CLINCHING AMBITION: REFUSAL AND EXCEPTION IN BLACK WOMEN'S CANONICAL ADAPTATION

Shakespeare's murderous Scottish Queen reigns supreme as the Western canon's cipher of womanly ambition; the history of Black women in America interpreting this role is centuries old, each iteration as circumscribed by its current moment as the next. In 2021/2022, theatre darling Whitney White and movie star Ruth Negga took on Lady Macbeth in landmark productions, White as the creator, writer, and star of her adaptation of *Macbeth*, *Macbeth In Stride,* [1] the first of a five-part Shakespeare series commissioned by American Repertory Theatre, and Ruth Negga as the first Black woman to ever play Lady Macbeth on Broadway. White wielded significantly more creative control over her character and the entire production than Negga, who, conversely, starred in a much more traditional, though significantly altered, adaptation under the direction of Sam Gold at the Longacre Theatre. The parallels between these very different productions and these women's embodiments of Lady Macbeth stage a kind of existential wrestling match, each woman tackling the immediate and metatheatrical implications of being power hungry Black women performers in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic in a world and industry still dominated by white men.

In this chapter, I argue that, together, White and Negga's performances reveal the divergent possibilities of Black women's ambition when said ambition takes the white canon as its object, tracing that ambition's transformative potential and its psychic price. I contend that said ambition assumes a Black feminist force and consequence when the performer's own

[1] For a robust account of *Macbeth in Stride's* performance history and its pedagogical implications for Black communities approaching the Shakespearean canon, see Bailey Sincox, "Taking Shakespeare in Stride: Lady Macbeth at the American Repertory Theatre," *Shakespeare*, vol. 20, no. 2, 2024, pp. 281–300. I extend Sincox's reading by situating the production within the framework of Black feminist ambition and the autoethnographic method, and by placing it in dialogue with Sam Gold's contemporaneous Broadway *Macbeth* to map the divergent possibilities of Black women's ambition in the context of adapting the white theatrical canon.

situated epistemological authority denaturalizes the canon's racial and gendered assumptions, instead of reifying them. Both performers draw on their lived experiences of Black woman stardom to inhabit Lady Macbeth through an autoethnographic analytic, each reflexively and self-consciously bringing her own epistemologies to bear on a canonical role, making her subjectivity the interpretive lens that resists total subordination to the text and/or the weighted expectations of a centuries' long performance history. At once an aesthetic and intellectual commitment, this autoethnographic method makes the performer's presence within the work legible as embodied theory, transforming the canonical text into a site of Black feminist self-theorization. It is a praxis that facilitates an interrogation of the cultural ecosystem to which these women's ambitions continually respond and act upon. White deploys this method by mobilizing the figural logic of the "diva," harnessing a figure with an historical relationship to fabulous resilience, communal uplift, and the labor of surviving white patriarchal institutions; seeing herself both in and through the diva, White recognizes the ideal vehicle for staging Black feminist ambition's possibilities and limitations. Negga's iteration of a Lady Macbeth is not a diva in this sense. Rather, her performance enfleshes what I theorize as *haunted ambition*, achievement shadowed by the social exclusions and hierarchies said ambition interpolates and reperforms. Aligning her ambition with white patriarchal power rather than questioning it, her Lady Macbeth purchases institutional access at the cost of collective transformation. She trades the solidarities that Black feminist praxis might have generated for a proximity to a version of white power that ultimately destroys her.

At stake is the difference between the representation of Black women in positions of power and the transformation of the structures that stand to benefit from and facilitate their influence and leadership. This struggle certainly did not begin in 2020, or with the murder of

Trayvon Martin. Anti-Black violence and representational failure are as American as apple pie and as old as the country itself. But Elizabeth Alexander helps us understand how the Trayvon Martin generation's inheritance of such realities is distinct, insofar as their political consciousness was forged in the specific conditions of the digital age, shaped by camera phones and social media that make anti-Black violence immediately, constantly, and inescapably present with a force and frequency unmatched in previous generations. This milieu truncated what little racial innocence they may have held. As Alexander reminds us, "They always knew these stories. These stories framed their world view."[2] Their grief festered for over a decade, accumulating in their bodies and organizing a generation that took to the streets, built a movement, and watched institutions respond with the language of transformation while quietly maintaining the terms of their own power. White's *Macbeth In Stride* goes beyond calling out this wound of sustained inequity already known to her audience by staging a means to process it and rehearsing how to survive it. Negga, arriving on Broadway as a diasporic artist who began working in the United States the same fateful year George Zimmerman shot Trayvon Martin in 2013, who proudly assumed the Black American struggle, brings a different relationship to her performance of Lady Macbeth. While these shows were in development, 80% of America's most powerful people were white.[3] In 2019, *Backstage Magazine* listed the 25 most powerful people on Broadway. Only 5 were women. All of them were white.[4] These two women perform in conversation with this hereditament against the backdrop of the nation's most hallowed theatrical institutions in a moment of profound transition as companies and producers sought to implement demands and plans for equity that had taken shape in the digital landscapes of Zoom, social media, and email

[2] Elizabeth Alexander, "The Trayvon Martin Generation," *The New Yorker*, June 15, 2020.
[3]Denise Lu, et al, "Faces of Power: 80% Are White, Even as U.S. Becomes More Diverse" in *The New York Times.* 13 Sept. 2020
[4] Backstage Staff, "The 25 Most Powerful People on Broadway." *Backstage.com.* 23 Jan. 2019.

during COVID lockdown. The conditions of their performances as some of the first to bring live theatre back pressurized their political significance, positioning them as de facto litmus tests for whether or not the online discourse and DEI reform inside the theatre had worked. At the time of their respective productions' development, the stakes felt particularly high, as many other American institutions were installing, and promptly undermining, historic Black women "firsts": Kamala Harris as the first Black, South Asian, and/or woman Vice President elected in the United States; Ketanji Brown Jackson appointed as first Black woman Supreme Court Justice; Ariana DeBose as the first openly queer Afro-Latina to win an Oscar for acting; to name a few. Their historic change rests in their winning of these positions. Their enduring historic challenge remains in delivering the kind of systemic change they hoped their presence might foster. White and Negga presciently stage this.

To mobilize ambition as an analytic in this discussion of White and Negga's Lady Macbeths requires reckoning with what ambition demands of Black women in America. The very notion of "ambition" is racialized and gendered. In the United States, as Patricia Hill Collins has argued, ambition's rewards—power, wealth, distinction—have been historically constructed as the rightful property of white men. In Black women's pursuit of those rewards are often framed as acts of transgression, rather than a natural expression of human desire.[5] Brittney Cooper names the specific double bind this produces, highlighting how Black women must navigate their framing as "angry" or "uppity" when asserting leadership, all while walking a tightrope between being perceived as too ambitious or not ambitious enough.[6] Their triumphs are consistently met with what Koritha Mitchell theorizes as "know-your-place aggression," the

[5] Collins, Patricia Hill, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. Routledge. 2000.
[6] Cooper, Brittney. *Eloquent Rage: Black Feminist Discovers Her Superpower*. St. Martin's Press. 2018.

systematic disciplining of Black women who claim recognition and authority in public life.[7] The rubric of ambition for many Black women in America—work twice as hard as everyone else, believe in yourself when no one else will, pave your own way, lift other women up—can play out like an absurdist script rife with vexing contradictions that undermine their intellectual, representational, and material freedom. Because of the intersectional dilemmas many Black women face, the story of their "ambition" becomes rooted in an ethos of "overcoming" said absurdism. This formulation of *ambition-as-overcoming* then becomes a kind of creative act in itself, as it responds to systemic obstacles. As Roxane Gay has written, breaking through while Black is always "tempered by so much burden." The same ambition that drives Black women toward achievement is the same ambition that can never be fully satisfied because many of the systemic conditions that produced its urgency remain. The current moment of intersectional activism in theater in the United States arguably necessitates the ambition of Black women.

Even for community-minded Black women creatives, performing ambition can conjure the frictions that chafe at the intersection of self-interest and the expectations of selflessness that undergird critiques of ambitious Black women. Institutional rewards for individual ambition can and do pull against commitments to collective care and transformative change. Pearl Dowe's research on Black women's political ambition confirms that ambition theory consistently "misunderstands or completely neglects the sense of community that leads Black women to

[7] Mitchell defines this as, "the flexible, dynamic array of forces that answer the achievements of marginalized groups such that their success brings aggression as often as praise. Any progress by those who are not straight, white, and male is answered by a backlash of violence—both literal and symbolic, both physical and discursive—that essentially says, *know your place!*" Mitchell, Koritha. "Identifying White Mediocrity and Know-Your-Place Aggression: A Form of Self-Care." *African American Review*, vol. 51, no. 4, 2018, pp. 253–62). Koritha Mitchell. *From Slave Cabins to the White House: Homemade Citizenship in African American Culture*. University of Illinois Press. 2020. 2.

engage in a unique type of political work."[8] Herein, I address this neglect by theorizing ambition not as sheer individual drive, but as a structurally determined and communally oriented practice. White and Negga's performances of Lady Macbeth illuminate this tension.

Black American women are haunted by these paradoxes of ambition. So, too, is the literary and dramatic figure of Lady Macbeth. She appears to be a character that Black actresses are drawn to. They have been exploring ambition through this figure in America since the early 19th Century.[9] Despite being framed as "non-traditional" or "experimental," which scholar Daniel Banks[10] suggests is owed to American audiences' misperceptions and ambivalence about the racial makeup of their own society, casting Lady Macbeth with Black actresses in the United States has been a consistent practice since the early 1800's. In many instances, it has carried with it modicums of cultural cache for many American directors. In William Brown's African Grove Theatre, founded in 1821, a short 70 years after the first recorded performance of Shakespeare in the United States, Black women played both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. Black actress Edna Thomas played a withering Lady Macbeth in Orson Welles' cross-cultural[11] all-Black, rather masculinist, 1936 adaptation of *Macbeth,* which came to be known as *Voodoo Macbeth*, staged at Harlem's Lafayette Theatre in conjunction with the Negro People's Theater as part of The Federal Theater Project.[12] Angela Bassett starred as a neurotic and hysterical Lady M. alongside

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[8] Dowe, Pearl K. "Resisting Marginalization: Black Women's Political Ambition and Agency," PS: Political Science and Politics 53, no 4 (2020): 697.

[9] In William Brown's African Grove Theatre, founded in 1821, a short 70 years after the first recorded performance of Shakespeare in the United States,[9] Black women played both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth (Marvin Edward McAllister, *White People Do Not Know how to Behave at Entertainments Designed for Ladies & Gentlemen of Colour: William Brown's African & American Theater* (University of North Carolina Press, 2003). 19).

[10] Daniel Banks, "The Welcome Table: Casting for an Integrated Society" in *Casting a Movement: The Welcome Table* Initiative, edited by Claire Syler and Daniel Banks (Routledge, 2019), 19.

[11] Angela Pao defines cross-cultural casting as casting decisions that facilitate the entire world of a play being translated to a different cultural setting. (Pao, 2).

[12] Rania Karoula, *The Federal Theatre Project, 1935-1939: Engagement and Experimentation (Edinburgh Critical Studies in Modernism, Drama and Performance), 1st ed.* (Edinburgh University Press, 2022), 95.

a predominantly white celebrity cast in acclaimed Black director George C. Wolfe's 1998 production of *Macbeth* in the New York Shakespeare Festival.[13] Studying these performances can help us trace how Black women's ambition adapts and evolves in a given historical context.

