaptation*, extending Christina Wilkins's filmic ideas about the film actor as a site of adaptation to a live and intersectional context to describe the performer's transformation of a canonical role through the instruments of her own Black feminist epistemology, cultural memory, and interpretive authority. I connect this to the notion of *autoethnographic Black feminist acting*, which facilitates these kinds of performance interventions. This is followed by rubrics for understanding how these performances mobilize and respond to racialized and gendered affective phenomena like "ambition" and "desire" that animate the performances and dictate their sociocultural meaning.

I lay out the book's methodology, which combines close performance analysis, original interviews with performers, directors, and dramaturgs, and critical engagement with the public discourse surrounding these productions. I also introduce how in the final chapter, the method extends to my performance practice, making my own scholar-performer work a case study. The introduction closes with a roadmap of the four chapters.

Chapter 1: Clinching Ambition: Refusal and Exception

We attend first to Lady Macbeth, the canon's most famous figure of female ambition, as a site for theorizing what ambition means for and to Black women navigating predominantly white theatrical institutions. It examines Whitney White's *Macbeth in Stride* (A.R.T., 2021), for which White is the creator, composer, and star, and Ruth Negga's landmark Broadway *Lady Macbeth* (Longacre Theatre, 2022), in which she became the first Black woman to play the role on Broadway. The chapter theorizes two divergent models of Black women's ambition in canonical adaptation. Whites' performance enacts a collective, world-making Black feminist ambition, refusing the canon's demand that ambitious women be punished in order for the story to make sense. Negga's

performance stages what the chapter theorizes as *haunted ambition*, a mode of individual achievement shadowed by the institutional exclusions that make it both remarkable and structurally insufficient, closer to neoliberal exceptionalism than Black feminist world-making. Together, the two performances illuminate the divergent possibilities and structural limits of Black women's ambition when the white canon is its object. It includes material from interviews with Gold's *Macbeth*'s dramaturg, Professor Ayanna Thompson.

Chapter 2: (Re)Locating Black Women in the “American” Musical

This chapter argues Black women performers, inhabiting the lead roles of *Oklahoma!* and *Gypsy*, can transform those productions into acts of repertorial counter-history, using voice, body, sonic choice, and presence to re-inscribe Black women erased from historical narratives into the American musical codified. The American musical has long functioned as a vehicle for national mythology, constructing its vision of American identity through the systematic erasure of Black women from nation-defining realms like the frontier and vaudeville. Through close analysis of Rebecca Naomi Jones and Sasha Hutchings in Daniel Fish's *Oklahoma!* and Audra McDonald in George C. Wolfe's *Gypsy*, the chapter theorizes three interrelated mechanisms of performed historical re-inscription: *sonic historiography*, in which the timbral, stylistic, and affective qualities of a performer's vocal choices introduce Black expressive genealogies into the musical's sonic architecture; *embodied critical fabulation*, in which a performer's physical and interpretive presence introduces into the dramatic world historical subjects suppressed by the source texts—subjects like Black homesteaders and Black stage mothers; and *repertorial rupture*, in which a performer's choices expose and destabilize the racial and gendered conventions that have made these musicals' white femininity appear natural or universal.

The chapter gives sustained attention to the critical and public discourse surrounding both productions. Critic John McWhorter's *New York Times* piece arguing that McDonald should play Rose as though she were “white,” and his retraction, are read as a legible symptom of the colorblind framework this book argues against. The actors' own public statements about their roles model the autoethnographic practice the book theorizes, their own histories becoming the interpretive mediums through which they inhabit the characters. Their ambitions to play these roles as closely as possible to their respective understandings of their “authentic” selves constitute a form of historical recovery. Gabrielle Hamilton's performance of the updated *Oklahoma!* “Dream Ballet” is introduced as an instance of repertorial rupture that carries us into and is fully developed in Chapter Three.

This chapter includes interviews with director Daniel Fish, actor Sasha Hutchings, actor Will Brill and if all goes well, director George C. Wolfe and Whitney White.

