



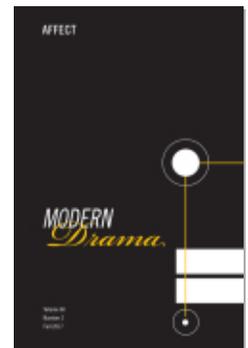
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Strains of the Enlightenment: Making Belief in American Secularism and African Difference in *The Book of Mormon*

KELLEN HOXWORTH



ABSTRACT: *This article argues that the 2011 Broadway musical The Book of Mormon, best known for its parody of Mormon religious beliefs, uses what Sara Ahmed terms “affective economies” to paradoxically remake American beliefs in secular rationality. Whereas Richard Schechner posits a strict division between “make-believe” and “make-belief” performances, The Book of Mormon demonstrates how the “make-believe” of Broadway makes beliefs and feelings in its audiences through circulations of affect. This article traces how such affects and beliefs are imbricated with national impressions about religious, racial, and sexual difference, particularly through the musical’s Mormon and black African characters. By attending to the musical’s impressions of Mormons and Africans, it deconstructs the musical’s tacit investments in American secularism and rationality through its circulation of “common sense” ideas about religious and racial others.*

KEYWORDS: *affect, African performance, Broadway, Robert Lopez, Mormonism, musical theatre, Trey Parker, Matt Stone*

Since its premiere in 2011, *The Book of Mormon* has taken a privileged position in American culture. The musical won nine Tony Awards in 2011, and Ben Brantley hailed it as the contemporary paragon of the “all-American art form of the inspirational book musical.” Since then, *The Book of Mormon* has maintained its popular success through an ongoing Broadway production and two national tours. Penned by a trio of prominent satirists from US television, film, and Broadway (*South Park* co-creators Trey Parker and Matt Stone and *Avenue Q*’s Robert Lopez), *The Book of Mormon* exemplifies a new form of the Broadway musical replete with “transcendent, cathartic goofiness” (Brantley).

Brantley’s praise captures the affective enthusiasm generated among many American audiences of *The Book of Mormon*. In particular, *The Book of Mormon* offers an experience of spectacular irony, an aesthetic and affective

formation typical of what Jessica Sternfeld calls the “post-megamusical” that emerged on Broadway after 9/11 (349). Such post-megamusicals work affectively by mediating the exuberance of 1980s and 1990s megamusicals (e.g., the canon of Andrew Lloyd Webber) through aesthetic techniques of irony and self-reflexivity. *The Book of Mormon* fashions such experiences by mashing up mediatized genres, combining the earnest, big feelings of the Broadway megamusical with *South Park*’s acerbic, bawdy, pop culture–infused satire, a technique effectively and affectively showcased in the Act One show-stopper “Man Up.” Thus *The Book of Mormon* generates entangled experiences of earnest affective involvement – transcendence, catharsis, and inspiration, in Brantley’s terms – as well as cool irony. *The Book of Mormon*’s re-centring of the post-megamusical on the homosocial bonds of white male protagonists has drawn in new (notably young male) audiences, altering the economic and cultural landscape of Broadway in the process.

Yet despite the celebration of *The Book of Mormon* as a cultural icon and a landmark production, there is reason to interrogate its transformations of the Broadway musical. First and foremost, musical theatre performs its ideological work primarily through affect; in the words of David Savran, it creates “a kind of hothouse for the manufacture of theatrical seduction” (216). However, as Richard Dyer notes, such “entertainment offers some pleasures[,] not others” (7). Indeed, *The Book of Mormon* offers some affective experiences to some people and not to others. We may ask, then, for whom does *The Book of Mormon* generate seductively pleasurable feelings of inspiration, transcendence, and catharsis? When does its production of ironic “goofiness” become something more serious? If *The Book of Mormon* is reshaping Broadway, what new social formations are emerging in its wake?

This article traces the entanglements of affect, belief, and performance in *The Book of Mormon* within an affective economy premised on two entangled strains of Enlightenment thought. The first strain is secular rationality, which views “belief” with intense scepticism. The second is a framing of “Africa” as a “dark continent” devoid of rationality. The musical’s narrative intertwines these strains – along with catchy strains of music – as it follows a “fish out of water” story in which two Mormons, Elders Price and Cunningham, travel to Uganda for a two-year mission. There, they attempt to convert Ugandans to their religion, experience doubt about their beliefs, and forge a syncretic new religion recorded in “The Book of Arnold.” The musical makes beliefs and generates public feelings through the circulation of specific impressions of two groups of “different” people: Mormons and Africans. Through these made beliefs, the musical generates a dominant affective economy of enjoyment and pleasure, which interpellates audience members into a dominant, enlightened position relative to mystified Mormon believers and irrational, abject Africans.

