Introduction

In the 1990s, audiences appeared to have an undying appetite for Shakespearean drama on the big screen. However, the great Shakespeare boom of the 1990s did not last, and the first decade of the twenty-first century witnessed a big-screen bust as Shakespeare migrated to the small screen. This wasn't, however, merely a change in venue; it was also a change in genre. Filmic adaptations of the plays gave way, in the middle of this first decade, to an inundation of television documentaries about teaching Shakespeare to "at-risk" youth. In Al Pacino's relatively early documentary *Looking for Richard* (1996), what might be considered an urtext for this new genre, Pacino and his colleague Frederic Kimball ask strangers on the street what they think about Shakespeare as they rehearse *Richard III*. One man replies that, though he's an avid watcher of television, he has never actually seen a Shakespeare play. Kimball answers, "That's because there's no Shakespeare on TV!" This is by no means the case today. How do we account for this bust and migration? What happens when Shakespeare moves to the small screen? *Shakespearean Charity and the Perils of Redemptive Performance* takes up a series of television documentaries, all of which depict young people laboring with Shakespearean performance, in order to ask, along with Nietzsche, the genealogical question "what was really happening when that happened?" (41). What were the conditions of possibility, the structures of feeling, that gave rise to this new partnership between Shakespeare, marginalized youth, and the television documentary?

In the pages that follow, I argue that these films emerge in response to four historical and discursive developments: the rise of reality television and its emphasis on the emotional transformation of the private individual; the concomitant rise of neoliberalism and emotional capitalism, which fuses the figure of *homo economicus* with that of *homo sentimentalis*, and which employs therapeutic discourses demanding self-optimization through emotional labor in order to individualize social inequality; the privatization of public education, the rise of so-called "no-excuses" charter schools, the 2001 and 2015 reauthorizations of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), the ESEA's investments in moral or "character education" and what neoliberal reformers call "the new paternalism," reforms that further dismantle the welfare state while stigmatizing and disciplining the poor; and

the emergence of new modes of address that infuse evangelical conversion narratives with a therapeutic self-help ethos. When these forces attach themselves to Shakespeare, we end up with what I call the "White Christian Shakespeare Complex."

The White Christian Shakespeare Complex is a species of what Teju Cole has termed the "White Savior Industrial Complex." Cole, in *The Atlantic* and on Twitter, critiqued the efforts of the Kony 2012 campaign against Joseph Kony, a Ugandan war criminal. For those who don't remember, Kony 2012 was a cloyingly evangelical piece of viral video slacktivism that melted the hearts and fired up the spirits of white middle-class suburban college students around the world. This fervor was matched only by its backlash. The video, which currently has more than 100 million views on YouTube, polarized viewers. Cole wrote the following:

> The white savior supports brutal policy decisions in the morning, founds charities in the afternoon, and receives awards in the evening. The banality of evil transmutes into the banality of sentimentality. The world is nothing but a problem to be solved by enthusiasm. This world exists simply to satisfy the needs – including, importantly, the sentimental needs – of white people and Oprah. The White Savior Industrial Complex is not about justice. It is about having a big emotional experience that validates privilege . . . I deeply respect American sentimentality, the way one respects a wounded hippo. You must keep an eye on it, for you know it is deadly.

As a first-generation college student, as a scholarship student whose life was, some might say, saved by Shakespeare, and as someone who has taught Shakespeare to marginalized youth, I was inspired by Cole's comments to ask serious questions about arts education and applied drama's dependency upon its own privilege. It's complicated: How has Shakespeare been used, like the Kony 2012 video, to create "a big emotional experience that validates privilege"? Whose emotions and "sentimental needs"? Whose privilege? What does it mean to give Shakespeare as a gift, and how do we

expect students to properly receive Shakespeare? What problems are solved by their enthusiasm?