Countering scholar Henry Lennix's claim that "*Macbeth* is a great work that does not carry the onerous burden of race…[and] is mercifully free from any delineating considerations that lie outside the most basic human impulses,"[14] scholar Ayanna Thompson argues that *Macbeth* is in fact the "'Blackest play that people don't think is about race,' both in its language ('black Macbeth'[15]) and its performance history."[16] So many adapters, including actors, have identified the play as an adaptogenic[17] narrative template through which to explore and challenge "real world" racial and gendered meanings. In the current cultural moment, on the heels of a global civil rights movement, a pandemic, the #MeToo movement, and #WeSeeYouWhiteAmericanTheater, playing Lady Macbeth as a Black actress presents an opportunity to embody and work through how Black women's ambition might facilitate, respond to, and/or be in conversation with the promise of change spurred by these historic events. Black actresses can and have transfigured Lady Macbeth into a still that concentrates and clarifies their creative and professional ambitions, now. Doing so reveals as much about Black women's ambition as it does about the challenges of appropriating the ghosted text of *Macbeth*, one rife

[13] These casting choices may be understood as either societal casting or colorblind casting. Considering George C. Wolfe's engagement with race in his directorial oeuvre, I am inclined to suggest it is societal casting, which is when ethnic, female, or disabled actors are cast in roles they perform in society as a whole (Pao).
[14] Harry J. Lennix, "A Black Actor's Guide to the Scottish Play, or, Why Macbeth Matters" in *Weyward Macbeth: Intersections of Race and Performance.* 2010. pp. 113-120.
[15] William Shakespeare, *Macbeth,* 4.3.63.
[16] Chloe Schama, et al. "Daniel Craig and Ruth Negga Star in Broadway's New 'Macbeth', a Cathartic Release for Our Times" in *Vogue*, (23 Mar. 2022). <www.vogue.com/article/daniel-craig-ruth-negga-macbeth>
[17] In 1998, adaptation scholar Groensteen coined the term "adaptogenic" to mean "easy to adapt" (Linda Hutcheon, *Theory of Adaptation.* Routledge. 2012. pp 15.

with moral, gender, and racial paradoxes that can reflect the confounding hurdles of white supremacy in American society and its theater industry.

The productions I examine reflect and respond to the sociopolitical milieu in which they arrived. The global pandemic pushed *Macbeth In Stride*'s slated debut in A.R.T.'s 2019/20 season back to October 2021. Premiering six months after the murder of George Floyd, it became one of the first productions of the first theatre season informed by the demands of the #WeSeeYouWhiteAmericanTheatre manifesto, at A.R.T. As I will show, *Macbeth In Stride* overtly locates and articulates itself as being in and of this moment; it presages the institutional reckoning Harvard University, A.R.T.'s parent institution, had begun via its Presidential Committee's report on the university's historical ties to chattel slavery and anti-Black discrimination, which it would publish a year later. The stakes of this new premiere date were high. There persisted the lingering threat of Covid-19 infection for audiences as theatres re-opened. White faced the pressure to "succeed" as a Black woman lead play in both the wake of and as part of the American theater's public reckoning with the very structures of white institutional power *Macbeth In Stride* calls out. In developing this show prior to 2020, White spoke toward a looming civil rights inflection point that, ultimately, came to pass. White's timing, approval of venue, and choice of source text—the Western canon's most concentrated meditation on ambition's relationship to power, violence, and gender—does not register as incidental. Rather, White's moves functioned as acts of Black feminist ambition, a public claim on the spaces and places most historically invested in its exclusion.

Six months later, in April 2022, Sam Gold's *Macbeth* premiered as efforts to rectify the collective trauma of the pandemic and address institutional harm faltered. Previews and earlier performances of the show were canceled, as its stars and ensemble members contracted Covid-

19. American courts had yet to convict and sentence leaders of white supremacist extremist groups like the Proud Boys and Oath Keepers for their role in the 2021 January 6th Insurrection, and the House Select Committee to Investigate said attack did not publish a final report until well after the play's run ended. Less than a month before the play's opening, a Kentucky grand jury acquitted Brett Hankinson, a police officer who fired at least 10 live rounds into Breonna Taylor's home, of first-degree wanton endangerment charges, even after several jury members insinuated that Kentucky's attorney general and the police had been covering up what really happened. Gold named "equivocation" as a governing concept for his production, describing it as a "political word" to describe the "political landscape we've all just lived through, which is to devalue truth."[18] He was speaking about the political climate defined by the dissolution of democratic norms, the consolidation of power under buffoonish patriarchal authority, and the willingness of institutions to sacrifice the bodily autonomy of women and marginalized people for the maintenance of that power. The Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade* six weeks after Gold's *Macbeth* closed. Gold casts his entire production into this landscape, Macbeth's Scotland becoming a mirror for of the American moment, its image systems, sonic hierarchies, and ensemble of diverse actors revealing much about white patriarchal impunity. Placed at the center of it all, the glamorous Black biracial Negga deftly picks up the charge to embody what happens when a Black woman stakes her ambition on a structure designed toward her undoing.

The Ambitious Whitney White

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[18] "*Macbeth:* Director Sam Gold Previews Daniel Craig and Ruth Negga's Murderous Power Play," ew.com/theater/macbeth-broadway-preview-sam-gold-daniel-craig-ruth-negga/.

"Ambition" underscores playwright-director-actor-musician Whitney White's career and work, often serving as the thematic spine of her professional and creative approach to adaptation. She is now the fifth Black woman to ever be nominated for a Tony award in directing, and continues to direct Broadway shows starring celebrities like Nick Jonas and Adrienne Warren.[19] A brief scan of her artist resume reveals the fruits of her professional and creative ambition, her accolades and popularity suggesting maximal success in navigating traditionally "white" theater spaces.[20] She continues to be an exemplar in her Black feminist approach to adapting the "Classics" with Black women leads. In 2019, White directed *An Iliad,* playwrights Lisa Peterson and Denis O'Hare's adaptation of Homer's *Iliad,* at New Haven's progressive Long Wharf Theater.[21] White cast Black actor Rachel Christopher in the lead role of "The Poet," who represented a modern version of Homer. The inclusiveness and prestige of the Long Wharf's stage[22] offered empowering conditions wherein White could adapt a Classic through and toward an audience "in a language they understand" with "a perspective these stories do not often get."[23]

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[19] White was nominated for a 2024 Tony award for directing her first Broadway show, Jocelyn Bioh's comedy *Jaja's African Hair Braiding* at the Samuel J. Friedman Theater in 2023.

[20] Herein, "traditionally white theater spaces" and their affiliated academic and cultural institutions are those which have historically been shaped by majority white leadership, employed majority white artists and faculty, implemented Western-focused curriculum and season programming, and catered to predominantly white audiences. White has worked in and with such institutions, including the Harvard affiliated American Repertory Theater, The Long Wharf Theater, Julliard, and Princeton University. Their theaters' histories as being "traditionally white," and in some cases, systemically racist, has come to the fore as theater activist professionals and students began making strong appeals for change following the murder of George Floyd and the global civil rights movement it inspired.

[21] In 2014, a year after the founding of Black Lives Matter protests movement, the Long Wharf's then Artistic Director, Gorden Eidelstein, eschewed uncritical color-blind[21] and multicultural casting as being deleterious to non-white communities the theater hoped to serve.[21] More radically pushing these attitudes forward, his successor, Jacob Padrón,[21] revamped the theater's commitment to "the pillars of artistic innovation, radical inclusion, and meaningful connection" as he imagined The Long Wharf as a place "where art and activism can live side-by-side" ("Long Wharf Announces 'Boundary-Breaking' 2020-2021 Season" in *New Haven Arts* (12 Mar. 2020). <www.newhavenarts.org/arts-paper/articles/long-wharf-announces-boundary-breaking-2020-2021-season>).

[22] Some notable productions that moved to Off Broadway and Broadway from the Long Wharf are *Durango, Wit, The Shadow Box, The Gin Game, I Love You Your Perfect Now Change,* and *American Buffalo.* Actors like Al Pacino, Julie Harris, and Lyn Redgrave have performed there. (<https://archive.ph/20021225103057/http://www.longwharf.org/about_history1.html>).

[23] C. Arnott "Women fight back; updates on ancient dramas 'an iliad,' 'If We Were Birds' on Connecticut stages" in *Hartford Courant* (31 Mar. 2019).

She has continued to establish her Queendom in the realm of adaptation, a large swath of her oeuvre centering on literal queens. *Macbeth In Stride* was the first of five Shakespeare adaptations A.R.T. commissioned from White. In each of them, she's tasked with excavating the women from Shakespeare's canon. *Macbeth in Stride,* White, per the show's' billing "[examines] what it means to be an ambitious Black woman through the lens of Shakespeare's most iconic characters,"[24] using "live pop, rock, gospel and R&B to trace the fatalistic arc of Lady Macbeth while lifting up contemporary Black female power, femininity, and desire."[25] In her staging of the play, and in her performance as the Lady Macbeth figure herself, White demonstrates an ambition rife with the ethos of "overcoming."

The production itself performs ambition as it stages an act of total authorship. Launching a musical production amid theaters reopening during a global pandemic was no small feat, especially one that approaches Shakespeare through a Black feminist lens. She created, starred in, wrote, and composed the piece, co-staging it with directors Tyler Dobrowsky and Taibi Magar. She performed the attentional and physical labor of several people, acting in the production while simultaneously employing a critical writer's-, director's-, and dramaturg's-eye. Devised, didactic, and presentational, we do not wonder at how casting herself as Lady Macbeth informs White's Lady Macbeth, or "Woman" as she calls her, both theatrically and metatheatrically; White can engage and explore the process of Black women's ambition, both on stage and off, through and as part of the process of her own real-life ambition.

A.R.T.'s institutional context is itself a haunted stage. The theatre's history of nontraditional casting was shaped by founding artistic director Robert Brustein's colorblind

[24] "Macbeth in Stride." <americanrepertorytheater.org/shows-events/macbeth-in-stride>
[25] "Macbeth in Stride Resource Guide | A.R.T" (2021). <americanrepertorytheater.org/media/macbeth-in-stride-resource-guide>

casting ideology and later complicated by new artistic director Diana Paulus's subsequent anti-racist commitments. Together these legacies made A.R.T. a vertiginous site for White's commission, at once enabling and constraining the Black feminist ambition her work enacts. White navigates this terrain through what Stephanie Batiste identifies as the constitutive condition of Black performance in white institutions: the simultaneous reproduction and contestation of imperial identity.[26] In choosing Shakespeare as her vehicle, White leverages the Bard's cultural capital, what Thompson describes as the problematic promise of being "freed by Shakespeare," to legitimize herself in a theatrical ecosystem that has barely welcomed Black women directors. As White herself has said, "I am a black woman from Chicago, and I always saw my experience reflected in Shakespeare's world."[27] Yet as Thompson also warns, Shakespeare's universality "makes white, Western culture the norm from which everything else is a lesser deviation."[28] By aligning herself with and arguably intervening in Shakespeare, White ambitiously takes on a beloved king.

