

**“*Hasa Diga Eebowai, What a Wonderful Phrase!*”:
Subverting the Cultural Binaries of Disney’s *The Lion King* in *The Book of Mormon*
by A.J. Knox**

In his *Carnival and Cannibal*, Jean Baudrillard suggests that “Whites may [be] said to have carnivalized—and [simultaneously] cannibalized—themselves”¹ in their appropriation of Other/other cultures and images, and nowhere is this clearer in today’s theatrical landscape than in Disney’s Broadway sensation *The Lion King*. While much praise has been given to the production and to Julie Taymor, the 2011 Broadway musical *The Book of Mormon*, an unquestionable runaway success, is perhaps the first major theatrical critique and deconstruction of the binary economies established—and supposedly blurred—in *The Lion King*. Far from being merely a simple satire or burlesque of the Mormon religion, *The Book of Mormon* calls into question the politics of performance surrounding Western depictions of “non-Western” cultures, blatantly subverting the portrayals of Africa, Africanisms, and the non-white in Disney’s theatrical cash cow by both carnivalizing as well as cannibalizing its target.

Early in *The Book of Mormon*, the young missionaries are told their mission locations, and the two main characters, Elder Price and Elder Cunningham, receive their destination: Uganda. When Cunningham, the dimmer of the two, hears that Uganda is in Africa, he exclaims, “Oh boy! Like *Lion King!*” Upon their arrival in Uganda, however, the missionaries are confronted with a decidedly darker and grittier image of Africa (a far cry from *The Lion King*’s

¹ Jean Baudrillard, *Carnival and Cannibal*, trans. Chris Turner (London: Seagull Books, 2010), 7.

iconography), and they eventually fuse Mormonism with the play's (equally inauthentic) cultural and social African constructs, creating an absurd and surreal sociopolitical economy. Beyond its burlesque of Mormonism, *The Book of Mormon* is, arguably, a satire of American commercial theatre, of Broadway itself, and, in particular, of the fervor with which American audiences seem to carnivalize the "Other" while simultaneously cannibalizing their own identity. Throughout the riotous musical, the white characters and the Africans become humorously and hopelessly intertwined, and in so doing, they become simulacra of any true or authentic identities. By adopting an imagined *African-ness* (or, more broadly, *otherness*) the whites in the play forego their own senses of identity and culture, creating a wholly new carnivalesque world in which neither original identity holds significance; this, I suggest, is the crux of *The Book of Mormon's* critique of *The Lion King's* theatrical impact in the United States.

Despite the numerous ways in which the production both embraces and satirizes Mormonism, the musical reserves its most mordacious satire for the politics and binaries surrounding the Broadway goliath that is *The Lion King*. My goal here is to interrogate the ways in which the play reevaluates and recontextualizes the categories and polarities established by the appropriation of "African" ideologies, religions, politics, and geographies within US theatre. I shall also examine how *The Book of Mormon* paradoxically—and self-deprecatingly—emphasizes the inability of commercial Broadway fare to re-imagine such topographic, corporeal, and cultural economies. Furthermore, it challenges theatrical tropes and American cultural relations proliferated by *The Lion King*, while simultaneously and ironically embracing the festive and carnivalesque nature of the commercial Broadway musical. *The Book of Mormon* illustrates the power of satire—in practice, performance, and ideology—to challenge traditional

categorizations found in American theatre, while ironically highlighting the danger such satire faces when working within the very structures it seeks to destabilize.

Before examining the ways in which *The Book of Mormon* challenges Taymor and Disney's *The Lion King*, the Broadway behemoth must be evaluated on its own terms, in order to establish the point of origin and one target of *The Book of Mormon*'s satirical edge. The play itself is marketed as a multicultural, international theatrical experience built upon performance practices and aesthetic techniques from throughout Africa and Asia. Taymor's own training in a variety of decidedly "non-Western" theatrical forms seems to lend a sense of authority and authenticity to the production, suggesting that what the average Broadway tourist is getting as a part of the overarching *Lion King* product is a faithfully-reproduced (or perhaps even transplanted) African performance. Similarly, despite the artifice and abstraction of much of the production's design and staging, it seems to offer an authentic (or romanticized) depiction of Africa itself—an offer never overtly denied in the production's marketing or publicity.² A cursory look at the show's original cast however, reveals nearly every leading cast member to be American; likewise, nearly every member of the creative team is American (and, referring back to Baudrillard's notion of carnivalization and cannibalism, they are primarily white as well). This reveals a number of problematic aspects of *The Lion King*'s inter- or multi-cultural vision.