In her aptly titled *Applied Drama: The Gift of Theatre*, Helen Nicholson notes the dual nature of the gift of theater, reminding us that "there is always a need to be vigilant about whether the practice is accepted as a generous exercise of care or whether, however well-intentioned, it is regarded as an invasive act or unwelcome intrusion. It is easy for trust to become dependency, for generosity to be interpreted as patronage, for interest in others to be experienced as the gaze of surveillance" (166). Operating under the material constraints and logic of what has been called "philanthrocapitalism," all of the films studied here depict philanthropic practices that risk being received as patronizing intrusions. While I do not doubt the benevolence of these practitioners' intentions, I am concerned about the unintended effects of their practices, effects that may in fact form a crucial part of their appeal. As Jenny Hughes and Helen Nicholson note, applied theater's need for funding and its need to produce results – by getting marginalized students into the center – "can mean that applied theater is conceptualized in ways that serve neoliberalism well," even if this recuperation is also "obscured by an apparently activist rhetoric: applied theatre transforms, promotes well-being, improves quality of life, and moves people on" (4). I want to highlight the importance of the therapeutic language evoked here and the way such imperatives to attain emotional health can work in the service of neoliberalization.

In what follows, I argue that the films in question, and the practices documented within them, serve and reflect larger projects of neoliberalization. While at times I may invoke neoliberalism as an historical period, as it has been sketched out by scholars such as David Harvey in his *Brief History of Neoliberalism*, or while neoliberalism might instead name a set of policy innovations associated with the Mont Pelerin Society or Chicago School economics, innovations largely introduced to humanities scholars through the work of Michel Foucault, I largely follow the definition proposed by Wendy Brown, who, in her recent book *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*, acknowledges that "neoliberalism as economic policy, a mode of governance, and an order of reason is at once a global phenomenon, yet inconsistent, differentiated, unsystematic, impure … It is globally ubiquitous, yet disunified and nonidentical with itself in space and time"

(20–21). Nevertheless, in her chapter on the neoliberalization of higher education, Brown focuses her attention on neoliberalism as a rationality or "order of reason." She writes:

> [Neoliberalism] is best understood not simply as economic policy, but as a governing rationality that disseminates market values and metrics to every sphere of life and construes the human itself exclusively as *homo oeconomicus*. Neoliberalism thus does not merely privatize – turn over to the market for individual production and consumption – what was formerly publicly supported and valued. Rather, it formulates everything, everywhere in terms of capital investment and appreciation, including and especially humans themselves (176).

Leigh Claire La Berge and Quinn Slobodian have found Brown's pronouncements on neoliberalism's triumph and ubiquity too totalizing and a bit premature, even if Brown herself highlights how inconsistencies within the neoliberal imaginary might serve to caution us against reading her narrative as "a teleological one, a dark chapter in a steady march toward end times" (La Berge and Slobodian 611; Brown 21). For this reason, at times I use "neoliberalization" in order to index the incomplete, heterogeneous, and continuous nature of neoliberal reforms. More importantly for this project, recent scholarship stresses how, contrary to (and yet compatible with) laissez-faire models of capitalism, neoliberalization refigures the state as a crucial market actor, relying upon the "active intervention of what neoliberals often called the 'visible hand' of law, state, and … religion to encase and protect capital rights" (La Berge and Slobodian 606). Further, contrary to critiques of neoliberalism that focus exclusively on society's reduction to the individual market actor, the works of Wendy Brown and Melinda Cooper more accurately argue that "it is the reproductive family unit, not the individual, that is the basic unit of the neoliberal imaginary" (606). For these reasons, throughout this project I highlight the changing roles of the family, the state, and religion in these films.

While Shakespeare studies has focused on the many pedagogical uses of filmed dramatizations of Shakespeare's plays in the classroom, very few take on these documentary films, which embed this very problematic within their

diegesis. Only through an attentiveness to the institutional and discursive context of these films can we see how they operate to solidify Shakespeare's place in relation to the White Christian Shakespeare Complex, a complex that, I argue, interpellates marginalized youth into a particularly neoliberal, patriarchal, and puritanical vision of capitalism.