White's primary focus remains on using the figure of Lady Macbeth to liberate the ambition of Black women and femmes[29] from sexist racist structures. In *Macbeth In Stride,* she

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[26] Stephanie Leigh Batiste, *Darkening Mirrors: Imperial Representation in Depression-Era African American Performance* (Duke University Press, 2011), 25.

[27] "Whitney White's Shakespearean Rock Concert Macbeth in Stride Opens at A.R.T. October 28" in *Playbill (*16 Dec. 2021).

[28] Ayanna Thompson, *Passing Strange: Shakespeare, Race, and Contemporary America* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 6.

[29] In *Macbeth In Stride*, she aligns Black women with Black femmes, as she seeks to explore how femininity complicates ambition. I use the term "Black femme," coined by the LGBTQ Community, how I believe White intends to use it in her interviews. She suggests the term describes gender identity presentation and expression that combine elements of Blackness and "femininity," regardless of one's assigned sex at birth or sexual orientation. It recognizes the intersectionality of race and gender while understanding "Blackness" and "femininity" as capacious in meaning. Black femme individuals identify with what "femininity" means to them, not necessarily with the heterosexual notions of "femininity' that others may ascribed to them (Kaila Adia Story, "Fear of a Black Femme: The Existential Conundrum of Embodying a Black Femme Identity While Being a Professor of Black, Queer, and Feminist Studies" in *Journal of Lesbian Studies, Vol. 21, No. 4* (Oct. 2016), 407–19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10894160.2016.1165043>). Mikelle Street of *Paper Magazine* suggests the term "Black femme" is "a big tent that can encompass lots of different experiences, backgrounds and biologies ranging from

disentangles the idea of the "feminine" from biological sex altogether, as she casts a Black femme cis-male actor Reggie Watson as a witch aligned with the intersectional challenges of the play's Black women, the other two witches played by Phoenix Best and Kira Sarai Help. White frequently discusses the "feminine" as a quality unmoored from sex in direct address to the audience and in interviews.[30] Thus, as a creator, she sets out to undermine the gender binaries *Macbeth* so famously stands to reinforce in Shakespeare, in the theater, and in society.

Can White use the "master's tool" of Shakespeare to "dismantle the master's house"[31] of American theater and its legacies? White is deeply invested in the American theatre's engagement with Shakespeare,[32] even as she recognizes that his plays "weren't written for women or people of color to play."[33] Therefore, White's goal of using the figure of Lady Macbeth to explore Black women's ambition risks trapping Black women and herself in the very structures and ideologies she sets out to critique. At the same time, the theatrical process of pursuing this goal—of enacting her creative vision—potentiates a very compelling glimpse at how White's ambition both performs and haunts her within this cultural framework.

In October 2021, on the A.R.T.'s Loeb Drama Center mainstage, a minimalist set made from two diagonal raised platforms resembling runways jut diagonally downstage right and left out from center stage in both directions. The band's positioned stage left and stage right. Black

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cisgender black women and black transwomen (perhaps the two most identifiable manifestations of the label), as well as queer men who have feminine affectations. And though they may share mannerisms and habits, the groups are treated by society in distinctly different ways, causing complicated relationships between themselves" (Justin Moran, "Do Not Erase Black Femmes in Your History of Gay Slang" in *PAPER Magazine* (15 June. 2020). <www.papermag.com/gay-slang-history-black-femmes#rebelltitem15>).

[30] Robert Duffley, "Art Not without Ambition" (American Repertory Theater, 2021). <americanrepertorytheater.org/media/art-not-without-ambition/>

[31] Borrowed from Audre Lorde's admonishment that "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house," (Audre Lorde, *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House* (Penguin UK, 2018)).

[32] White was named Associate Director of The Shakespeare Theatre Company in Washington D.C. in 2020.

[33] Whitney White, *Macbeth in Stride* (American Repertory Theater, 2021).

actors Phoenix Best, Kira Sarai Help, and Reggie Watson, our witches and self-described Fates, process solemnly. Watson wears makeup and earrings, suggesting "femme" identification, or what White later describes as "the feminine." As they serve multiple roles throughout the show, we are instructed to think of them as our protagonist's "sister-enemy-witch-friends." The witches reverently hold up small offerings. Not the "fenny snake" or "newt and toe of frog" from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, but items of beauty and spirit. Incense, petals, ash, a goblet of wine. This is a ritual. They are opening the space.

Whitney White as Woman (Center) and The Fates: Phoenix Best, Reggie Watson, Kira Sarai Help (L to R). Photo by Lauren Miller

What ensues is less a traditional narrative play and more an interactive plot-driven concert, powered by musical numbers spanning the genres of rock, soul, and gospel. White plays a character she calls "Woman," a hybrid character that is both Lady Macbeth enacting the drama

of Shakespeare's play and a contemporary band frontwoman. She serves as our interlocutor, speaking, singing, enacting, and redacting parts of *Macbeth's* plot as she comments on the relationship between Black women, Shakespeare, and contemporary American society. She has adorned herself in signifiers of Black divahood as she channels Diana Ross circa 1994. Her hair is styled big and long. She dons a sequined Black jumpsuit. Actor Charlie Thurston, referred to as "Man," acts as Lord Macbeth and Woman's emo rockstar husband who is bare-chested, leather-clad, glam rock eye-lined, and the embodiment of male patriarchy. Original songs with imperative titles like "Reach for It" implicitly perform the commanding ambition Woman wishes to pursue, while slower contemplative numbers like "Dark World" and "I for You" express a frustrated reliance on men and male power that both allure and impede her. Glamorous and powerful, she registers immediately as a pop diva. A gifted woman struggling to overcome the material limitations of racism and sexism in her pursuit of something the world insists she has no right to want.

Scholar Bailey Sincox has argued that White performs three distinct but overlapping characters: Woman, Lady Macbeth, and an implied third figure Sincox calls "Lady M." The last is a Tina Turner-esque diva whose musical numbers bridge the gap between the other two.[34] Sincox's tripartite reading, while dramaturgically astute, inadvertently reproduces the very demand for legibility that White's performance refuses. To partition White's subjectivities, however overlapping, is to ask her body to resolve into something nameable and containable. The performance's Black feminist argument resists this. My reading insists on the irreducibility of the hybrid. White is one Black woman whose autoethnographic authority resides in this

[34] Sincox, Bailey. "Taking Shakespeare in Stride: Lady Macbeth at the American Repertory Theatre." *Shakespeare*, vol. 20, no. 2, 2024, pp. 281–300.

irresolution itself. As Patricia Hill Collins argues, Black feminist epistemology holds each Black woman's particular lived experience and the larger collective tradition of Black women's knowledge in necessary and productive tension.[35] The gap between Woman, Lady Macbeth, and Sincox's implied "Lady M." constitutes the paradox at the heart of White's method and her embodied argument that Black woman's selfhood is irreducibly multiple.

This multiplicity of selves contained in White's singular body constitutes White's divahood. Her divahood saturates the show, as it functions as the ontological condition of her presence, which animates every interpretive choice as she narrates personal reflections, recites Shakespeare's original verse, belts rock songs, utilizes direct address, and engages direct communal address. By privileging the interpretive lens of her own lived experience, White claims her intellectual license to massage the canon into yielding narrative and performative conditions. As the daughter of a single-mother struggling financially in Chicago, White names and embodies her accumulation of institutional navigation, survival, and hard-won narrative authority that the production enacts as much as it represents. She wields her lived experience to crack open Lady Macbeth's ambition, wrenching it from the cautionary framing that has historically made female desire punishable. She offers herself to us as a subject who has lived the labors the diva figure theorizes. She performs what Daphne Brooks has theorized as Black feminist surrogation, "an embodied performance that recycles forms of black female sociopolitical grief and loss as well as spirited dissent and dissonance."[36][37] Through *Macbeth In Stride's* songs and White's crowd work, similar to the R&B protest works of Mary J. Blige and

[35] Collins.
[36] Daphne A. Brooks, "'All That You Can't Leave Behind': Black Female Soul Singing and the Politics of Surrogation in the Age of Catastrophe" in *Meridians, Vol. 8, No. 1* (2008), 180.
[37] See Joseph Roach's theory of surrogation in cultural performance in *Cities of the Dead*, from which Brooks derives her formulation of Black feminist surrogation.

our contested Beyoncé, whom Brooks covers, Woman, too, offers a "response of sorts to [a] long history of black women who have been stripped and stressed and displaced and denied," offering a performance that can "[imagine] new ways of moving and singing under duress."[38] Through her work, as both a creator and performer in this production, White, as Jeanne Scheper argues of the diva, wields her laboring body as on and against, "uneven working conditions, differing audience consumption patterns, and forces of antiblackness operating on black performers on and off stage." Hers is a "labor of critique," challenging the status quo of performance repertoires from within them.[39] She is, as Mitchell Morris has shown, an historically queer figure, a rallying point of fabulous resilience for large and diverse audiences who have found in her the cultural permission to live conspicuously out loud within structures that would prefer their silence.[40] In 1996, Elizabeth Alexander, as if presaging a theatrical salve to the crises she identifies in "Trayvon Martin Generation," offered the diva as a generous and magnificent cultural figure, "'genderless and celestial,'" a figure of any race whose primary fabulousness is rooted in their "'fortitude, stamina, and strength…The power from within radiates outward... Her glory is not something she hoards. If you are magnificent, you have enough to spare.'"[41] What Alexander calls generosity, White calls the show as she proffers her diva-y knowledge, grief, resilience, and refusal as the common property of the people in the room. In doing so, she offers the diva as universalizing alternative to Shakespeare, the former operating as a non-essentially white or male alternative to latter.

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[38] Ibid, 201.

[39] Jeanne Scheper, *Moving Performances: Divas, Iconicity, and Remembering the Modern Stage* (Rutgers University Press, 2016), 21-22.

[40] Mitchell Morris, *The Persistence of Sentiment: Display and Feeling in Popular Music of the 1970s* (University of California Press, 2013), 168-172.

[41] Alvin Klein, "Theater; Divas in Metaphor, Divas in Crisis, Divas in Life" in *The New York Times*, (28 Apr. 1996). <www.nytimes.com/1996/04/28/nyregion/theater-divas-in-metaphor-divas-in-crisis-divas-in-life.html>

White gets ahead of assumptions that Woman's "divahood" is tied to ego or selfishness and harnesses the diva's role in the service of a collective ambition that centers Black women and femmes. Her "sister-enemy-witch-friends" challenge Woman by asking, "You wanna rework a 400-year-old play for your own ego?" and "Is this evening really gonna be all about her? Why, when so many of us don't get what we deserve?" Pushed, Woman doubles down on her commitment to uplifting other women and femmes through community. She retorts, "It's not just about me. It's about she and her and y'all and that lady right there in aisle three. It's about your daughter, your daughter's friend, every woman whose story met an untimely end, and all of Shakespeare's great women who never seem to make it out of these plays alive."[42] Yes, she figures herself as a diva, name-checking Tina Turner as an exceptional model for taking what one wants, not waiting until it is given. She grants queer and otherized viewers the cultural permission to frame their own passions as legitimate.