Even within the very aesthetics and performance practices that she is honoring, Taymor reveals a mistrust of non-Western techniques. Regarding the use of masks in performance, she

² Interestingly, the most recent press release for *The Lion King*, announcing its status as the sixth longest-running show in Broadway history, announces a number of the notable elements of the production ("On stage, Taymor's creative vision blends elements of African art and Broadway artisanship"), notes its international appeal, and credits many of the creative individuals behind the production. Each individual is referred to only by name with the exception of "South African Lebo M," who contributed to the musical material. This strikes me as an overt attempt to create a link to some sort of "authentic original" regarding notions of *African-ness* in the production as the release does not refer to "American Julie Taymor" or "British Elton John." ("*The Lion King* to Become Sixth Longest-Running Show in Broadway History," *The Lion King* Broadway Press Release, March 13, 2012. <http://waltdisneystudios.com/corp/news/838>)

recalls, “I thought, what if I create these giant masks that really are clearly Scar and Mufasa, but then the human face is revealed below, so that you're not losing the human facial expression, you're not hiding the actor?”³ Taymor does not seem to trust the very techniques she is appropriating, for fully-masked performance is common throughout Africa and Asia, both in theatrical performance and religious ritual. John Emigh notes in his thoughtful and thorough study *Masked Performance*:

In the West, the mask has been devalued and is generally regarded as a cosmetic disguise, rarely used on the stage and often deprecated in the metaphors of everyday speech. People are accused of “masking” their intentions or feelings, or of “hiding behind a mask.” Actors are praised for their abilities to reveal the feelings of the individual character “behind the social mask.” The tendency is to speak of the mask as an impediment to expression, protecting and hiding the individual, corrupting understanding and disfiguring truth.⁴

While Taymor does not seem to fall to the simple aesthetic or devalued analysis of the mask—quite the opposite, she has frequently commented on the inherent value and beauty to be found in masked performance—she does rob her masks of their magical transformative power by allowing the face to be seen as well. She emphasizes the need to see the human behind the mask or the puppet instead of acknowledging the actual potential of the technique. This is not so much a masked performance as it is an elaborately costumed one, and Taymor’s reticence to fully embrace the performance techniques she is utilizing reveals *The Lion King* to be still very much in line with Western performance practices. While it is true that the production does incorporate masks and non-Western practices (which is an uncommon practice on the Western commercial stage in general), her techniques seem to echo Emigh’s notion of “cosmetic” masking, which I suggest traps the performance in a sort of liminal zone, one which does not belong truly to the

³ “Behind the Scenes: Costumes, Masks, and Puppets.”

www.disney.co.uk/musicaltheatre/TheLionKing/abouttheshow/costumesmaskspuppets.jsp (accessed Oct. 29, 2011)

⁴ John Emigh, *Masked Performance: The Play of Self and Other in Ritual and Theatre* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), 7.

theatrical practices Taymor is pursuing nor to standard Western theatrical expectations. Instead *The Lion King* offers a more superficial image of these non-Western performances, one designed for easy mass consumption, while lacking in the rich complexity of the techniques Taymor is emulating.