All of these films provoke and document emotion by combining reversals of cultural fortune with transformations in the emotional "health" of poor students, many of whom are, importantly, students of color – though few films address this fact. In *Shakespeare High* (2011), for example, we meet Luis Gueta, a former gang member turned thespian, or, in his words, a "big badass cholo ni**er" turned "motherfucking geek." Upon winning first place for his performance in *Midsummer Night's Dream*, he explains his motivation: "What we needed to do is to stand up as an example. We don't have to be white, and we don't have to be rich, yeah, you know, coming from the bottom, we're the underdogs." Paula Hunter, the drama teacher at Hesperia High School, a rural desert school in which, we learn, "most of these kids have separated parents," similarly remarks, "I always think of [Hesperia] as the underdog." Much of the appeal of these films' engagement with the White Christian Shakespeare Complex is the appeal of the underdog narrative, though such underdogs are never explicitly marked by race or class. Furthermore, if these films show us "underdogs" who become emotionally healthy and culturally rich, they do not challenge or depict the structures that made them unhealthy or poor to begin with. Theodor Adorno sums up the dangers of these films best when he warns, "In the end, glorification of splendid underdogs is nothing other than glorification of the splendid system that makes them so" (28). The same might be said for the glorification of those who facilitate the underdogs' transformation, be they teachers, arts educators, actors, therapists, or life coaches.

In the final moments of *Kings of Baxter: Can Twelve Teenage Offenders Conquer Macbeth?* (2017), a film in which two professional actors try to motivate disinclined incarcerated youth to perform *Macbeth*, Huw McKinnon, an actor with Bell Shakespeare, Australia's national theater company, seems close to acknowledging the central problematic of the White Christian Shakespeare Complex. No other film makes such an acknowledgment, and here it happens very quickly, under McKinnon's breath, and within faltering syntax and a strange piece of Australian slang. After complimenting and encouraging a

panicked – or just unmotivated – actor on the eve of the performance, McKinnon, exasperated, tells the camera, "It's a real fine line between being in his face too much . . . I'm also conscious of pissing in his pocket, like, when they know when you . . . you know what I mean?" To "piss in one's pocket," an abbreviated form of "to piss in one's pocket and tell one it's raining," according to Urban Dictionary and my Australian friends, means "to insincerely attempt to convince a person that you're doing them a favor, when you actually have only your own interest (generally making a profit or ingratiating oneself) at heart."[1] McKinnon seems to partially acknowledge, here, the fact that the youth in the film – barely invested in the project all along – "know when you" are manipulating them and how much emotional labor they're really performing for their ostensible donors. At two points in the film both parties quip that they know the teens are performing only for the candy they receive for showing up to rehearsal. Though it's never directly acknowledged, nevertheless, everyone in the film seems to know that their endeavor is a failure, and it's perhaps this inadvertent proximity to honesty and failure that is *Kings of Baxter*'s greatest achievement as a film. Unlike so many of these films, *Kings of Baxter* refuses to deploy what Lauren Berlant has called "cruel optimism"; the film never figures Shakespeare as an attachment that might provide redemption or "the good life" under neoliberal conditions of precarity (*Cruel Optimism* 1).

Act I of *Othello* offers a scene that I find emblematic of the documentaries examined here. There, we witness an autobiographical tale within an autobiographical tale, as Othello delivers his "round and unvarnished tale" to the Venetian Senate. Autobiography and documentary, as I hope to show, as modes of storytelling, share a similarly fraught relationship to the private truths they construct yet pretend to merely reveal. Within Othello's tale, he recounts being continually asked by Brabantio, and then by Desdemona herself, to tell the "story of [his] life," particularly of its "disastrous chances" and "hairbreadth scapes i'th' imminent-deadly breach," of being "sold to slavery," and his "redemption thence." Such imperatives seem to mirror the demands these documentaries make of their participants. The institutional imperative to recount one's triumph over adversity is also, it's worth noting, a commonplace

[1] The OED's definition of this phrase seems less apt than the one found in Urban Dictionary.

of college and scholarship application essay prompts. Othello tells tales of exotic spaces far removed from Venice, piquing the voyeuristic – if not imperialist – impulses of his interlocutors. Desdemona, distracted, would "seriously incline" and with a "greedy ear / Devour up [his] discourse." This tale "beguile[s] her of her tears" when he speaks "of some distressful stroke / That [his] youth suffered" (1.3.130–159). Much is made of the power of this tale to woo, to forge love and pity, in the broadest sense, between two people. Even the telling of the telling of the tale moves the Duke. In relation to the Shakespearean documentaries I examine here, this familiar scene speaks in new ways by pointedly indexing the emotional powers, racial dimensions, uneven relations, and discursive contours of Shakespearean charity and redemptive performance.