Chapter 3: Ambitious Ambivalence: Black Queer Performance and the Canon's Horizon

Chapter three examines an historically significant concentration of Black queer and gender-nonconforming performers adapting the Western canon at commercially mainstream venues, a phenomenon this chapter theorizes through the concept of *ambitious ambivalence*: a stance of desire and critique that appropriates and extends the pleasures of the canon while negotiating its historical hostility. Drawing on Muñoz, Nyong'o, Nash, Ahmed, and Sedgwick, the chapter reads dancer Gabrielle Hamilton's controversial solo in Jonathan Heginbotham's reimaged dream ballet in *Oklahoma!* (Broadway 2019), Cynthia Erivo's inhabiting divinity and monstrosity across her Jesus in *Jesus Christ Superstar* (Hollywood Bowl, 2025) and all twenty-three characters of *Dracula* in Kip William's one-woman *Dracula* (West End, 2026), and J. Harrison Ghee's Tony Award-winning

performance in *Some Like It Hot* (Broadway 2023), as instances of a Black queer dramaturgical method that performs the self into futurity.

The chapter reads these case studies along a spectrum of ambitious ambivalence, from Hamilton's queer interiority staged and immediately foreclosed by the plot, through Erivo's inhabitation of the tradition's most symbolically charged roles at maximum commercial visibility, to Ghee's queerness absorbed into the romantic comedy conventions the mainstream stage condones. The chapter does not resolve the question of whether this concentration of Black queer performance at commercially significant venues signals genuine cultural transformation or a more ambivalent tolerance — a queerness better exoticized on stage than recognized off it. It argues, rather, that Muñoz's utopian performative exists in the present tense of each performance regardless of what the institution does with it afterward, and that the gap between what these performers stage and what the culture is prepared to sanction is itself the historically significant thing to theorize.

Chapter 4: Embodying Philosophy

The final chapter puts the book's central argument to a personal test. I center on *Oldish: Crisis in the Life of an Actress*, a one-woman show I created and analyze here as an act of Black feminist autoethnographic adaptation. It adapts the content and architecture of philosopher Søren Kierkegaard's 1848 essay, "The Crisis and a Crisis in the Life of an Actress," which traces the aesthetic maturation of a Danish actress through a Hegelian framework of artistic repetition and self-realization. Kierkegaard's essay presupposes a white European actress and a tradition that was built for her; it presupposes a girlhood of innocence and unreflectiveness, a career of increasing self-consciousness, and a trajectory of maturation that the tradition will recognize and reward. *Oldish* stages what happens when that philosophical architecture is filtered through the embodied knowledge of a contemporary Black biracial performer navigating predominantly white academic and theatrical institutions. The chapter models how Black women's embodied performance can be a form of knowledge production and theorizes ambition as a commitment to intellectual and artistic coherence, particularly in the face of institutional misogyny and misogynoir during the time of #MeToo and #Oscarsowhite.

The chapter theorizes ambition in its most personal and most Black feminist register, as the ambition to be the theorist of one's own practice and experience— to put one's own body into the scholarly argument and to insist that what that body knows can constitute a valuable form of knowledge, critique, and emergence.

Conclusion: What the Body Knows and Shows

The Conclusion returns to the book's foundational claims in light of the current cultural and political moment. As DEI commitments erode across American institutions and the industry continues to negotiate the gap between its stated values and its structural practices, the question of what Black women performers are actually doing in canonical space, not merely that they are there, becomes more urgent. This kind of invaluable work is, at least for now, happening on some of the most visible stages in the English-speaking world, in front of audiences who may not have had the language to name what they were witnessing. This book gives them that language.

AUDIENCE AND MARKET

Ambitious Acts is written for multiple overlapping audiences and is well-positioned to reach them.

The book’s primary scholarly audience is researchers and graduate students in Theatre and Performance Studies, African American Studies, Feminist and Gender studies, and Queer Studies, as well as scholars in adjacent fields including musicology and American Studies. It is suited for adoption in advanced undergraduate and graduate courses in Black performance, feminist theory and performance, American musical theatre, and contemporary theatre history. Given the broad cultural visibility of its case studies—Audra McDonald, Cynthia Erivo, and Ruth Negga command substantial public recognition beyond academic circles—the book has genuine crossover potential for educated general readers with interests in theatre, race, and gender in American culture.