The Book of Mormon thus forges a post-9/11 American “structure of feeling” premised on formations of racial and religious difference (Williams 128–35). It orchestrates this structure of feeling by circulating impressions of non-white and non-secular people. As Sara Ahmed argues, the circulation of “impressions of others” (“Affective” 122) generates and sustains dominant structures of feeling that precede rational thought by bonding individuals and groups affectively and ideologically, “mediat[ing] the relationship between the psychic and the social, and between the individual and the collective” (119). Thus the musical generates feelings that make an impression on audiences. Audience members then make beliefs in American “common sense” at the juncture of Protestant-derived secularism, Enlightenment rationality, and African difference. In performances of *The Book of Mormon*, feelings and beliefs mix and mingle, making beliefs through shared audience engagement with the spectacular impressions of “post-megamusical” make-believe.

IMPRESSIONS OF PERFORMANCE

All theatrical and everyday performance, including “post-megamusical” Broadway, *does or makes* something. As both live art and behavioural practice, performance involves doing and making things with socially available sources, most often ideas and feelings, belief and affect. To that end, Richard Schechner situates performance within two fields: “make-believe” and “make-belief” (*Performance* 35). In make-believe performances, performers and audiences use theatrical conventions to “mark the distinction between pretending and being” (35). In contrast, make-belief performances trouble this distinction, engaging performance in everyday life to forge beliefs about the “real world.” In Schechner’s theorization, audiences are savvy participants who navigate the blurry boundaries between the “make-believe” of theatre and the “make-belief” performances of our theatricalized world. Audiences of make-believe performances “know it’s all make-believe” and thus may engage as critical, rational participants by using their knowledge of the performance mode to moderate their affective investments (Schechner, *Between* 92).

Yet Schechner’s division relies on a strict distinction between belief and rational thought, both of which are understood to be active practices. A performer makes believe *or* makes belief; a spectator believes credulously *or* thinks critically. This binary begs the question, as Rebecca Schneider perceptively notes, “what difference does ‘knowing it’s all make-believe’ ultimately make?” (127). For Schneider, performance emerges in the nexus at which knowledge/power, ideology, and affect converge and mingle. No matter how critical an audience may be, the lines separating make-believe and make-belief cannot hold: “making belief is precisely where ‘make-believe’ takes place as experience and flips, almost imperceptibly, into the actual” (127). Boundaries

blur and categories collapse. Due to the promiscuity of affect and belief, critical distance and/or rational thought cannot contain the experiential flux of performance, for performances always do more than they intend and always exceed the experience of any individual subject (Phelan 27). Indeed, beliefs and affects are in many ways the before and after of the “maniacally charged present” of performance (148). Never for the first time and never fully complete, make-believe performances cannot help but make beliefs.

Performers and audiences alike engage in the realm of performance, in which ideologies and feelings animate, come to life, and become impressions of the “real world.” As Ahmed notes, the word “impression” relates to both belief and affect: “An impression can be an effect on the subject’s feelings (‘she made an impression’). It can be a belief (‘to be under an impression’). It can be an imitation or an image (‘to create an impression’). Or it can be a mark on the surface (‘to leave an impression’)” (*Cultural* 6). Ahmed’s definition draws on language closely related to performance – impressions are *made*, *felt*, and *believed*. In particular, Ahmed attends to the embedded verb, “press,” in “impression.” Everyone impresses (or tries to), and everyone is impressed by others through the circulation of affect. In other words, impressions are performed and performances impress. Performance is a charged social site where the “press” in “impression” goes to work, generates economies of affect, and makes beliefs.