Woman declares her desire for the trappings of American divahood: fancy foods, dresses, fame, fortune, stardom. The figure of the diva risks what bell hooks identified in Beyonce's work as a neoliberal colonization of Black feminist politics, glamorizing individual ambition at the expense of collective liberation.[43] White knows this risk intimately and disavows it. The witches remind her that neoliberal promises of meritocratic success have never been in her favor when they sing, "lil' sister don't go too far, the man is watching don't be no star, do the best with what you have, work twice as hard, might still get had."[44] Lewis Gordon names the structural condition these lyrics conjure, in which neoliberal systems of personal advancement, Black people and particularly Black women "become collateral damage of neoliberalism's conceptions

[42] White.
[43] bell hooks "Moving Beyond Pain" (Bell Hooks Institute, 09 May. 2016).
[44] White.

of liberties, the person, and rights."[45] White's Woman inhabits this contradiction fully, understanding the concomitant arrival of neoliberalism's promise and betrayal. Her radical act of collective ambition here is to keep striving anyway.

The effigy[46] that White ultimately bodies forth is a Black diva who fills the erasure and absences of Black women femmes in the Shakespearean canon and in American theater. As a surrogate for many Black women and femmes, housing a metaphorical coalition of intersectional feminist interests in her singular body, she participates in a tradition of Black women performers who, as Brian Eugenio Herrera has argued about popular minority performers, mobilize popular performance as a racializing mode, inhabiting the archive of popular racism knowingly,[47] leveraging the canon's authority in the service of Black feminist collective ambition.

Figuring Lady M.-as-diva is one way in which White-as-a-creative and White-as-a-Lady Macbeth character performs this kind of collective ambition. White's transculturation[48] of *Macbeth* becomes a repertoire of what Soyica Diggs Colbert calls a "Black Movement": an expressive "manifestation of black social life as the basis for artistic and political life" that "affirms the ontology of black people as beings who resist, innovate, live, thrive, suffer, and die."[49] Her alignment with this approach is beautifully summed up by the witches in their opening song, "If Knowledge Is Power" in which they perform this ontology of empowerment, as they tell Woman that they all "have got the power to tell it like it is." The collective ambition

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[45] Lewis R. Gordon, "Black Aesthetics, Black Value" in *Public Culture 30.1* (2018), 19-34 at 22.
[46] "Effigy" here is Joseph Roach's concept of the effigy as a performed embodiment that stands in for cultural loss and absence, which he introduces as part of his larger theory of "surrogation" in *Cities of the Dead.*
[47] Herrera, Brian Eugenio. "Prologue." *Latin Numbers : Playing Latino in Twentieth-Century U.S. Popular Performance*. University of Michigan Press, 2015.
[48] Kevin Witmore defines "transculturation" as "the process by which playwrights and theatre artists take a text from the source cultural and transform it for the target culture" (Kevin J. Wetmore Jr, *Black Dionysus: Greek Tragedy and African American Theatre,* McFarland. 2010, 82).
[49] Soyica Diggs Colbert, "Black Movements" in *Black Movements* (Rutgers University Press, 2017), 13.

of White's *Macbeth In Stride* echoes that of Black movements like the Black Arts Movement and William Brown's early 19th Century African Theater. White signals an understanding that today, "black social life" and her Black movement are inextricable from the mixed communities that constitute the contemporary American theater audience,[50] as she includes non-Black people in an "imaginary space of possibility."[51] Outspoken about her commitment to fostering community, White explains her process: "'The piece is done for the audience in the same way that a concert is: the audience is the judge and the jury.'"[52] And while she centers Blackness and femininity, White asks both the witches and the audience a series of questions over the course of the 80 minute show that tasks the viewing community with witnessing and identifying their own challenges within a flawed system—the same system that has failed her, Shakespeare's women, and Black American women and femmes.[53] For a mixed audience, White employs call-and-response patterns of Black aesthetics, what Kimberly Benston articulates as "critical call and visionary response."[54] White asks, "What's the story that framed you before you were even you?" As Maggie Sales argues, call-an-response demands that new meanings be created for each particular moment of telling, giving authority not just to the originator of the story but to

[50] Again, the 2020 civil rights protests and demonstrations were more diverse than those preceding it. The scale became global, the geography of the protests expanding from strictly Black American neighborhoods to cities across the nation and world.

[51] Baraka, in his prioritizing the process of performance over product, strived to use ritual, experimentation, and creative communication between Black people to inhabit an "imaginary space of possibility" for "intercultural and intertextual articulation." (Thomas DeFrantz, and Anita Gonzalez, *Black Performance Theory,* Duke University Press, 2014, 4).

[52] "Art Not Without Ambition" (American Repertory Theater, 2021). <americanrepertorytheater.org/media/art-not-without-ambition>

[53] White's approach is not so much multiculturalist as it is post-Black, insofar as it reflects Colbert's idea that "Post-black demonstrates flexibility with the past and an ability to affirm and deny relationships that have come after the period known as the Black Arts Movement." (Colbert, 14.)

[54] Kimberly Benston, *Performing Blackness: Enactments of African American Modernism* (Routledge. 2000), 244.

whoever can recreate it most responsively for the needs present in the room.[55] White applies this logic to Shakespeare. Everyone speaks their desires and obstacles into the theater, the space becomes more communal, facilitating a discovery of shared experience. Seasoned performers, White and her cast adjust to the tone and attitudes the audience brings. In offering this practice to a heterogenous audience, White appears to enable the relating across differences that are not entirely rooted in one type of intersectional oppression specific to her.

White attempts to find common ground by pointing to our shared experiences of overdetermination, the "stories" that "frame" us before we self-actualize. A witch asks a woman in the audience to speak out and claim what she wants, what will it take, and will it be worth it? Answers range from "love" to "stabilized rent." Rarely did the audience respond with anything outlandish or outside of the humane. Most desires fell squarely into Maslow's hierarchy of needs. White's Woman goes on to directly address the "women, queer folk, and *othered* people" in the audience, rhetorically asking them, "What are *you* willing to do to get what you need? To get what you want?" Opening up, but still controlling the scenes, Woman and the witches nod to the slippery boundary between "need" and "want," suggesting that, for otherized people like themselves and those in the audience, the claiming of basic human needs becomes on par with expressing extravagant wants, their marginalized position having naturalized a lack of entitlement. Needing becomes conflated with "wanting too much," which White describes as "a condition." She must work towards Audre Lorde's assertion that, "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare."[56] Recognizing how

[55] Maggie Sale, "Call and Response as Critical Method: African-American Oral Traditions and Beloved" in *African American Review, Vol. 26, No. 1* (1992), 42.
[56] Audre Lorde, "The Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* (1993), 339-43.

society might delegitimize or even criminalize marginalized women's dreams of upward mobility, which require some modicum of power, Woman nervously spits out her most salient question: "What happens when a Black woman's only way out is by violent means?" A witch corrects her "out," to "up." It becomes a conversation with the audience and the witches about limited options, glass ceilings, and double standards. The witches cajole Woman to state what she wants and to ask what's behind the want, encouraging her to proudly claim a very human desire for power. But Woman needs to work through this and thus invokes Lady Macbeth, telling the witches that Lady Macbeth "gets a letter, then makes an impossible leap to get the power that she needs." The witches retort with, "Then leap." Together, they attempt to answer how a Black woman might pursue power through the figure of Lady Macbeth. In doing so, answering becomes a diverse communal process of discovery rooted in a Black aesthetic.

This odyssey begins with the song "Hallelujah!" which plays as an ecclesiastical attempt by Woman to transcend the limitations of her Black femaleness and motivate an ambivalent white Macbeth to enact her will. It is a prolonged plea in which she liturgically appeals to the Lord, then the audience, then to Macbeth to "lift her up" such that she "gets the power that she needs." The murder of Duncan and Macbeth's coronation serve as analogous outcomes for Woman's potentially violent pursuit of social mobility. The song begins with White, seated in front of the black backdrop, playing the piano. She sings, "In the place of love/Lord lift me up/Give me strength/Lift me up." The witches hum and harmonize in the darkness. Escalating the energy, she stands and moves to a mic center stage, joining the witches. Rock and roll riffs heighten the intensity, an electric guitar voicing the melodies. Woman begins weaving Lady Macbeth's "unsex me here" monologue into a half-sung, half-spoken chant-sermon of sorts, the choir of witches echoing her. This transforms the speech from a solitary call to forces of darkness

to strip her of her femininity— a quality that, in the repertoire of Lady Macbeth performance has often been understood as a hindrance to her ambition—into something more necessary and communal. This reworking of the monologue performs what Kimberly Benston describes as an "African American strategy of self-difference and dialectical reversal" that can " [absorb] the individual experience of trauma into collective historical meaning...Eschewing doctrines of apolitical transcendence for an exegetical idiom that both subverts (*stirs)* and constructs (*builds*) institutions and practices."[57] White-as-Woman-as-preacher, appropriating the iconic Lady Macbeth speech as theatrical scripture/doctrine, deploys it through the mode of gospel sermon. Replete with call-and-response, it is her adaptive "exegetical idiom." In doing so, she aligns Woman's "individual experience of trauma"—the personal and social denial of need—with that of people like her and her Black woman and femme chorus, the Shakespearean women who are punished for their ambition,[58] and the actresses of color playing these roles not originally meant for them.[59]

The spiritual nature of the song and the audience's "bearing witness" subvert the monologue into a communally and divinely sanctioned ritual of sloughing off societal attitudes about the limitations of womanhood, thus freeing, or "lifting up" our protagonist to pursue what's rightfully hers/ours. The black curtains rise and a light-red backdrop floods the stage with scarlet rays of ardor. The entire band drops in and Woman entreats the audience, as if she's leading a revival, "Lift me up…free the faithful, I'm talking to you, you, you, and you. To everyone in the background, to anyone who ever was and anyone who will ever be. I'm calling

[57] Benston, 281.
[58] In an interview, White says that "'If you're really ambitious in Shakespeare and you happen to be a lady, you are very likely to not make it to the end of the play." ("Art Not Without Ambition.")
[59] White states that, "These plays weren't written for women or people of color to play these roles, so when you do you have to deal with these 'phantoms.'" ("Art Not Without Ambition.")

out from the deepest part, the deepest part of me. I need you to help me, OK? Say it with me." The audience goes on to echo her thrice repeated refrains, "there is no down" and "there is no ground," sanctifying their collective momentum up and out of whatever might be holding any of them back. As it implements a 400-year-old text, this moment, as Benston says of African American expressive culture, "[theorizes] and [engages] in the present, offering its participatory 'audience' the challenge of radically regenerating itself as a political society capable of confronting a world of confusion and struggle."[60] It is a moment that "can [open] new possibilities of desire, perception, and action." [61] We are with Woman, she is with us, and we are momentarily enraptured by the possibility this revisioning of Lady Macbeth offers all of us.