Though the question has been raised regarding *The Lion King*'s "authenticity" in relation to its non-Western or African elements, there is a striking duality that emerges as a result of the performance techniques used to convey Disney's story. While she may be blending a number of various techniques, the overarching aesthetic and cultural tone is one of a romanticized *African-ness*, as I have mentioned, which is proffered to the Broadway masses through copious advertisings and images as the yellow and black advertisement featuring a stylized lion's face continues to keep a silent vigil over Times Square. In an interview, Taymor admits:

African tales are much more outrageous than this. This is a Western story. What is very African about *The Lion King* is Lebo's music. The visuals, too, the textiles. And Garth Fagan's choreography. I picked Garth because I wanted something real cross-cultural, very European and African, or American-European and African. I liked that Garth is a contemporary choreographer from Jamaica. He has the roots and he knows African idioms, but he's doing his own stuff.⁵

By Taymor's own admittance, the only African elements of the play are the aesthetic or stylistic qualities, lending the production certain echoes of interculturalism. Rustam Bharucha suggests that the most dangerous function of interculturalism in performance and practice is "when a traditional performance is stripped of its links to the lives of the people for whom it is performed. Nothing could be more disrespectful to theatre than to reduce its act of celebration to a repository of techniques and theories."⁶ Taymor adopts African music, design, and movement in order to tell a markedly Western story, one drawn from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Bharucha here seems to

⁵ Richard Schechner and Julie Taymor, "Julie Taymor: From Jacques Lecoq to 'The Lion King': An Interview," *TDR* 43 No. 3, Puppets, Masks, and Performing Objects (Autumn, 1999: 35-55), 55.

⁶ Rustam Bharucha, *Theatre and the World: Performance and the Politics of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1993), 4-5.

be speaking directly to Taymor's production of *The Lion King*, which offers a seamless melding of two disparate cultural and theatrical worlds. Intercultural theatre and performance is, according to Mark Fortier, "a practice fraught with aesthetic and political pitfalls,"⁷ though judging by the success of *The Lion King*, such pitfalls seem to be mere potholes in the road paved by Disney's Broadway business model. Roughly twelve years after the debut of *The Lion King*, however, *The Book of Mormon*, a major Broadway success (and fellow Tony winner for Best Musical), has emerged to challenge and subvert this intercultural ideology in a number of profound and comic ways.

The Book of Mormon is a profoundly comic play, but throughout its humor runs a biting commentary on Broadway consumerism and to *The Lion King* in particular. It has been compared to everything from *Spamalot* in terms of its comic "irreverence," to *South Pacific* and *The King and I* in its treatment of the "Westerners-meet-the-funny-natives"⁸ trope, suggesting that the show's thematic qualities are varied and encompassing. However, in Frank Rich's notes regarding the musical's influences and antecedents in the booklet accompanying the cast recording, not a single mention of *The Lion King* is to be found. The play has garnered a tremendous amount of attention for its treatment of Mormonism, even prompting the Church of Latter-Day Saints to issue an official statement regarding the show's viability and the validity of its interpretation of the religion. The Mormon faith is, of course, subverted in a number of ways throughout the musical. For instance, the showstopping "Turn It Off" reveals the "cool little Mormon trick" of burying unwanted or dangerous feelings as one missionary's closeted homosexuality becomes a core point of dispute. As the song progresses, the Mormon missionaries eventually end up in sequined vests and tap shoes parodying not only Mormon

⁷ Mark Fortier, *Theory/Theatre: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2002), 202.

⁸ Frank Rich, *The Book of Mormon: Original Broadway Cast Recording*, Digital Booklet, 2011.

attitudes towards alternative sexualities but also the apparent homosexuality historically associated with the American musical stage.⁹ Furthermore, during “Spooky Mormon Hell Dream,” dancing coffee cups share the stage with Adolf Hitler, Genghis Khan, Jeffrey Dahmer, and Johnny Cochran. Even the balladic “I Believe” highlights some of the more far-fetched aspects of Mormon faith (interestingly, in the 2011 Tony Awards performance of the number, actor Andrew Rannells’ facial expressions distanced himself from the character and lent the performance an air of Brechtian self-referential humor notably absent from the actual Broadway production).