The book’s most proximate comparators within the Theory/Text/Performance series are Angela Pao’s *No Safe Spaces* (2010) and Brandi Catanese’s *The Problem of the Color[blind]* (2011), both of which have had a significant and lasting impact on the field. *Ambitious Acts* extends and updates both into a contemporary moment shaped by social and arts activist movements like #MeToo, #Oscarsowwhite, #WeSeeYouWhiteAmericanTheatre, Black Lives Matter, and the 2020 global Civil Rights movement. Scholars and instructors who have used Pao and Catanese will find this book an essential companion and update.

The book includes original interview material with key practitioners involved in the productions under analysis, including actress Sasha Hutchings and actor Will Brill (both from Daniel Fish’s *Oklahoma!*), director Daniel Fish, and Ayanna Thompson, Regents Professor of English at Arizona State University and dramaturg and text consultant for Sam Gold’s Broadway *Macbeth*. I am also in the process of securing interviews with director George C. Wolfe, actress Rebecca Naomi Jones, and Whitney White. This primary interview material substantially distinguishes the book from other Performance Studies monographs and broadens its appeal to practitioners, students, and educated general readers who are interested not only in the scholarly analysis but in the voices of the people who made these productions.

While my previously published work and presentations at conferences has focused on Black comedic actresses, including my *Theatre Topics* article “Embodying Extraness: Leslie Jones’s Black Feminist Comedic Strategy” and my PSl conference paper, “The Maya Rudolphification of Kamala Harris: A Performative Cruzo,” my public intellectual work has meaningfully and successfully theorized contemporary Black feminist performance and embodiment in contemporary American sociopolitical contexts.

APPARATUS/ILLUSTRATIVE MATERIALS

Ambitious Acts, will be approximately 75,000-80,000 words in length, including notes and bibliography. The manuscript will include 14 production photographs, permissions for which will be secured. I have contacted the appropriate licensors, all of whom are willing to grant permissions for reasonable fees that I can obtain through my home institution of Pomona College.

STATUS OF THE WORK AND TIMETABLE FOR COMPLETION

The manuscript draws substantially on research conducted for my doctoral dissertation, which has been reconceived, restructured, and significantly rewritten for the book. One chapter is fully drafted in its book form. The remaining chapters are in active development with substantial research and writing completed across all four. My writing coach and I have discussed the feasibility and attainable goal of having a full draft completed by December 2026. I will have a full-year sabbatical beginning in fall 2027 or spring 2028 dedicated to manuscript revision and completion.

SCHOLARLY CONTEXT AND DISCIPLINARY INTERVENTION

Ambitious Acts sits at the intersection of Black feminist performance theory and history, the politics of race and casting in American theatre, and critical autoethnography as performance methodology. A secondary but important conceptual contribution is the book's use of adaptation as an analytic for naming what the performers do. Its central contribution is the concept of Black women and femme's embodied adaptation, the performer's transformation of a canonical role through the instruments of her own epistemology, cultural memory, and interpretive authority. Existing scholarship has theorized Black women's embodied performance as a form of knowledge production and historical recuperation and invention across experimental art, choreography, and recorded sound. *Ambitious Acts* extends these existing frameworks to the "mainstream" theatrical woman and femme performer inhabiting canonically white roles at highly visible venues between 2013-2026, arguing that the somatic and interpretive choices such a performer makes constitute a distinct and epistemologically generative form of cultural production, and narrative and historical intervention.

Race, Casting, and Black Performance in American Theatre

My most immediate disciplinary interlocutors are Angela Pao's *No Safe Spaces*, Brandi Wilkins Catanese's *The Problem of the Color[blind]*, and Faedra Chatard Carpenter's *Coloring Whiteness* (University of Michigan, 2014). All three are in the Theory/Text/Performance series, and collectively, they make up much of the foundational scholarly conversation about race, casting, and Black performance in American theatre and performance. *Ambitious Acts* extends all three by shifting the analytical frame from institutional casting decisions and audience reception to the performer's own dramaturgical and epistemological labor, centering Black women and femmes specifically in the ways these broader studies do not.

Ambitious Acts, drawing on important work on gender and race in musical theatre, engages the essential scholarship of musical theatre scholars Stacy Wolf and Warren Hoffman. Masi Asare's *Blues Mamas and Broadway Belters*, which theorizes the historical impact of blues singers on Broadway vocal practice by centering sonic embodiment as Black feminist world-making, is an important contemporary parallel. My book is in dialogue with Asare's framework, but is contemporary rather than historical, and theorizes the full range of embodied interpretive choices rather than vocal practice specifically, and across genres and institutional contexts beyond Broadway.