Othello tells the Duke, "She loved me for the dangers I had passed / And I loved her that she did pity them" (1.3.168–169). Desdemona's "pity," an ambivalent and capacious affective relation in the early modern imaginary, if not within our own today, seems emblematic of the ambivalent role of emotion in these films. We might read her exchange with Othello sympathetically, as a moment of intercultural affection balanced by the fact that Othello is able to tell his own story, his testimony, and not have it told by others who might "extenuate / [Or] set down aught in malice" (5.2.340–341). In this reading, the affective exchange is a fair one, even if emotional exchange is cast in the language of the market: "She gave me for my pains a world of sighs" (1.3.160). Reading this scene more cynically, however, we might imagine Othello, both in court and in courtship, engaged in asymmetrical emotional and rhetorical labor, downplaying his skills and speaking upon hints while telling stories he knows his audiences want to hear. The documentaries in question share this ambivalence, and while they may purport to have good intentions, I want to read the practices depicted – and their very depiction – with a measured balance of cynicism and sympathy.

1 Genre Trouble: Between Fiction, Documentary, and Reality Television

Why did big-box-office, big-screen Shakespearean drama give way to low-budget, documentary television Shakespeare in the early 2000s? First, we

should note that this shift occurs within the very years that documentary, in general and on the big screen, was achieving mainstream box-office success. Documentary figures like Michael Moore, Errol Morris, and Al Gore were attaining unprecedented mainstream appeal and some of the biggest box-office records for documentaries to date. Steven Mintz argues, "The most stunning development in movies in the early twenty-first century is the surging popularity of the documentary ... Seven of the all-time Top 10 grossing documentaries were released in 2003 and 2004, and 18 of the 25 most profitable political documentaries were released since 2002" (10). Jonathan Kahana tells us that Moore's *Bowling for Columbine* in 2002 inaugurated a boom in documentary, but that this boom, however, quickly went bust: "Since 2004, the year that *Fahrenheit 9/11* led a cycle of politically themed documentaries into theaters, total domestic box office for documentary had dropped steadily, from $171 million in 2004 to $116 million the following year, to $55 million in 2006, and only $2 million at the midway point of 2007" (*Intelligence Work* 327). The first wave of Shakespearean documentaries – *A Touch of Greatness: A Portrait of a Maverick Teacher* (2004), *My Shakespeare: Romeo and Juliet for a New Generation with Baz Luhrmann* (2004), *Why Shakespeare?* (2005), *The Hobart Shakespeareans* (2005), *Shakespeare Behind Bars* (2005), *Ballet Changed My Life: Ballet Hoo!* (2006), and *Mickey B* (2007) – appeared, significantly, during this boom, though only *Shakespeare Behind Bars* appeared in wide release on the big screen.

We might also point out that this rise of the documentary coincided with a larger destabilization of truth under the Bush administration – beginning with the disputed election in 2000 – and a paranoid truth-seeking in the wake of the terror attacks of September 11, 2001, as evidenced by the so-called 9/11 truther movement. Kahana notes that, while much attention has been given to big-screen documentaries of this period, especially presidential political documentaries, "the more interesting phenomenon was the distribution of documentary themes and dispositions across various levels of culture" (*Intelligence Work* 328). He points to the growing number of documentaries appearing on small screens at that time. This sudden increase of small-screen documentaries, importantly, coincides with the emergence and triumph of "prestige television." In the second decade of the twenty-first century, we have witnessed a continuation of Shakespearean