While it is true that the treatment of the Mormon faith in the musical is relatively superficial, the creators (Matt Stone and Trey Parker of *South Park* fame and Robert Lopez, co-writer and co-composer of *Avenue Q*) are less interested in interrogating the Mormon faith than in challenging the limits and constructs of the American Broadway musical. Much of the show’s humor comes from its classical structure and its adherence to traditional musical comedy tropes. Using this format, the show is able to challenge Broadway from within, adhering to its standards while subversively turning it on its head. As Rich notes,

However skeptical their show may be of the Church of Latter-day Saints in particular and religion in general, its faith in the Broadway brand of tuneful, funny, well-told and uplifting musicals is orthodox and unshakeable. *The Book of Mormon* scrupulously follows the old testament of Broadway circa 1945 – 1965, A.D., even while fondly spoofing it.¹⁰

The Mormons depicted are emblematic of American sociopolitical and cultural attitudes and beliefs, and their metatheatrical relationship to the play itself reveals them to also be a part of the American theatrical economy. Thus, Mormonism becomes a sort of stand-in for “Americanism.” Jon Krakauer argues in his *Under the Banner of Heaven* that Mormonism is, and has always

⁹ This may also be a reference to *Spamalot*’s “His Name is Lancelot.”

¹⁰ Rich.

been, profoundly and unabashedly American; speaking of the actual religious text of the Latter-day Saints, he notes:

The Book of Mormon appealed [...] because it was so thoroughly American. Most of its narrative was set on the American continent. In one of the book's most important moments, Jesus Christ pays a special visit to the New World immediately after His resurrection to tell His chosen people—residents of what would become America—the good news. Moroni delivers the golden plates to a quintessentially American prophet—Joseph—who later receives a revelation in which God lets it be known that the Garden of Eden had been located in America. And when it is time for Jesus to return to earth, He assures Joseph, the Son of Man will be making His glorious arrival in that same corner of America.¹¹

This point is emphasized in the musical *The Book of Mormon* when the missionaries teach the Africans of Joseph Smith (the “All-American Prophet”), Moroni (the “All-American Angel”), and Mormonism (“God’s new religion... [it’s] All-American!”). I suggest that, just as Krakauer notes, we may look at Mormonism as a touchstone for America, for it has become a sort of worldwide phenomenon whose origins are distinctly American. In many ways, the values and attitudes intrinsic to Mormon faith are representative of conservative American political and cultural thought, which still dictates much of our intercultural and international discourse and exchange. Therefore, the satire is not directed at Mormons specifically but rather at arguably skewed and misguided American attitudes and understandings of Africa and the non-Western world—attitudes carefully constructed and heavily influenced by such cultural icons as *The Lion King*.

As mentioned earlier, Elder Cunningham and the other Mormons’ understanding of Africa is shaped entirely by the *The Lion King*—both the film and by extension the musical as there can be no avoiding the immediate association of the numerous *Lion King* references, which is playing only a few short blocks away. The main (white) characters’ concepts of Africa are completely dependent on Disney’s artifice. For example, as the missionaries are waiting for their

¹¹ Jon Krakauer, *Under the Banner of Heaven: A Story of Violent Faith* (New York: Anchor Books, 2003), 72.

plane in America, the airport terminal fades away and they find themselves under a red African sun, with waves of grass in the distance. A woman appears, whose costume and makeup seem to be a grotesque amalgamation of African imagery and tribal costuming, recalling (among others) a burlesqued version of *The Lion King*'s Rafiki. She sings a nonsensical African chant that, despite its incomprehensibility, nonetheless recalls "The Circle of Life." It seems as though the missionaries have been magically transported to Africa welcomed by a primitive tribal theatrical spirituality; however, the singer is revealed to be Ms. Brown (the only black character we see in Salt Lake City, and the first black character seen in the play), whom the Elders' parents had hired to sing them a "traditional African song" as a farewell. When the missionaries do eventually arrive in the Ugandan village, the scene is markedly different from *The Lion King*: a shantytown filled with trash, villagers dressed in T-shirts and shorts, and a man dragging a decaying donkey carcass across the stage. This is not the Africa of *The Lion King*, a fact emphasized by their first musical exchange with the villagers.