Black Performance History and Theory

The historical scholarship grounding the project includes Jayna Brown's *Babylon Girls* (Duke, 2008), which establishes the deep historical precedent for Black women performers transforming the American stage from within; Stephanie Leigh Batiste's *Darkening Mirrors* (Duke, 2011), which examines how Black performers navigated dominant performance forms while asserting their own aesthetic authority; and the foundational Performance Studies scholarship of Harvey Young (*Embodying Black Experience*, University of Michigan Press, 2010, and "Touching History: Suzan-Lori Parks, Robbie McCauley and the Black Body," *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 23(2). 2003). Soyica Diggs Colbert (*Black Movements: Performance and Cultural Politics*; Rutgers University Press, 2017; *The African American Theatrical Body*, Cambridge University Press, 2011) and Daphne Brooks (*Bodies in Dissent*, Duke, 2006, and *Liner Notes for the Revolution*, Harvard University Press, 2021), whose frameworks for Black embodiment, Black cultural movement, and Black women as sonic and cultural archivists inform the book throughout. *Ambitious Acts* builds on Ilka Saal's framework of *historiopoiesis* (*Collusions of Fact and Fiction: Performing Slavery in the Works of Suzan-Lori Parks and Kara Walker*, University of Iowa Press, 2021), which theorizes artistic works across media "that [make] history through poetic/formal means" and focuses on artists' methods that "stress the performative

dimension of [historical] discourse” in the late 1990’s and early 2000’s. Julius B. Fleming Jr.’s *Black Patience* (NYU Press, 2022)—which argues that Black theatrical performance constitutes a radical temporal refusal—resonates with the book’s account of Black queer futurity and the claims Black women performers make on canonical space.

Autoethnographic Performance and Self-theorization

One of the book’s most distinctive scholarly contributions is methodological. Critical autoethnography’s foundational scholars—Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bochner, Norman Denzin, and D. Soyini Madison—established the legitimacy of the researcher’s own body and experience as a site of knowledge production. Robin Boylorn’s explicitly Black feminist autoethnographic practice, centering Black women’s embodied experience as both subject and method, is the closest existing model to what the book does in its final chapter. Uri McMillan’s *Embodied Avatars* (NYU Press, 2015) extends this tradition into performance studies by reading Black performance artists’ self-fashioning as critical theorization. *Ambitious Acts* advances these frameworks by teasing how “traditional” Eurocentric acting training and methods bleed into and overlap with this type of critical performance work, suggesting that this autoethnographic method is not just available to experimental or avant-garde practitioners. The book argues that such a practice has already been operative in the work of Black women performers navigating canonical institutions. The book’s final chapter, in which I primarily perform and theorize my own one-woman adaptation of Kierkegaard, argues that the performance itself is the method, and that the knowledge it produces cannot be fully extracted into propositional form. This is the book’s most radical claim, and the one most likely to generate productive debate across Theatre and Performance Studies, Black feminist studies, and the methodological conversations of the contemporary humanities.

FIT WITH THEORY/TEXT/ PERFORMANCE SERIES

Ambitious Acts is a natural fit for the Theory/Text/Performance series. As previously mentioned, three of my most immediate scholarly interlocutors, Pao, Catanese, and Carpenter, are published in the series. My book extends and updates their conversation into the contemporary moment, and into methodological frameworks—Black feminist autoethnographic acting, embodied adaptation, queer futurity—that none of the existing series titles address. Harvey Young’s *Embodying Black Experience*, also in the series, establishes the phenomenological and theoretical terrain on which my project builds; with Young as series co-editor, the series is particularly well-positioned to champion a book that extends his foundational framework into the domain of contemporary canonical theatrical adaptation and Black feminist performance.

The series’ commitment to work that bridges performance theory and practice, brings new methodological frameworks to bear on theatrical texts and events, and intervenes in debates beyond the immediate disciplinary context makes it the right home for this project. *Ambitious Acts* contributes to ongoing conversations in African American Studies, feminist and gender studies, queer studies, and musicology, while remaining rooted in the analytical objects such as the live performance event, the canonical text, and the embodied practitioner that define the series’ intellectual identity.