Ahmed’s theorization of “impressions” offers a new lens for approaching theatrical performances, which are necessarily public and social, by emphasizing the precognitive affective work mediated by theatre’s “feeling-technology” (Hurley 28; cf. Schweitzer and Guadagnolo 146). Crucially, Ahmed’s concept of “affective economies” decentres the model of the autonomous subject, offering an alternative paradigm to psychoanalytic concepts of “identification” that emphasize the experience of the individual subject, “I,” against claims to collective experiences of “we” (Diamond 404). By contrast, Ahmed asserts that the separation between the individual self (as interior and psychic) and the world (as external and social) relies on Enlightenment impressions of the subject as independent and rational (*Cultural* 1–19). She troubles this separation by attending to the “sticking” functions of feelings that generate common affective experiences: “how emotions work by sticking figures together (adherence), a sticking that creates the very effect of a collective (coherence)” (“Affective” 119). In other words, by tracing the affective work of “impressions,” we may apprehend the complexities of how impressions are felt and leave their marks on spectating bodies that may or may not “identify” with stage characters. Collectively, theatre audiences engage in affective economies of “make-believe” that generate impressions about others; these impressions stick social assemblages together through feelings of “common sense.” Spectatorial

encounters thus form collectives, impressing subjects with senses of belonging while simultaneously orienting subjects together.

The Book of Mormon therefore works, effectively and affectively, as a “new-born, old-fashioned, pleasure-giving musical” (Brantley). The musical sticks its American audiences together, however briefly, in feelings of “common sense” enjoyment. In its repeated “make-believe” that “a Mormon just believes” (Parker, Lopez, and Stone 68–71), *The Book of Mormon* plays on tensions among religious belief, secularist “non-belief,” and the vagaries of make-believe and make-belief performance to generate communal pleasure. Simultaneously, it also makes “common sense” beliefs by making impressions of others. The musical creates an impression of Mormons as representative figures of unusual “belief” and Africans as effigies of racial “difference,” thus impressing deeply embedded Enlightenment discourses about African difference and deviant religiosity on its audiences. These impressions allow national, racial, gendered, and sexual superiority to be felt and believed rather than consciously thought. Through the circulation of impressions of Africans and Mormons, *The Book of Mormon* binds its American audiences with affect, making and remaking beliefs about the commonality of their “common sense,” the mutuality of their investments, and the differences of their others. Ironically, the musical generates an affective economy of belief through strains of music and feeling that conceal its investment in the Enlightenment ideal of rational subjectivity.

AMERICAN SECULARISM, PROTESTANT BELIEF, AND “COMMON SENSE”

The United States both is and is not a secular nation, as Ann Pellegrini suggests in her essay “Feeling Secular” (214–15). American politics and popular culture remain deeply invested in Enlightenment rationality and Protestant-derived secularism. In the language of *The Declaration of Independence*, the “certain unalienable Rights” of Americans are guaranteed by the dual apparatus of the “Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God” (“Declaration”). In other words, American political liberties have two parallel proofs, one from the Enlightenment and one from Protestantism. For Thomas Paine, these rights and liberties promised to the Enlightenment subject are not only God-given but also “common sense” (Paine). This slide from Protestantism to Protestant-derived secularism remains central to American secularism, which requires tacit belief in Enlightenment rationality to justify its political and ideological formations (Jakobsen and Pellegrini 2–3).

These connections among religion, the Enlightenment, and American “common sense” would come as no surprise to Antonio Gramsci, for whom “common sense” is “the spontaneous philosophy of the multitude [. . .] which has to be made ideologically coherent” (421). In the “common sense” of latter-day American secularists, the ideological coherence of political structures

often requires paranoia against perceived threats to the guarantors of unalienable rights – threats that often appear in the form of religious encroachments on individual freedoms. In the “common sense” of American religious groups, the enervation of belief endangers the social and political fabric of the American city on a hill, a threat ostensibly generated by unrestrained individual freedoms of choice. In both cases, the affective matrix of fear binds one group against the other, (re)making belief in the “common sense” of their respective ideologies. Believers make belief in the non-belief of others, and “non-believers” paradoxically make belief in their freedom from belief itself.

The Book of Mormon engages these national formations of belief by insisting on the Americanness of Mormonism: the Book of Mormon is introduced not as a religious tract but as “a book about America / A long long time ago” (Parker, Lopez, and Stone 2). Several jokes play on Mormonism’s putative provincialism. One energetic, proselytizing number frames Joseph Smith as an “All-American Prophet,” while several others – “Sal Tlay Ka Siti,” “I Am Africa,” and “Joseph Smith American Moses” – reinforce the Americanness of Mormonism by asserting its un-Africanness. The musical circulates impressions of Mormons as inherently and excessively American through song-and-dance numbers in which Mormon characters perform Broadway choreography of box steps, twirls, and do-si-dos with exaggerated gestures.¹ Mormon elbows rise above shoulders and heels flick with excessive flair in choreography that scores Mormon embodiments of enthusiasm – an affective surplus that demarcates the “fanatic” from the rational Enlightenment subject (Toscano xviii–xix).