The Ugandan villagers welcome the missionaries with the song, "Hasa Diga Eebowai." The village leader Mafala (whose name immediately echoes *The Lion King*'s patriarch Mufasa) states, "In this part of Africa, we all have a saying—whenever something bad happens, we just throw our hands to the sky and say 'Hasa Diga Eebowai' . . . it's the only way to get through all these troubled times. There's war, poverty, famine, but having a saying makes it all seem better." Elder Cunningham asks, "Does it mean 'no worries for the rest of your days'?" which of course is the given translation for *The Lion King*'s song "Hakuna Matata." As the Africans sing of the immense human suffering they have experienced ("We've had no rain in several days . . . And eighty percent of us have AIDS . . . Many young girls here get circumcised; their clits get cut right off . . ."), the Mormons' complaints are limited to a crowded plane and late bus. Their

experiences are revealed to be remarkably disparate; here we see a thinly-veiled critique not only of Mormonism but also of American attitudes toward (and ignorance of) the suffering experienced in other more “primitive” or “third-world” countries.

This iconic phrase is further subverted—and revealed to be a major obstacle in the missionaries’ attempts to convert the Africans to Mormonism—when it is translated by Mafala as “Fuck you, God.” Whereas in *The Lion King*, the outsider (Simba) immediately finds his place in the jungle with Timon and Pumbaa in “Hakuna Matata,” Price and Cunningham’s “welcome” to “Africa” immediately shatters the universality of Disney’s Africa and establishes a much more realistic dialogue of conflicting ideologies. Edward Bruner remarks of the song:

This musical tradition and the songs themselves . . . [including “Hakuna Matata”] . . . have been widely interpreted in American popular culture as expressions of “Africanness” and “blackness,” and then have been represented to American tourists, by Africans, in Africa. What is new is not that transnational influences are at work, that a song or an aspect of culture flows around the globe, as ethnographers are already familiar with these processes. Nor is it new that a global image of African tribesmen is enacted for foreign tourists . . . What is new is that . . . the Americans, who have presumably made the journey in order to experience African culture, instead encounter American cultural content that represents an American image of African culture. The Americans, of course, feel comfortable and safe, as they recognize this familiar representation and respond positively, for it is their own. This is globalization gone wild . . .¹²

The Book of Mormon emphasizes and plays upon this notion of an ideal and romanticized Africa that exists in the American cultural imagination. The missionaries—and the audience—are effectively misled in the opening refrains and introduction to “Hasa Diga Eebowai,” tricked into believing that *The Lion King*’s Africa, particularly “Hakuna Matata,” might actually be authentic. Once the phrase is “translated,” we and the missionaries recognize our folly in believing that this more “realistic” (for lack of a better word) Africa would mirror *The Lion King*’s interpretation. We are played, as it were, by our own expectations as developed through

¹² Edward M. Bruner, “The Maasai and the Lion King: Authenticity, Nationalism, and Globalization in African Tourism,” *American Ethnologist* 28, No. 4 (November 2001): 881–908, 893.

the binaries and images established by Disney in their mass-marketing of “Africanness” to eager American audiences.

This Americanization of a perceived *African-ness* is overtly addressed once the missionaries have succeeded in baptizing the villagers, as the Americans dressed all in white sing “I am Africa.” The American missionaries compare themselves to African animals (“with the strength of the cheetah, my native voice will ring”) and the elements (“we are the winds of the Serengeti, we are the sweat of the jungle man”); they even go so far as to insist, “Africans are African, but we are *Africa*.” This moment is profoundly troubling for it reflects a distinctly colonial attitude toward Africa (of course, that is the joke), one that can be seen in Taymor’s appropriation of Africanisms in the development of *The Lion King*. Elder Cunningham even remarks, “I am Africa—just like Bono!” highlighting the ways in which “Westerners” identify with those they deem “needy” or “underdeveloped” in an attempt to emphasize a privileged liberal magnanimity. “I am Africa” illustrates Edward Said’s theories of Orientalism, which divides the world into the West (white, rational, ubiquitous) and East (non-white, black, irrational) wherein the West must look after and watch over the East. The Africans here are murderous, uncivilized, naïve, and must be cleansed (literally through baptism) and shown the path to salvation. However, this is not a distinct criticism of religious practices but rather of American orientalist and imperialist ideology in general. The song is not meant to be rousing in its ideology, but rather it is intended to highlight the foolish nature of such attitudes.