These generous and critical moments, enacted amidst a diverse group on a spectrum of privilege, make it clear that *Macbeth In Stride* is not just a show about Whitney White using the story of *Macbeth* as a crucible for self-aggrandizement or baseless complaining. It is a piece of Black art that cultivates a community rooted in the understanding that Black women and femme lives matter as much as everyone else's. As a community-oriented Black feminist piece, White's *Macbeth in Stride* subverts the potentially problematic "universalizing potential" of Shakespeare. The performance interpolates *Macbeth* into a performative offering that guides this viewing community toward a Black feminist paradigm of intersectional connectedness, as opposed to one of universal whiteness. It invites everyone in the audience to the same table, embracing difference as an approach to social equity for Black women, and therefore, everyone. Through her use of Black performance practices, White appropriates the text, history, and performance of *Macbeth* to reframe the moral implications of "ambition" as she stages a (meta)theatrical critique

[60] Benston, 281.
[61] Ibid.

of how the white patriarchy on which imperialist ambition relies might adversely impact not only Black women, but entire heterogenous communities. Like many of her Black creative predecessors, White manages to "[make] meaning within [problematic structures],"[62] including the American theater industry and Classic literary texts.

As White works her way through *Macbeth,* she does not take the narrative liberties necessary to rescue *Macbeth* from the ensnaring sexist traps its plot performs. Woman comes to recognize the futility of relying on what Lorde calls the "old blueprints of expectation," such as proximity to white maleness, for securing the advancement of self and other marginalized people. White's piece asks us to question, as Lorde asks in *Sister Outsider,* an internalized belief that proximity to the "mythical norm" of male whiteness is somehow a protective strategy, which, instead, undermines the power of embracing difference to facilitate the kind of collective action that might battle and exorcize what Lorde calls "old structures of oppression."[63] In a moment of sad recognition, Woman realizes that her relationship and womanly power will never be the way she dreamed, because the powerful white man she's hitched her wagon to keeps saying "I," instead of "we." White's Woman's Man, AKA Macbeth, becomes discomfited that the gender balance has shifted, proclaiming in his rock version of Macbeth's "Sleep No More" monologue that, "It used to be a man could have his way." As he gets to wallow in self-pity and guilt, everyone else around him must cope and pick up the pieces. In the case of Woman, proximity and catering to him only ensure her continued subservience. They will never be "in stride." Lady Macbeth's story, as Shakespeare wrote it, is *not* the way forward.

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[62] Batiste, 233.

[63] Audre Lorde, "Age, Race, Class, and Sex" in *Sister Outsider 116* (1980), 112.

In the end, Woman rejects Lady Macbeth's suicide, interrupting her own "Out damned spot" speech to admonish the corner of madness into which Shakespeare has painted her. "Man" recites the nihilistic "tomorrow, tomorrow, tomorrow" soliloquy as the witches embody other Shakespearean women, weaving together bits of text spoken by characters like Juliet, Cleopatra, Emilia, and Ophelia grappling with their own oppression. In an abrupt refusal of all these women's mortal ends, Woman stares into the black void of the audience and states that "ambition says to live," ending the show on a tragic grievance she never gets to address.

As an adapter, White could have written or enacted a more hopeful denouement and a more satisfactory afterlife for Lady Macbeth. But she chooses refusal, an historically political tactic of Black resistance to white institutions.[64] White's production suggests that Shakespeare's original narrative continues to lock Lady Macbeth into a tragic fate and a masculinist system. White fails to rescue the text, her adaptation-as-product limited by its rotted source material. *Macbeth* as a narrative framework can mirror what we can understand as a narrative framework of the American theater's history of white male hegemony. They can both haunt and vex creative ambition that seeks to confront systemic issues of racism and sexism in the theater, particularly in the case of a striving Black creative like White, who makes her identity and social justice intentions known. Like Woman in *Macbeth In Stride,* White's most powerful, agential move as an ambitious creative entrepreneur is the act of refusal—refusal of the prescribed pathways forward or even to her own demise. Refusal of the status quo is an ambitious move in and of itself, risky as it may be. Meditating on and enacting her own ambition in *Macbeth In Stride*, White arguably "overcomes," and it is within this refusal at the end of the show where both Woman and White's "overcoming" culminates. It is an overcoming of narrative expectations

[64] See Kelle Carter Jackson. *We Refuse*: *A Forceful History of Black Resistance*. First edition, Seal Press, 2024.

housed within the scripted ending of *Macbeth* and society writ large that ambitious women, and in Woman/White's case, Black women, accept a patriarchal story/system designed to literally kill these women should they seek to ascend utilizing the rubrics of white patriarchal power. In the end, White drops the rubric, bravely confronting an unknown alternative future. This refusal potentiates creative new ways forward for those, like White, who are willing to take the risk. It reflects "ambition-as-overcoming" as being efficacious for *change.* A change of canonical narratives, a change within an industry, a change in the life and lives of Black women performers negotiating similar matrices of ambition, community, and adversity to White.

White's repudiation of Lady Macbeth's fate is theory made flesh. Alone on a darkened stage, she refuses the prescribed ending by outlasting it, her voice insisting on life after the script has demanded her death. Her body theorizes the sovereign refusal of a Black woman who will not be written out of her own story, making legible what language alone cannot. Her disavowal of the script echoes the collective demand of a generation that took to the streets in 2020 and insisted, in every register available to it, that prescribed endings would no longer stand.

Ruth Negga's body carries a different weight. Luminous, exquisitely costumed, and consciously inhabited, it bears the full burden of the Black woman exception: every first, every historic arrival, every individual recruited to stand as proof that the hierarchies of race and gender are dissolving. Nega's Lady Macbeth embodies the unfortunate truth of their persistence and what that embodiment forecloses.

The Trap of the Exception

That both productions were shaped by white male directors, Gold at the Longacre and Tyler Dobrowsky working with Armenian-Egyptian female co-director Taibi Magar at A.R.T.,

makes their outcomes all the more analytically significant. The difference rests less in the presence or absence of white male authority but in how the Black woman performer's epistemology organizes the work. Six months after *Macbeth In Stride* premiered, less than 250 miles away, Ethiopian-Irish actress Ruth Negga also tackled questions of performing ambition as a Black woman playing Lady Macbeth. Negga starred across from white British actor and celebrity Daniel Craig in a 2022 run of *Macbeth* at the Longacre Theater on Broadway.

The productions shared significant similarities and connections. For one, White began the professional directing side of her career as Sam Gold's assistant at the New York Theater Workshop in 2016, for *Othello*, which also starred Daniel Craig.[65] Like *Macbeth In Stride*, the play faced similar challenges, as it premiered shortly after theaters reopened during the Coronavirus pandemic. Like White, Gold and Negga tackle questions about performing the ambition of a Black woman Lady Macbeth. Yet their approach to Lady Macbeth's story differ significantly. More acquiescent to the restraints of "the world Shakespeare wrote" than White, the Broadway production does not change the text aside from a contemporary preamble about the history of the play in the context of global pandemics. Negga and Gold ask, "What happens when Lady Macbeth, who is born for power, can, in the world Shakespeare wrote, achieve her power only through her husband" in "a play in which this powerful Black woman has obstacles to the power she innately should be able to manifest?"[66] They appear to insinuate that these "obstacles" are her gender and her race. Negga, with directorial support, must approach these questions less explicitly than White.

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[65] Diep Tran, "In the Last Five Years and Macbeth in Stride, Whitney White Is Wondering if Women Can Have It All," *Playbill*, August 12, 2025, https://playbill.com/article/in-the-last-five-years-and-macbeth-in-stride-whitney-white-is-wondering-if-women-can-have-it-all.
[66] Hannah Flint, "Ruth Negga Takes Center Stage" in *Town & Country* (01 Apr. 2022). <www.townandcountrymag.com/leisure/arts-and-culture/a39427166/ruth-negga-lady-macbeth-interview>

As a Black biracial, newly-crowned movie star[67] leading a cast in a wholly different commercial ecosystem from White's—profit-driven Broadway, not the non-profit world of A.R.T. and regional theater—Negga's positionality in the entertainment industry complicates the staging of Black women's ambition and how we understand its alignment with Black feminist paradigms. A driven and socially conscious performer, Negga has ambition as an artist that has taken her to career heights from which she can select the type of roles she wants—parts that align with her goal of playing underrepresented or misunderstood characters. She recognizes the intersectional challenges facing Black women and their representation in theater as she works to understand her place in this struggle. She tells *The New York Times*, "To me race is in the foreground, the background, the present, and it's not something I have had to chase or I've had to ignore. It's with me, it's in me, it's who I am. So, stories about race …have always piqued my interest. How do people go through the world as a person of color with the structures and limitations that have been imposed by society? And how does the status quo come up against your personal desire and ambition? And how do you live the life that you want as best you can within these structures that are telling you, 'No.'"[68] She recognizes the power of her platform as a celebrity, the privilege of her status. She approaches her work with intentionality. She tells *Town and Country Magazine* that she wants to be sure her professional and artistic desires are "'in line with the legacy I want to leave,'" and always asks, "'How am I being useful to the world?'"[69] As she approaches Lady Macbeth, she asks, "'Without ambition, where would a lot of people be, especially minorities and marginalized people?'" She insinuates her commitment to

[67] Negga arguably reached movie star status after acting as the lead in the 2016 film *Loving*, and the 2021 film adaptation of Nella Larsen's 1929 novella of the same name, *Passing*.
[68] Salamishah Tillet, "Ruth Negga Thinks Lady Macbeth Is Misunderstood" in *The New York Times* (11 June. 2022). <www.nytimes.com/2022/06/07/theater/ruth-negga-macbeth-tonys.html>
[69] Flint.

representational uplift that benefits minoritized people, and she most certainly understands ambition-as-overcoming as a vital practice for Black women. Negga's professional ambition appears guided by an impulse to empathically and mindfully represent the nuanced ambition of Otherized people.

As the first Black actress to ever play Lady Macbeth on Broadway, the stakes surrounding how she embodies ambition both onstage and off were high. In taking on Lady Macbeth as her first Broadway role, Negga courts the power of the Great White way, as well as potential critics who stand to delegitimize her casting and work as tokenism. She expressed in an interview that it was imperative that her casting, "not be tokenism. 'It's important for me to work with people who aren't just excited about the surface attention it will garner,'"[70] the surface attention being her Blackness. Failure in this space threatens her rising celebrity status, a standing that already places her outside of the realm of accessibility and community that White still manages to inhabit. Both Negga, and as we shall see, her Lady Macbeth, already possess the trappings of wealth and glamour that White's Woman seems to covet. Despite Negga's commitment to uplift, her ambition, colored by her celebrity, necessitates an enactment of a less magnanimous, more antiquated definition of ambition: to go about "striving for favor" with a "thirst for popularity."[71] We can see this kind of movement in the press tours Negga went on for the play. It further imbricates her in a celebrity machine that pays dividends and sells tickets and lifestyle products alike. It is no coincidence that Negga's *Town and Country* interview lists the

[70] Ibid.
[71] "mid-14c., *ambicioun*, 'eager or inordinate desire for honor or preferment,' from Old French *ambicion* (13c.), or directly from Latin *ambitionem* (nominative *ambitio*) 'a going around,' especially to solicit votes, hence 'a striving for favor, courting, flattery; a desire for honor, thirst for popularity,' noun of action from past-participle stem of *ambire* "to go around, go about," from *amb-* "around" (from PIE root *ambhi- 'around') + *ire* 'go' (from PIE root *ei- 'to go')" (*Ambition | Search Online Etymology Dictionary*. <www.etymonline.com/search?q=ambition&utm_campaign=sd&utm_medium=serp&utm_source=ds_search>)

designers and prices of the clothing she wears in her photoshoot. Negga's ambition thrives where art and commerce meet, very much making her a creative entrepreneur who must navigate her circumscription by the white male dominated world of showbiz.