These choreographic repetitions intentionally conflate the stereotypical affective exuberance of Mormon missionaries with the over-the-top performances of Disneyfied Broadway. As Trey Parker explains,

We would always say when we’re working on either the sets or the costumes or whatever, we’d say: No, make it more Rodgers and Hammerstein. Or make it more Disney. Or make it more Mormon. And they’re like: Well, which one is it? And we’re like: No, it’s all the same – word [*sic*] for the same thing. You know, basically like make this brighter and happier and cheesier. (qtd. in Gross)

The affective excess of Mormon enthusiasm – “brighter and happier and cheesier” than normal – marks Mormon bodies as abnormal, their beliefs expressed as corporeal difference, restaging entrenched discourses about Mormon alterity (see Jones). Indeed, Elder Price’s utopia is Orlando’s Disneyworld, where the “bright lights” and “big dreams” of Disney’s “make-believe” compete with his belief in Mormonism (Parker, Lopez, and Stone 81). At this uncanny juncture of belief and make-believe, Mormonism appears as distinctly American due to its similarity to the paradigmatic emblem of US popular culture, Disney.

Simultaneously, Mormons appear as strange and essentially different through their apparent excesses of belief. The likeness between Mormonism and Disney marks both as essentially American and as inauthentically unreal. Both are distinctly American forms of “make-believe.”

In *The Book of Mormon*, Mormonism thus stands in for American religious belief at large, all of which appears as inauthentic in contrast to an unmarked secular rationalism. If an ideal secular rationalist is individualistic, critical, sceptical, and feels in moderation, then a believer appears as a negative ideal because of his or her seemingly excessive communalism, credulity, and exuberance (Pellegrini 208–10). For *The Book of Mormon*'s putatively secular rationalist audience of critical non-believers, belief and believers repeatedly serve as punchlines. For instance, “All-American Prophet” performs the origin story of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints as a farce, framing Mormonism as patently absurd. Elder Price performs as a salesman of Mormonism, hucking the Mormon origin story to potential Ugandan converts, with Elder Cunningham playing the role of hype man to Price's Harold Hill. In an ironic joke, Cunningham over-performs his role, unwittingly revealing the propinquity of salesmanship and evangelism: he cries out, “Wow! How much does this all cost?!” (Parker, Lopez, and Stone 37). Cunningham sets the audience up for this joke, declaring, “God says, ‘Go to your backyard and start digging’? That makes perfect sense!” (35). The audience laughs; the joke lands. None of this story “makes sense” to a secular rationalist American audience; thus the musical elicits the audience's laughter at the “nonsense” of Mormon belief. Theatre – and theatrical failure (e.g., Cunningham's over-performance) – reveals the Mormon sales pitch to be “make-believe,” generating laughter that binds the audience together in shared affect.

The conflation between “make-believe” and Mormonism is reiterated through the final scenes. Approaching the finale, “Joseph Smith American Moses” reprises these structures in which Mormons appear to be merely “making things up” (54–59). The Mormon missionaries and their would-be African converts forge a new syncretic religion by “pretend[ing] hard enough” together (30). Thus *The Book of Mormon* collapses “the distinction between what's real and what's pretended” by asserting that any religious belief is just pretend (Schechner, *Performance* 35). In other words, Mormonism becomes nonsensical in contrast to the audience's American secularist “common sense,” as the musical makes belief in the irrationality of belief itself. The audience laughs, sticking together in a feeling of superiority: they know better than the Mormons on stage. After all, Enlightenment rationality and American secularism are both invested in knowing better.

The commonness of the audience's laughter, however varied, belies the individuality presupposed by rationality and secularism. The spectators feel

together, affirming their rationality through shared feeling. The audience's laughter at the Mormon stage characters – and its feelings of superiority over them – comprise the “saturated affects” of feeling secular that circulate throughout the audience space (see Ahmed, *Cultural* 11). These are big feelings that do not originate in any single person but rather move the audience as it feels moved. These feelings affect everyone in the theatre. As an audience member at a touring production in Las Vegas, I was moved to laughter, especially by the stage characters' exaggerated gestures and enthusiastic choreography. My affective responses occurred despite my discomfort with many of the musical's impressions. I – a white, male, non-Mormon American – felt torn between my enjoyment and my displeasure, and sometimes my disgust.