The Africa depicted in *The Book of Mormon* both draws upon as well as subverts American expectations and understandings of Africanness as established and proliferated by *The Lion King*. For example, the play’s villain warlord Butt fucking Naked shoots a villager in the head in front of the Elders; Elder Price enters in the next scene, his pristine white shirt covered in

blood, and cries, “This is nothing like *The Lion King*! They took a lot of liberties with that!” Furthermore, when Africa becomes too “real,” Elder Price yearns to go to his favorite place in the world: Orlando, Florida. This is of course another reference to *The Lion King* as Orlando represents the Disneyfication of the entire globe as seen in Epcot Center’s various “global” attractions and in Disney’s Animal Kingdom, which promises again an “authentic” Africa here in America. It should also be noted that, aesthetically, America (represented in the play by Salt Lake City and Orlando) is depicted visually in two-dimensional images, crowded with distinctly American iconography (McDonalds, advertisements, Disney, theme parks, and even in the case of Salt Lake City idealized purple mountains and a sweeping majestic sky). The America presented is just as inauthentic as both plays’ versions of Africa—it is a bricolage of disparate imagery in an attempt to illustrate an “authentic original.” Both Disney’s and *The Book of Mormon*’s Africa become, in Baudrillard’s terms, “third-order simulacra,” creating a new (in)authentic original. Where *The Book of Mormon* departs from *The Lion King* is in its self-referential humor, which ultimately leads to the development of a new postmodern and metatheatrical sociopolitical construct in which a third-order America appropriates a third-order Africa, creating a surreal cultural amalgam led by the character least politically, socially, culturally, and religiously informed: Elder Cunningham.

The play’s conclusion emphasizes the limits of intercultural theatrical practices; the missionaries eventually succeed in converting the Africans to Mormonism—but not without a catch. The version of the faith they are taught comes from Elder Cunningham who freely admits to never having actually read *The Book of Mormon*. The missionaries are ill-equipped to deal with such problems as AIDS, female circumcision, and famine; and they quickly find that their faith does not help the Africans whose own beliefs are built upon the mantra “Hasa Diga

Eebowai.” In a last-ditch attempt to gain their attention, Cunningham creates a “new Mormonism,” one in which Joseph Smith has AIDS, Brigham Young has circumcised his daughter, and the like. He also weaves *Star Wars*, *Lord of the Rings*, *Star Trek*, and other such “Western” references into his teachings. The end result is a tenuous and ridiculous union of American and African cultural touchstones. The newly-converted Africans stage a play for the Mormon President in which the “All-American” educational routine earlier performed by Elders Price and Cunningham is reenacted, this time as a hybrid of that previous performance and the villagers’ own performance techniques and aesthetics. Joseph Smith wears Michael Jordan’s Bulls jersey; the mystical “golden plates” become gold-painted dishes, and the black Africans don whiteface to play these American characters. This is all brought to a head by the eventual reveal that the male characters—including Moroni—are donning tremendous artificial phalli resembling the New Guinean koteka. As Americans, we may laugh at the obvious disharmonious melding of “Americanisms” with “Africanisms” in this performance, but I suggest this moment utilizes comic Occidentalism as a subversively satirical critique of the performance techniques at play in *The Lion King* as well as in *The Book of Mormon* itself, which draws much of its aesthetic from recognizable depictions of Africanisms within American theatre.

Of course, the play’s cultural union is built upon lies and misunderstandings, seemingly emphasizing the inability for any actual realization of such relations. Rustam Bharucha combats and criticizes Western practitioners of interculturalism, and seems to anticipate the conclusion of

The Book of Mormon:

For my own part, I believe that as much as one would like to accept the seeming openness of Euro-American interculturalists to other cultures, the larger economic and political domination of the West has clearly constrained, if not negated the possibilities of a genuine exchange. In the best of all possible worlds, interculturalism could be viewed as a “two-way-street,” based on mutual reciprocity of needs. But in actuality, where it is

the West that extends its domination to cultural matters, this “two-way street” could be more accurately described as a “dead-end.”¹³