pedagogical documentaries: *When Romeo Met Juliet* (2010), *Shakespeare High* (2011), *Fame High: The Talented Students at the Los Angeles County High School for the Arts* (2012), *Caesar Must Die* (2013), *Romeo Is Bleeding* (2015), *Midsummer in Newton* (2016), and *Kings of Baxter: Can Twelve Teenage Offenders Conquer Macbeth?* (2017).[2] All of these films, to varying degrees, and in very different ways, argue for Shakespeare's power to "transform" or "redeem" poor students, most of whom are students of color. In fact, watching these films feels in many ways like watching the same film over and over, a repetition that must index an urgent social anxiety around the intersections of class, race, education, and documentary. Such repetitions make sense given Kahana's claim that documentary functions according to a logic of allegory, wherein "documentary representation both depends upon and displaces the particular value of the individual case, affirming its value in the name of an abstract principle" (*Intelligence Work* 8). What abstract principle do the displaced individual lives surveyed in these films affirm? In order to find out, we will proceed allegorically, moving between specific moments in these films and a broader examination of their shared abstract principles. My hope, however, is that we need not displace the particular in favor of the general.

Film scholars have long noted a significant change in late twentieth-century documentary style, from a *cinéma-vérité* or direct cinema style to one that borrows elements of the fiction film. Conversely, the fiction film can now be seen borrowing elements of the documentary. Linda Williams, in her discussion of Oliver Stone's *JFK* and Errol Morris's *The Thin Blue Line*, suggests that

[2] Though an examination of prison Shakespeare documentaries (e.g., *Shakespeare behind Bars*, *Mickey B*, *Caesar Must Die*, and *Jail Caesar*) is beyond the scope of this Element – and is explored fully elsewhere – the prison industrial complex haunts the White Christian Shakespeare Complex, if for no other reason than that we cannot consider schools separately from prisons, given the school-to-prison pipeline, a phenomenon masterfully explored in Anna Deavere Smith's *Notes from the Field* (play, 2015; film, 2018). It's also worth noting that all of the disciplinary institutions examined by Foucault – schools, prisons, hospitals and mental institutions, and army barracks – serve as sites for recent Shakespearean documentary films.

the "historical fiction film borrowing many aspects of the form of documentary" might be contrasted with "what we might call the low-budget postmodern documentary borrowing many features of the fiction film" (796). Kahana adds, "In a manner that was soon imitated widely, Morris embraced cinematic artifice, incorporating techniques of performance, of cinematography, and *mise-en-scène*, of musical scoring, and of editing that were anathema to the reportorial ethos of *cinéma vérité*" ("Introduction" 723). As these genres bleed into each other, we notice a surprising number of fiction films about the production of a Shakespearean drama – e.g., *In the Bleak Midwinter* (1995), *Shakespeare in Love* (1998), or television's *Slings and Arrows* (2003–2006) – that share the audition-rehearsal-performance structure found in Shakespearean documentaries (Purcell 538). We might consider how Shakespeare's own dramas, particularly the history plays, have long engaged in a similar cross-genre borrowing. The most recent big-budget (£9 million) screen adaptation of Shakespeare's plays is, notably, Sam Mendes's *The Hollow Crown* series (2012–2016) (Morse 7). This adaptation of the *Henriad* (both tetralogies), however, put historical drama on the small screen, airing on BBC and then on PBS.

In addition to these formal borrowings, we must attend to the way in which these Shakespearean documentaries borrow subject matter, narrative patterns, and tropes from the fiction films that preceded them, particularly within the decades-long genre of the working-class classroom drama: *Blackboard Jungle* (1955), *To Sir, with Love* (1967), *Conrack* (1974), *Stand and Deliver* (1988), *Dangerous Minds* (1995), and *Freedom Writers* (2007), to name just one during each decade. But beyond these films, which deal with education generally, I'd like to observe the prescient particularity of one film, *Renaissance Man* (1994), which fictionalizes the teaching of Shakespeare and establishes the ground upon which the Shakespearean documentary will flourish. *Renaissance Man* follows down-and-out Detroiter Bill Rago (Danny DeVito) as he teaches *Hamlet* and *Henry V* to military recruits "at risk" of being kicked out of the army because they lack "comprehension"; they are referred to as "double Ds," "dumb as dogshit." On the first day of class, the recalcitrant recruits write an autobiographical essay about why they joined the army. They all read aloud their stories of hardship: dead, absent, or laid-off fathers, poverty and hunger, the isolation of life in a trailer park, homelessness, gang violence,