I was not alone in having conflicted feelings, which animated affective confusion in Mormon and non-Mormon spectators alike. During performances of the official touring production in Salt Lake City, Mormon audience members sometimes laughed along with the larger crowd. At other moments, the musical generated enthusiastic affective displays in the audience – screaming and hooting at Mormon abjection (Smardon). One Mormon audience member enjoyed the communal laughter, even when the jokes were directed at Mormon culture. Another, Timothy Emery, expressed deep ambivalence about his experience:

I'm deeply Mormon, was raised in the church, really terribly offended by this play. [. . .] I might leave, yeah – except that I keep laughing. And that bothers me because it's so funny. So my outsides are telling me, don't go forward. But my insides are telling me, this is really funny. So I'm very conflicted at this point. (qtd. in Smardon)

Emery's account of his affective experience reveals the entanglement of individual beliefs and public feelings. He notes the potential of *The Book of Mormon's* “make-believe” to make belief, expressing his offence in response to the performance; simultaneously, he marks the effect of the production on his feelings: the show brings him to laughter. Yet Emery's “insides” are not the only thing telling him “this is really funny”; the audience's feelings and their boisterous expressions also affect his experience, as they did mine. We feel, despite ourselves. Later, we resolve the “conflict” between our feelings, the room's saturated affect, and our rationalizations of our experiences.

My experiences and those of Mormon audience members signal both the pervasiveness of – and the limits to – the dominant affective economies at work in *The Book of Mormon's* audiences. These affective economies cue audience members through unarticulated prompts, eliciting laughter through the musical's rhythms and the syncopation of the audience's response. What is “funny” emerges through the circulation of such laughter, which reproduces itself and afterwards serves as a rationale for the musical's funniness.

These public feelings invest shared affect in secular beliefs and work to make-belief in the absurdity of religious belief.

The Book of Mormons's affective investments in “funniness” and absurdity – rather than in critical reflection – frames the musical as what Dyer calls “pure entertainment” (17); yet as Stacy Wolf asserts, “[m]usicals are necessarily political, even as they appear to be only entertainment” (ix). Thus the work of the musical, as with any production of pleasurable entertainment, remains bound up with other ideological and political formations that (re)make publics through the circulation of affect (Dyer 25). *The Book of Mormon* generates an affective economy in which the audience, first and foremost, feels together in shared experiences that (re)make beliefs about others. Playing on the tropes of “anti-Mormon melodrama,” the musical mobilizes American public feelings about the perceived difference of Mormons and their beliefs (see Jones). The audience does not need to think through their impressions in order to feel superior to the stage characters, for the musical situates the audience as exceptionally secular and rational.

Through these theatrical techniques, *The Book of Mormon* frames the “All-American” religion of Mormonism as paradoxically un-American due to its affective and ideological investments in belief (see Jones 1–22). The figures of Elders Cunningham and Price generate parallel impressions of the potential dangers of “make-believe” to secular rationality. Whereas the dramatic arc allows Elder Cunningham to embrace his “little problem” of compulsive fibbing, the musical reconciles Elder Price to his Mormon beliefs by making Mormonism into mere make-believe (Parker, Lopez, and Stone 12). The musical thus plays to an American spectator – presumably secular and rational – who may derive pleasure from the absurdity of Mormon beliefs as Disneyfied “make-believe.” Through the satire of Mormon belief, secular rationalist spectators may make belief in the commonness of their “common sense.” The affect of secular exceptionality, however, misfires when those not made exceptional in the musical’s dramaturgy engage in the audience’s affective economy. American secularism and its particular formations of “common sense” invest in rationality as a common bond that unites rational subjects within a shared structure of feeling. Those who feel differently must be irrational, their feelings illegitimate. Feeling and believing outside of the dominant circulations of affective economies mark some subjects as essentially different, as those who must be excluded in order to maintain the commonness of “common sense.”