As a celebrity playing Lady Macbeth for a new audience, Negga must certainly contend with expectations for this "haunted" character. She is also, in Marvin Carlson's terms, "ghosted" by her previous roles and an "interpretive persona developed and maintained…by the institutional structures of media and publicity, which offer productions a complex interpretive matrix."[72] The unique conditions of Negga's celebrity status complicate and inform how Negga's adaptation of Lady Macbeth performs Black women's ambition more broadly.

It is important to note how Negga became famous in the United States. She received an Academy Award nomination for her first starring role in a US film, Mildred Loving in the 2016 film *Loving.* The story follows the historical figures of the white Richard and the mixed-race Rappahannock and Black Mildred Loving, a couple whose arrest for interracial marriage led to the 1967 Supreme Court decision decriminalizing interracial marriage. The ethnically ambiguous Mildred Loving, on various occasions, changed how she racially identified.[73] Negga also starred as Clare Kendry/Bellew in the 2021 Rebecca Hall film adaptation of Nella Larsen's 1929 novel, *Passing*. Clare Kendry/Bellew passes as a white woman during the Harlem Renaissance, using her status as a beautiful white woman to marry a very wealthy white man. However, she longs for the Black kinship and culture she left behind. These stories of interracial relationships and racial passing ghost her. Known for teasing racial boundaries, Negga's presence on stage stands to make spectators more attuned to the mutually constitutive and contextual nature of race.

[72] Carlson, 75.
[73] Rachel B. Fernandes, "Listening to Loving" in *Resonance, Vol. 3, No. 3* (Jan. 2022), 288–308.

Negga's Lady Macbeth, who has all the material trappings that White's diva version of Lady Macbeth sought, stands to capitalize on her positionality as a ghosted, mixed-race celebrity to issue a cautionary tale about the dangers of Black women aligning their ambition with white patriarchal power structures. Given Negga's ghostedness by her performances of passing, as well as the ethnic and racial makeup of Gold's *Macbeth*'s cast, it is appropriate to apply a framework of passing[74] to better understand how to analyze Negga's version of Lady Macbeth. In this production, the most powerful nobles—Duncan, Malcolm, and Macbeth—are all white and male/masc.[75] The rest of the cast is notably racially diverse, with some gender-bending of the roles: Macduff is played by Black actor Grantham Coleman, Banquo is played by Black biracial actress Amber Gray, and not all the witches are women, to name a few. There were rumblings that Lady Macduff was meant to be cast as a Black actress, but the role ultimately went to Maria Dizzia for reasons that superseded the racial logic of the production was playing at, likely to the play's detriment, despite Dizzia's excellent performance. Nevertheless, this arrangement still insinuates a power dynamic where white men still maintain dominion over their diverse subjects. Thus, proximity to their whiteness and maleness may seem advantageous for Lady Macbeth. Now, the text of *Macbeth* does not explicitly address Lady Macbeth's race. Furthermore, Negga never claims to be passing as white, on stage or in life. But the actress does identify as biracial. In this scenario of playing Lady Macbeth's self-imposed alienation from her diverse kingdom, this "claiming hybridity," per scholar Alysson Hobbs, can be "a plausible substitute for

[74] Such a framework refers to the societal structures, norms, and expectations that govern a person's ability to identify as a racial identity other than their own, generally with the intention of attaining economic, social, or legal advantages. It encompasses the historical and contemporary contexts in which negotiations of racial perception, power, and privilege occur. See: Allyson Hobbs, *A Chosen Exile: A History of Racial Passing in American life*; Ralina L Joseph, *Transcending blackness: From the new millennium mulatta to the exceptional multiracial;* Gayle Wald, *Crossing the line: Racial Passing in Twentieth-Century US Literature and Culture* (Duke University Press, 2000).

[75] Non-binary white actor Asia Kate Dillon plays Malcolm in traditionally "male" clothing.

passing,"[76] because a hybrid identity can still position light-skinned Black people close to the socially elevated status of whiteness. We must keep this in mind when assessing Negga's Lady Macbeth's approach to ambition, as it makes her Lady Macbeth vulnerable to the trap of exception, which names what happens when a Black woman's arrival at the center of power ratifies the terms of her own exclusion.

A quick gloss of the world of Sam Gold's *Macbeth* helps us understand how Negga's ambition plays out under such conditions. In our interview, the production's dramaturg, Ayanna Thompson, shared that the guiding question for the show was, "What does toxic masculinity look like?" She and the production crew had determined this was to be a "play about toxic, white masculinity."[77] Gold relies heavily on what he locates in the play's "image system" to stage this. "There's no play, to me, as clear and focused in its image systems as this one," Gold says of his *Macbeth.*[78] Gold's *Macbeth,* which has virtually no set, appears to happen in a terribly violent and grim no-place. He capitalizes on the "image system" of celebrity, framing the Macbeths, Ruth Negga and famous white British actor Daniel Craig, as the glamorous celebrities they already are. Their costumes are lavish and rich. Everyone else dresses in drab pedestrian or military clothing. "Everyone is not actually equal in the State of Scotland," critic Helen Shaw points out, "designer Suttirat Larlarb puts slouchy, drab, regular-degular clothes on everyone except for them. When Macbeth has his chat with the murderers, he wears heavy cream pajamas and a green-and-pink paisley robe so sumptuous, so brocade-stiff and silky-snuggly, that I

[76] Hobbs, 19.
[77] Ayanna Thompson, Personal Interview (01 November. 2023).
[78] Jessica Derschowitz, "*Macbeth* Director Sam Gold Previews Daniel Craig and Ruth Negga's Murderous Power Play" *Entertainment Weekly* (21 Dec. 2021). <ew.com/theater/macbeth-broadway-preview-sam-gold-daniel-craig-ruth-negga>

reached out toward the stage to pet it. Negga variously wears fur and a chemise and a high-necked cheongsam and a golden evening gown." [79]

Daniel Craig and Ruth Negga in *Macbeth*. Photo by Joan Marcus

The sartorial signs of Negga's Lady Macbeth's wealth are amplified and ghosted by Negga's real-world glamour. The disparity in clothing between the Macbeths and everyone else serves as a visual indicator of class divides evocative of the consolidation of wealth by the one percent and most powerful in our current world.[80] It supports Gold's efforts to concern this production of *Macbeth* with contemporary inequities and manipulation of the masses, and his concerns about the deterioration of the American electorate's faith in institutions due to the growing predominance of "fake news," particularly during the global pandemic. Furthermore, as

[79] H. Shaw," Theater Review: Daniel Craig and Ruth Negga in 'Macbeth.'" in *Vulture* (April. 2022). <https://www.vulture.com/2022/04/theater-review-daniel-craig-and-ruth-negga-in-macbeth.html>)
[80] Ibid.

suggested previously, Gold relies heavily on visual markers of race and gender to reflect hierarchies within the society. White men, who border on buffoonish in this production, rule. The character of Duncan, who grants Macbeth his thanedom, is played by actor Paul Lazar, who embodies the role with derpy comedic excess, playing him cross-eyed and in a fat suit. Craig plays Macbeth as a largely incompetent beautiful idiot. The rest of the cast, comprised primarily of Black and white actors, must overcome these men. This fulfills what scholar Andrea Pao sees as the processual potential of multicultural casting in Shakespeare to "[lead] to explorations on the part of both artists and audiences of how race and ethnicity function as material constructions and imaginary conceptions."[81] Cast in this way, we begin to see that this no-place operates much like many some-places, places where white male patriarchy re-performs what Cristina Leon Alfar sees as the enduring scaffolding of *Macbeth*, a "structure of power dependent on violence for stability."[82]

We can see, or rather, hear, the clearest evidence of this in character accents. In a multi-racial cast where only the villains have non-American accents, the sonic image system speaks to racialized and gendered hierarchies of power, ultimately buttressing Negga's Lady Macbeth's liminality in this vertical order. We can understand the sonic world their accents generate as reflective of an enduring Anglo-Saxon imperial and colonial logic, a logic once grounded in notions of racial and cultural superiority, the pursuit of geopolitical power, and economic exploitation, which served to justify violent subjugation and exploitation of colonized territories and masses colonized of people. For an American audience, these characters' Americanness and the ousting of the Macbeths coalesces with cultural memory and a nationalistic pride associated

[81] Pao, 67.
[82] Cristina Leon Alfar, "'Blood will Have Blood: 'Power, Performance, and Lady Macbeth's Gender Trouble" in *Journal X: A Journal in Culture and Criticism 2.2* (1998), 81.

with the expulsion and rejection of British oppressors during the Revolutionary war and onwards—a pride that adversely stoked Anti-blackness as it boosted White American nationalism. A historically rooted "American" disdain for the British has sustained in racialized and even violent ways in the theatre. While Lin Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton* playfully staged this contentious relationship in the early 20th Century with a multiracial cast, the American public's response to the staging of *Macbeth* itself by with British actors in America bore some of the most significant political and social repercussions for class and race relations in the United States, most notably the Astor Place riots in 1849, which were sparked the nativist fans of working class American actor Edwin Forrest, who violently disrupted the *Macbeth* performance of Forrest's rival, elite British actor Charles Macready, at the Astor Place Opera House. This class animus led to poor white nativists in New York infusing *Macbeth* adaptations with American Blackface tropes to both, as scholar Joyce MacDonald tells us, "violently [recontextualize] the play and its author within an aggressive American cultural nationalism" and "to deconstruct class and cultural authority by asserting white racial authority over blacks and their representation."[83] Gold's production appears to utilize accents to both exploit and challenge these ethnic, racial, and class-based aspects of *Macbeth*'s performance legacy.

Negga utilizes her Dublin accent. Craig foregoes both an affected Scottish accent and his normal Chesire British accent for the crisp posh English accent he uses when playing James Bond. These sonic choices and arrangements are thick with meaning, as they perform a great deal of representational and relational work; Craig's British accent undermines the possibility of an overt Celtic kinship between his Macbeth and Negga's Lady Macbeth. It, instead, invokes a violent imperial history, one in which England and Scotland as its proxy aggressively and

[83] Joyce Green MacDonald, "Minstrel Show Macbeth." in *Weyward Macbeth: Intersections of Race and Performance* (2010), 63.

systematically colonized Ireland through violent land seizure, installation of plantations, and imposition of English law beginning as long ago as 1169. Negga's Irish accent frames her as a colonized subject currying the favor of a colonizing figure in Craig's Macbeth. At the same time, her sonic positionality differentiates her from nearly everyone else in the play, particularly her American-accented foes and subjects. On one hand, her Irish accent renders her marginalized in the context of Americans, given the country's historical racism towards the Irish before they assimilated into American whiteness.[84] Conversely, the diverse defenders of the "natural" and goodly realm and spiritually sanctioned lines of succession—Malcolm, MacDuff, Banquo—all speak with American accents as they defend against the "foreign"-sounding Macbeths. Aurally, Negga's Lady M aligns with no one else, suggesting that she occupies an Otherized and rarified space. But, as I will go on to show, this felt singularity, rather than alienating her, emboldens her ambition and feeds into a logic of exceptionalism that ultimately proves her undoing.