As the show’s finale (a reprise of the opening number “Hello!” in which the Africans now don the pristine white shirts and black ties of the missionaries) builds to its final chorus, the final lines of the play come from a minor character, Gotswana. Gotswana’s function throughout much of the play is to remind everyone that “I have maggots in my scrotum.” As the last refrains celebrate, “Tomorrow is a latter day!” pointing towards a hopeful and optimistic future for both cultures, Gotswana is given the last word, singing, “I still have maggots in my scrotum!” A humorous way to end a highly offensive and raunchy comic musical, but this line also illustrates the fact that, despite the missionaries’ attempts to effect change, nothing *truly* has changed. Their presence and influence has not cured AIDS or ended famine or removed the maggots from Gotswana’s genitals. In the final notes, the play subverts any sort of typical happy ending suggesting that this cultural union is superficial at best and that it will ultimately prove unsuccessful.

The end result of the plot of *The Book of Mormon* is that Elder Cunningham creates a bizarre hybrid culture and religion for which he is the new prophet. Homi Bhabha discusses these notions of hybridity in his *The Location of Culture*:

Hybrid hyphenations emphasize the incommensurable elements . . . as the basis of cultural identifications. What is at issue is the performative nature of differential identities: the regulation and negotiation of those spaces that are continually, contingently, “opening out,” remaking the boundaries, exposing the limits of any claim to a singular or autonomous sign of difference—be it class, gender or race. Such assignments of social differences—where difference is neither One nor the Other but something else besides, in-between—find their agency in . . . an interstitial future, that emerges in between the claims of the past and the needs of the present.¹⁴

¹³ Bharucha, 2.

¹⁴ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 219.

If we take Bhabha's concept of "remaking the boundaries, exposing the limits . . ." as particular to the performativity of difference and identity, we see a world of possibilities emerge from *The Book of Mormon's* satire and critique of spectacular and commercialized interculturalism.

However, the problem then arises: what do we make of a satire that, even while criticizing and deflating its target, succumbs to many of the same pitfalls inherent to that form (in this case, the commercialism and artifice of the huge Broadway musical)? With such monumental success, does the satire go unrecognized, instead reinforcing Western superiority in terms of cultural and artistic capital? Though these questions in particular cannot be fully addressed in this brief study, I would suggest that the satire inherent to *The Book of Mormon's* comic aesthetic is clear, if not without problems. *The Book of Mormon* does not offer or advertise authenticity in the same capacity as *The Lion King*, but rather it emphasizes in excess the problems that contemporary Africa faces as a rebuttal to the utopian artifice of Disney's consumer product. That said, the satirist continually runs the risk of having the work collapse upon itself as Pfaff and Gibbs note,

the satirist risks the recovery of some unintended object by choosing a genre in which his or her intentions are not explicitly revealed, but are only alluded to through an implicit connection between the real world and the world of the text. Some readers simply infer that the author is actually endorsing the object that he means to satire.¹⁵

While I would argue that *The Book of Mormon* successfully subverts both the Broadway musical as well as the binaries established in *The Lion King*, one cannot deny that the musical plays with fire. There is no guarantee that the satire will resonate, and there is a calculated risk on the part of the show's creators in its portrayal of these (inter)cultural dynamics. While *The Book of Mormon* might not dethrone *The Lion King* as the king of Broadway, it does reveal the cracks in Pride Rock. Ultimately, while it does poke holes in the constructs established in contemporary American theatrical practices, *The Book of Mormon* does not fulfill its bloated promise to

¹⁵ Kerry L. Pfaff and Raymond W. Gibbs Jr., "Authorial intentions in understanding satirical texts," *Poetics* 25 (1997: 45 – 70), 60.

“change your life.” Instead, it hopes to change the life of the Broadway musical: Stone, Parker, and Lopez work from within the form, pushing it to its apex, allowing it to reveal itself as farcically unstable inherently flawed, though not without power and value as popular entertainment. This satire is a welcome change of pace in the current Broadway landscape, and perhaps indicates a new direction in the Broadway musical, one that will continue to challenge the limits and expectations of the commercial theatre, even if there is an advertisement for *The Lion King* in *The Book of Mormon*’s Playbill.

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