FEELING AND BELIEVING IN AFRICAN DIFFERENCE

The exclusionary structure of *The Book of Mormon's* affective economies appears in starker terms when considering the geographic displacements undergirding the musical. In Western discourse, as Binyavanga Wainaina observes,

a utopian/dystopian binary mediates “Africa” through familiar tropes in which “Africa is to be pitied or worshipped or dominated” (92; see also Ebron; Edmondson). As Wainaina notes, none of these frames is any more “real” than the others; they are intended merely to generate affective investments in an audience. Through such framing, “Africa” functions as an affective node for the generation and circulation of despair, an affect that contrasts with its binary other: hope. If the musical impresses Mormons with enthusiasm and credulity, then it complements them with impressions of Africans as alternately pitiable or fearsome. An average American audience’s knowledge of Africa – embedded within the “common sense” of these expansive discourses and affective economies – likely does not exceed the binary of alluring and foreboding “Africas” and Africans. Thus “Africa” as the locus of strangeness and difference aligns the audience’s experiences and affects with those of Elders Cunningham and Price. Cunningham worships the Disneyfied image of “Africanness”; Price pities himself and fears his encounter with the “real” Africa. The musical’s audience may do either or both but not neither, for *The Book of Mormon* insists that its spectators feel *something* about Africa. The duo serves as representative mediators for the binary affective investments of Americans who may experience the allure of Africa while also feeling apprehension, scepticism, and fear of African difference.

The Book of Mormon circulates affective economies through impressions of Africa’s strangeness in its earliest musical numbers. In “Two by Two,” a jaunty song satirizing “Up with People,” Mormon missionaries divide into pairs for their two-year missions to far-flung parts of the world. The first pair are appointed to a mission in Norway; the second, France; the third, Japan. The fourth pair we hear about, Elders Cunningham and Price, receives an assignment to Uganda. Upon the announcement of “Uganda,” the cheerful number halts abruptly. Horns blare, marking the disruption. “Uganda?” Elder Price whines. Elder Cunningham responds with unabashed enthusiasm: “UGANDA! COOL! WHERE IS THAT?!” (10). “Africa” – under the sign of “Uganda” – appears as many things simultaneously: a disruption (the music stops), the alluring (“COOL!”), and the unfamiliar (“WHERE IS THAT?!”). Whereas the other missionaries summon stereotypical cultural signifiers of their prospective missions, Cunningham and Price cannot recognize “Uganda” as a place at all (9). Their impression of “Africa” insists on its absolute difference, on its non-existence in their imaginations. As suggested by the sustained laughter during the interruption of “Two by Two,” the audience identified with this moment of unknowing that reiterates “Africa” as the unknown and the unknowable. Though the audience may laugh at the Mormon characters’ ignorance, they also likely identify with them against the unfamiliarity of “Africa,” forging affective bonds along national and/or racial lines.

Reinforcing the audience's commonality with Elders Cunningham and Price, *The Book of Mormon* circulates impressions of "Africa" as represented through American popular culture. In "Two By Two," the closest image Cunningham can summon of "Africa" is Disney's *The Lion King*, a cartoon representation of Africa as an animal kingdom. This familiar "Africa" appears under the sign of the fantastically "make-believe" world of Disney. Yet in contrast to Cunningham's enthusiastic affective response, Elder Price expresses shock and disappointment that he will not travel to Disney's magical kingdom in Orlando but will rather serve as a missionary in a less fantastical, more "real" place. *The Book of Mormon* thus positions "Africa" at the paradoxical juncture of reality and "make-believe," the familiar and the unknown, and feelings of excitement and dread. In sum, "Africa" appears as essentially different from the everyday lives of Elders Cunningham and Price and from the worldly destinations of their fellow Mormon missionaries.

In the ensuing scene, the Mormons re-enact and reaffirm the difference of "Africa," their impressions of Disney's "Africa," and their unfamiliarity with the "real" place. A "Lion King Character" unexpectedly appears on stage to sing a nonsensical imitation of *The Lion King* song "Nants' Ingonyama." The lighting shifts to a stark spotlight on the Lion King Character, suggesting that this song marks the musical's transition to the "real" Africa. This moment of "make-believe," though, is unexpectedly interrupted when the lights transition back to the airport where Elder Price's father announces, "A real LION KING SEND-OFF! We got Mrs. Brown to sing like an African for you!" (13). The Lion King Character is thus a false impression of Africa, one that symbolizes American unfamiliarity both with the continent and with Disney's inauthenticity.