When taken together, the image systems produced through Negga's Lady M, particularly her lavish costuming, singular accent, ethnic ambiguity, frame her as "exceptional" in this world. Her performance leans heavily into this framing, as she offers a breathtaking display of sensuality and guile that exploits the very palpable attraction between herself and her husband. In doing so, she performs an ambition aligned with a logic the perpetuates white toxic masculinity, rarely benefiting the women or people of color it encompasses, regardless of their loyalty to such a system. For the majority of the production, if we consider Negga as being ghosted by both her celebrity and ethnic ambiguity, we can speculate that her Lady Macbeth—a beautiful, persuasive, powerful, rare, and well-dressed anomaly in this dank and dark world—performs what Lisa Nakamura coins as racial "covering." This is a modernist strategy akin to passing, whereby

[84] See David R. Roediger. *Working toward whiteness: How America's immigrants became white: The strange journey from Ellis Island to the suburbs*. Hachette UK, 2006.

ethnically ambiguous people, particularly celebrities, stand to gain commercial capital through their proximity to whiteness "in a 'multicultural world' that values the exotic" so long as they do not acknowledge or explicitly identify with their non-white heritage.[85] In a neoliberal context of present day America, which is closely aligned with the world of this production, the logic of "covering" suggests that it is OK to be Black, but not to align or identify with Blackness in certain institutional settings, despite the harm this might impose on Black people. Negga's Lady Macbeth does just this until the very end of the play. The consequences, or even awareness of this kind of covering, which might be understood as factoring into Negga's Lady Macbeth's pursuit of ambition, do not register for her until it's too late.

Nor do these consequences fully register for the audience until close to the play's end. This covering is made more explicit by the juxtaposition of Negga with another Black biracial actress, Amber Gray, who plays Banquo. Originally a male role, Banquo is a loyal friend and fellow warrior to Macbeth. She remains outwardly morally upright, regardless of the motives for such behavior.[86] A light-skinned mixed race Black woman like Lady Macbeth, Gray's Banquo also operated strategically within the confines of the funhouse of this white patriarchal landscape to achieve a modicum of power by aligning herself with Macbeth.[87] Despite this support,

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[85] Lisa Nakamura, "Mixedfolks.com: 'Ethnic Ambiguity,' Celebrity Outing, and the Internet." in *Mixed Race Hollywood*, edited by Mary Beltrán and Camilla Fojas (New York University Press, 2008), 69.

[86] It should be noted that Gray does not necessarily agree with the perception of Banquo as wholly free of ambition. As she says in an interview with critic Leah Putham, "'So many people love to talk about Banquo being the moral compass. I don't know that I agree." She explains, "I think the only difference between Banquo and Macbeth is he has a Lady Macbeth encouraging the behavior and I have a kid to protect.'" (Leah Putham, "Spot the Difference: Amber Gray Talks Morality and Playing Macbeth's Banquo" in *Playbill* (27 Apr. 2022). <playbill.com/article/spot-the-difference-amber-gray-talks-morality-and-playing-macbeths-banquo>

[87] Gray highlights how her being a woman and a mother might place limitations on Banquo's pursuit of power, opening meaning in both the text and, as I argue, in relationships with other characters: "'it changes how the prophecy applies…'Thou shalt get kings, though thou be none.' It's never meant for Banquo to become king, it's always been meant for Banquo's descendants. Now we get to question the prophecy in these new ways. Can I not be king *because* I'm a woman...Your children and your children's children are set up for life…You're probably going to want to take it. But prophecies are tricky right? Do you need to intervene or not? I think she's really torn…There's a

Macbeth has her killed in a paranoic fit. Her ghost comes back to haunt him, driving him mad. In Act V scene 2, which contains Lady Macbeth's "Out damn'd spot speech," Amber Gray returns as Lady Macbeth's gentlewoman, still costumed as Banquo. Staged this way, the gentlewoman very well may be a ghostly apparition of Banquo.[88] Lit by a camping lantern in the now dark void of the stage, the women exist together in a liminal space. In the moment of Lady Macbeth's declining sanity, the two are juxtaposed such that the nature of their clothing, reflective of how they perform gender to navigate this masculinist world, has no bearing on their imminent demise. As critic Soraya McDonald notices in this production, "Banquo and Lady Macbeth become mirrors of each other, both supporting and cultivating the himbo Macbeth… There's an additional layer there about the sort of women with whom Macbeth chooses to associate…They both wish to see Macbeth seated as king."[89] Both women, being very close to Macbeth and very fair-skinned, embody a proximity to whiteness that, in the end, does not fulfill its promise.[90]

The culmination of this mirroring and its tragically affecting significance plays out in this scene. The ambiguity of who Gray is here—Banquo, gentlewoman, or both—complements the muddiness of Lady Macbeth's mental state. As McDonald points out, in this moment, Gray "bears a somewhat sisterly resemblance to Negga."[91] The intimate care with which Gray attends

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whole moment where she's really considering taking action to make it come true. And then Fleance comes out and catches her and they have this moment where she hands over all her weapons to her child" (Putham).

[88] Until February 2022, Gray starred as Persephone, the Greek goddess who spends half of her year in the Underworld. She, like Negga, is ghosted by a past role. A theater going audience may understand Gray as an actress laced with an aura of otherworldliness, as Persephone, and now Banquo, both navigate between spiritual planes.

[89] Soraya Nadia McDonald, "A Himbo and His Irritated Wife Meet Their Bloody Ends in Broadway's New 'Macbeth'" in *Andscape* (3 May. 2022). <andscape.com/features/a-himbo-and-his-irritated-wife-meet-their-bloody-ends-in-broadways-new-macbeth>.

[90] Per Thompson, at one point, there was the possibility of casting Lady MacDuff as a Black woman in an effort to further explore questions of how white patriarchy impacts the Black women it governs. Time and production constraints did not allow for this. For more on the "promise of whiteness," particularly its structural and cultural benefit, see DuBois, Dyer, and Crenshaw.

[91] McDonald.

to Negga conveys the closeness of kin. Gray's comforting embrace, her visage profoundly and empathically aligned with Negga's pained body conveys a shared knowing of what they have *both* sacrificed and endured navigating their respective ambition. Banquo's seemingly righteous path afforded no less suffering than Lady Macbeth's unholy one, though Banquo maintains the moral high ground.

Ruth Negga and Amber Gray in *Macbeth.* Photo by Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

They press together their foreheads, locking in a psychic transference of feeling, memory, and understanding.

Ruth Negga and Amber Gray in *Macbeth*. Photo by Joan Marcus.

Gray's Banquo/gentlewoman does not appear to fault Lady Macbeth for her egregious transgressions, despite having been their collateral damage.[92] We see the juxtaposition of women with wholly different racial, gender, and class expressions: Negga inhabits a "feminine" persona, her naturally curly hair free and flowing as she wears a loose expensive nightgown; Gray still conceals her "femininity" with her long sensuous curls disciplined and hidden in braids, her figure obscured by a practical muscle t-shirt and pants. Both women, despite their approaches to performing their intersectional identities, cannot win in the white masculinist world of Macbeth. Staring into Negga's bleary eyes, Gray seems to say, "I see you. I understand."

This closeness, this forgivable abandonment by kin reflects back the complex interpersonal phenomenon of passing that ghosts Negga. For centuries, it has been understood by many Black people in the diaspora as an unfortunate but often necessary strategy for procuring access to power and resources. Scholar Allyson Hobbs argues that passing proves to be a painful

[92] While Lady Macbeth does not kill Banquo, she stokes the ruthlessness and paranoia that inspire Macbeth to do so.

and alienating calculation, given the often-necessary separation or distancing from kin. At the same time, the performance of passing betrays the construction of racial categories. As Hobbs so poignantly says, the machinations and negotiations around this life in chosen exile "[reveal] that the essence of identity is not found in an individual's qualities, but rather in the ways that one recognizes oneself and is recognized as kindred."[93] Until this moment, Lady Macbeth, looking down from her high tower from an extravagant and murderous folie à deux with her white husband, had stopped recognizing herself as belonging to a world outside of an ambition hitched to white patriarchy. Negga and Gray, here seeing much of themselves in the other, linked by their respective betrayals by the man through whom they both sought power, share the regret of this alignment. For as Hobbs explains, "passing works as a prism: it refracts different aspects of what we commonly think of as racial identity and reveals what is left once the veil of an ascribed status is stripped away. Behind that veil of what we know as 'race' is simply the lived experience of people."[94] Here, bereft of her intoxicatingly sensuous mental command and her husband who confers status, literally stripped of her lush attire, we see Lady Macbeth find evidence of her miscalculations, a shameful lived experience, in the eyes of a sister-figure who can reflect it back.[95] Much to the chagrin of many critics, Negga does not perform her famous sleepwalking scene as they might expect. Given the intense ghostedness of this moment,[96] it should come as no surprise that there is resistance to Negga's creative addition to the literary text through a new kind of embodiment. For this soliloquy belongs to a collective performance memory that

[93] Hobbs, 14.
[94] Ibid.
[95] Another interpretation may be that the women are linked in their respective loss of a child. Banquo has died, and therefore lost her son, Fleance. The question of Lady Macbeth's fertility and childlessness has been an ongoing debate among literary and theater scholars. Dramaturg Ayanna Thompson shared that the production decided Negga's Lady Macbeth had a baby that didn't survive, and that some of her physical distress in her final scene is caused by phantom childbirth pains.
[96]This iconic speech is haunted by the memories of Lady Macbeths past, it is haunted by Negga's previous memories and previous roles, it is haunted by the audience's expectations of Negga the celebrity.

demands actors summon a particular theatrical body that remembers and performs prescribed "emotions," "gestures" and "inherited routines." [97] Per critics, this scene must be "crazed,"[98] performed with "frightening pathos,"[99] and excessive hand wringing. As Soraya McDonald observes, "it can be tempting to lean into audience expectations when it comes to Shakespeare's most familiar works…. Gold anticipates this and takes full advantage of Negga's outsized stage presence. And so, Lady Macbeth's 'out, damned spot,' which actors tend to overplay with violent handwashing, recedes a bit."[100] While I agree that Negga's performance subverts norms, a look at her gestural and emotional choices reveals hitherto underexplored emotional possibilities for Lady Macbeth. Her focus rests only briefly on her hands, which she imagines to be soaked with the blood of her victims. Instead, she looks desperately to Banquo, her gentlewoman, in whom she seeks not only solace, but also, forgiveness. She focuses outward to the audience, turning to them to help her make sense of what she has done. These connections endow her ensuing madness, quiet instead of frenetically terrifying, with a recognition of her own relationality, of being witnessed. She is, indeed, *out* of her mind, not trapped within it as she locates the objects of her guilt, the victims of chaos she's wrought, outside of herself. She lets them affect her. Thus, Negga transforms this from a performance of strictly guilt to one of shame. She casts her eyes down, and instead of delivering the iconic line, "Out damn'd spot" to her hands, as prescribed by performance history, she directs it to a blemish on the ground. This also seems to suggest that something exterior to herself is to blame for the violence, her shameful mode of procuring

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[97] Carlson, 58.
[98] Frank Scheck, "The Hollywood Reporter" in *The Hollywood Reporter* (28 Apr. 2022). <www.hollywoodreporter.com/lifestyle/arts/daniel-craig-ruth-negga-asia-kate-dillon-macbeth-theater-review-1235137293>
[99] Charles Isherwood, "'Macbeth' Review: Damned Spots Aplenty" in *Wall Street Journal* (29 Apr. 2022). <www.wsj.com/articles/macbeth-daniel-craig-ruth-negga-paul-lazar-william-sam-gold-shakespeare-amber-gray-grantham-coleman-11651265394>
[100] McDonald.

power. On the nearly featureless darkened stage, which we know to be the Macbeth castle, she seems to finally recognize that the *structure* by which she's been circumscribed, one she has perpetuated, is marred. Could this structure be that of white supremacy, this blemish symbolic of all the violence, hate, the -isms, and the divisiveness it brings?

Within the moral architecture of Gold's production, unlike White's, Negga's Lady Macbeth's failure to pursue a form of collective ambition that might account for, or even leverage, her own marginalization alongside that of others, damns her most. I call this failure of recognition *haunted ambition*; it is the condition in which a Black woman's hard-won entry into spaces of institutional power is shadowed by the very exclusions, hierarchies, and structural violences that made such entry both remarkable and necessary. The concept draws on overlapping theorizations of haunting. It extends Marvin Carlson's conceptualizing of theatre as a "memory machine"[101] in which all performances and performers on a stage are "haunted" by past performances and their interpretive histories, the past is always present in the bodies, voices, and movement of the performers. Haunted ambition widens the geography of the stage, accounting for the social and political conditions that surround it; these lingering histories of violence and exclusion that, as Avery Gordon argues, assert their claim on the present, refusing to be forgotten or suppressed.[102] These specters do not heed our imagined boundaries between the theatre space and social realities that shape the present moment. They migrate alongside and attached to Black women whose ambition carries them onto Broadway stages, into Harvard-affiliated theaters, and into the celebrity apparatus of American cultural production, spaces that have historically barred, tokenized, or disciplined their presence. This haunting is constitutive of

[101] Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine.* University of Michigan Press. 2001.
[102] Avery Gordon. *Ghostly Matters : Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*. New University of Minnesota Press edition, University of Minnesota Press. 2008.

the condition of their achievement. Saidiya Hartman's theorization of how the afterlife of slavery continues to structure Black women's relationship to institutions and power,[103] as well as Koritha Mitchell's articulation of "know-your-place aggression" as the persistent disciplining for of Black women's claims on public authority, name the specific social forces that produce this haunting.

Haunted ambition is the psychic and structural predicament of a Black woman whose drive, talent, and determination have secured her entry into spaces historically organized around her exclusion, only to find that the very terms of that entry are inseparable from the history that foreclosed it. Negga is ghosted by prior performances of the role she inhabits. This is compounded by her being ghosted by the accumulated weight of the exclusions her presence simultaneously indexes and exceeds. Her achievement and her haunting are, thus, coextensive: the institutional recognition she has secured as a Black biracial actress and the structural violence that made such recognition both remarkable and incapable of transforming the conditions that necessitated it. Both live in every gesture she makes on stage, each costume choice that rarifies her in a drab world, every critical reception that frames her casting as historic, and every room she enters as a "first." In the charged gap between Negga the actress, whose public commitments to representational equity are well documented, and the catastrophically ambitious Lady Macbeth she inhabits within Gold's Broadway apparatus, a cipher emerges. Through it, we come to understand the consequences of ambition fueled by blind self-exceptionalism and a dissociation from systemic oppression, an embodiment of what Black women's ambition can look like when it affirms the machinery of white patriarchal institutional power.

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[103] Saidiya V. Hartman, et al. *Scenes of Subjection : Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. , Illustrated by Torkwase Dyson, Revised and Updated Edition. 25th anniversary edition, W. W. Norton & Company, 2022.

Negga's interpretive choices as Lady Macbeth cohere beautifully to reflect a coherent internal life of a character fully convinced that the terms of her inclusion were also the terms of her belonging... until she wasn't. Her final externalized search for the root of the violence she's wrought embodies and makes visible the collapse of the dangerous logic she'd internalized. In doing so, she illuminates for us the structural conditions that make such ambition's failure likely. In making herself legible to a self-interested dominant power structure, she tragically discovers that legibility is not the same as sanctuary. It would be unfair to say that Gold's staging of this trajectory in a violent white patriarchal no-place hybrid of an atemporal Scotland and the American present of April 2022 mirrors a parallel logic within the Broadway commercial apparatus. It may drive invested parties nuts, but murderous intent is generally not there. But its concentration of authority in white male directors and playwrights, its functioning as a celebrity machine that rewards Black women's visibility without meaningfully transforming the conditions that necessitated it, and its failure of so many Black women actors striving to such great heights, chimes with the less overtly violent aspects of the world that Gold stages. Despite lip service to the contrary, and what I believe was a genuine desire but a lack of political will and/or capital from many white power brokers, the theater industry had begun yielding many of its post-Floyd pledges of transformation by the time Gold's *Macbeth* closed.

The precision of Negga's performance, both as Lady Macbeth and as a celebrity persona, illuminates the condition of being the "first." It is the condition of being positioned as visible proof of progress in an industry whose fundamental hierarchies of race and gender remain, beneath the symbolism of the historic casting, essentially undisturbed. Seeing as Negga is a Black biracial Irish actor who achieved American stardom by inhabiting roles that required her to navigate racial liminality gracefully to make her difference legible and non-threatening, her

celebrity itself performs the condition of haunted ambition. Gold's production lays bare its institutional logic as an intimate portrait of a world where proximity to whiteness confers temporary power and shelter, but never permanent safety. Negga's historic casting as Lady Macbeth in the spring of 2022 was just one data point in an industry straining against its stated commitments to DEIJ. Actor's Equity Association's "Hiring Bias and Wage Gap" report for 2022 and 2023,[104] which tracks employment opportunities and salaries across the categories of principal actors in plays and musicals, chorus actor, stage manager, and assistant stage manager, 30.26% of new contracts went to BIPOC members, an increase of almost 9% from the pre-pandemic era. But the aggregate figure obscures a bleaker picture. At the entry level, specifically Small Professional Theatre and low-tiered League of Resident Theaters contracts, where careers are born and pathways to visibility established, BIPOC members received fewer new contracts than their White colleagues. BIPOC stage managers and assistant stage managers received 56.7% fewer new contracts in 2022 and 53.8% fewer in 2023 than their White counterparts. The intersectional data shows that BIPOC women received only 14.4% of all new contracts in 2022, 9.4% fewer than their white women counterparts and 10.4% fewer than white men. Black women, who sit at the intersection of both categories, faced a double bind that the aggregate BIPOC figures obscure. The data shows modest overall racial progress alongside persistent gender regression. The language of inclusion, as the report's own authors acknowledge, could not yet account for what these intersecting pressures meant on the ground. Theatre Communication Group's "Theatre Facts" 2023 report[105] found that 61% of nonprofit theatres it

[104] Actors' Equity Association, *Hiring Bias and Wage Gap Report: 2022–2023*, https://cdn.actorsequity.org/docs/Hiring%20Bias%20and%20Wage%20Gap%20Report%20-%202022-2023%20-%20Higher%20Accessibility%20Version.pdf

[105] Theatre Communications Group. *Theatre Facts 2023*. Theatre Communications Group, 2025, tcg.org/Web/Web/Our-Work/Research/Theatre-Facts.aspx.

tracked were operating at a financial loss, the highest rate of deficit spending not seen since 2009, when the collapse of the American economy during the Great Recession pushed the theater sector to its most severe financial crisis in recent memory. These are the precise conditions under which DEI commitments, generally the first line item to be renegotiated, tend to quietly recede. And five years after the #WeSeeYouWhiteAmericanTheatre manifesto demanded that half of creative teams and programming at predominantly white institutions be BIPOC-identifying, *American Theatre*'s own accountability survey found the theater industry had fallen well short of that benchmark. Its commitments consistently outpaced its structural will.[106] As *American Theatre* observed, the goal post had moved.

Unable to side-step the narrative limitations on the character as can White's Woman, Negga's Lady Macbeth Performs what Dr. Ruha Benjamin named in a 2024 Spelman Founder's Day convocation address as the central danger of exceptional Black visibility: "Black faces in high places are not going to save us...our blackness and our womanness in themselves are not trustworthy if we allow ourselves to be conscripted into positions of power that maintain the oppressive status quo."[107] Negga's performance enacts this logic in real time, showing us what it looks like to be conscripted, to mistake the terms of one's inclusion for the terms of one's liberation. What her performance names is not the failure of individual ambition but the persistence of the conditions that make individual ambition, for Black women, both necessary and structurally insufficient. Lady Macbeth does not survive the play, but the structures that produced her, do.

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[106] "We Came. We Saw. Now What?" *American Theatre*, 16 June 2025, americantheatre.org/2025/06/16/we-came-we-saw-now-what.

[107] Dr. Benjamin said this in her convocation speech at Spelman college's Founder's Day Convocation on April 11, 2024.

CONCLUSION

Ambition, when staged by Black women performers through this kind of canonical adaptation, does not show up as a neutral impulse or an individual virtue. Instead, it arrives as negotiation, often fraught and asymmetrical, shaped by access to authorship, institutional power, and the terms under which desire becomes legible. In the figure of Lady Macbeth, who's long been tasked with absorbing cultural anxieties about women's lust for power, White and Negga's performances do not offer competing interpretations of a shared role so much as they expose divergent conditions under which contemporary Black feminist ambition can be rehearsed, constrained, or foreclosed within theatrical systems still organized by racialized patriarchy.

Macbeth In Stride shows that ambition becomes politically legible when it is staged *as* method. White mobilizes autoethnographic performance as a form of Black feminist praxis that resists tragic inevitably, refuses institutional containment, and insists on collectivity over exception. Yet her refusal does not dissolve the constraints of Shakespeare's narrative or the institution that houses it. Instead, she stages that refusal from within them. Her interruption of Lady Macbeth's canonical suicide serves as a structural intervention and a rejection of the cultural demand that ambitious Black women be punished, disciplined, or disappeared for the story to make sense. Nothing she does rescues the text, but that does not seem to be the point. Exposing the persistence of its masculinist scaffolding does. And although she does not arrive at a utopic alternate ending, her most ambitious act may be her risk of refusal to do so.

Negga's Lady Macbeth offers a vital counterpoint. Situated within the commercial, canonical, and celebrity-driven machinery of Broadway, her performance exposes how a traditional theatrical apparatus that concentrates authorship in the director and playwright, disciplines an actor's ambition, tightly constraining their reflexive self-authorship.

Together, these performances challenge the persistent fantasy that representational inclusion constitutes progress. The casting of Black women in canonical roles is not necessarily a radical act. Visibility does not equate with transformation. Ambition does not become liberatory just because it is embodied by marginalized subjects. What matters is not whether or not Black women are permitted to inhabit the canon, but whether they are empowered to author, interrupt, and even refuse it.

Lady Macbeth has long born the consequences of women's ambition, her desire framed as excess, her unraveling as inevitable. White and Negga show that this burden does not belong to the character alone, but rather to theatrical and cultural systems that understand ambition as a zero-sum game and reward Black women when they align themselves with its terms. If ambition speaks through these performers, it says both "ascend and refuse," and it warns what happens when ascent cannot refuse. It emphatically insists that the futures Black feminist ambition imagines not only require better endings but can refuse inherited ends altogether.