The lyrics sung by the Lion King Character emphasize her unfamiliarity with the "real" Africa, as she interprets the isiZulu lyrics of "Nants' Ingonyama" as gibberish:

THE LION KING'S "NANTS' INGONYAMA":
 Nants' ingonyama bagithi Baba
 Sithi um ingonyama [. . .]
 Ingonyama nengw'enambala (repeat)

ENGLISH TRANSLATION:
 Here comes a lion, Father
 Oh yes, it's a lion [. . .]
 A lion and a leopard come to this open place
 (repeat)
 (Zimmer and Lebo M 11)

THE BOOK OF MORMON'S LION KING CHARACTER:
 HEY NA DA HEY NA! AYA BUBBU
 TAYA TAYAAAAAAAAAAAA! [. . .]
 ENNYAAAAA! HEY NAAA NAAA
 NAAA DA HAYAAA!
 (Parker, Lopez, and Stone 13)

In the Las Vegas touring production performance of *The Book of Mormon*, the lyrics sounded even more absurd, with the Kiswahili word *Simba*

[lion] repeated at least twice amidst the character's gibberish. Whereas the Broadway *Lion King* opens with isiZulu lyrics structured on the repetition and harmonies of southern African choral music, *The Book of Mormon's* Lion King Character parodies the Disney song by "translating" it into nonsense. The difference between the lyrics in the two musicals signals a persistent irony in *The Book of Mormon's* framing of Disney as inauthentic. Notably, in contrast to the framing of Disney as "make-believe," Disney incorporated actual African languages – Kiswahili and isiZulu – into the animated film. Moreover, Julie Taymor's stage production featured African performers and artistic collaborators in prominent roles. *The Book of Mormon* engaged neither actual African languages nor African artists, signalling its disinterest in Africa beyond Disney's representations thereof, which *The Book of Mormon* figures as one and the same.

The reactions of Elders Cunningham and Price reinforce jokes about the inauthenticity of Disney's "make-believe" Africa. Elder Cunningham responds to this performance of Africa enthusiastically; he seems to believe in the authenticity of the performance. Elder Price remains stoic, unaffected by the performance, preoccupied by his anticipation of the "real" Africa. The two opposing "Africas" appear in tension: the Disneyfied fantastical "Africa" and the as-yet-unarticulated image of a "real," abject Africa. *The Book of Mormon* circulates the dual impressions of African difference as humorous, as attested by the sustained laughter during the moments of reversal between these two "Africas." The juxtaposition of the Salt Lake City send-off and their arrival in Uganda serves as the punchline to the missionaries' confusion between the Disney "Africa" and the "real" Uganda. The entrance of the Lion King Character stages this conflation, in which isiZulu becomes nonsensical gibberish and *The Lion King's* syncretic blend of non-western performance forms is reduced to a theatrical facade. Under the premise of an intertextual joke, the musical summons this "Africa" as a sign of the "incomprehensible, pathological, and abnormal" (Mbembe 8), indexing the absolute alterity and abjection of the continent in a few strains of Disneyfied pop spectacle. *The Book of Mormon* mobilizes this trope of Disneyfied "Africa" repeatedly, deploying pseudo-Brechtian techniques to reveal the theatrical apparatuses that create Disney's positive image of "Africa" while simultaneously concealing the theatricality of their putatively more "real" Africa. Despite a similar reliance on theatrical magic that masks its disinterest in Africa as an actual place, *The Book of Mormon* implicitly insists that its performances of abject "Africa" are more "real" than Disney's "make-believe."

The economy of these impressions circulates throughout *The Book of Mormon*. When Cunningham and Price arrive in Uganda, Cunningham's image of *The Lion King* shatters in its contrast with the abjection, poverty,

and death that greet them. Both missionaries gape in horror at the extreme difference of this “Africa,” a horror that circulates through the audience as comedy, as when an “African” character drags a donkey carcass across the full length of the stage apron at the moment of Price and Cunningham’s arrival, typically to resounding audience laughter (Parker, Lopez, and Stone 16). Impressions of African vulgarity, extremity, and difference recirculate in the ensuing scene when General Butt-Fucking Naked enters for the first time, executing a man centre stage in a shocking display of violence (41). In contrast to the missionaries’ arrival, the execution is not played for comedic laughter but rather for the discomfiting laughter generated by violence. The musical deploys theatrical techniques to emphasize the “reality” of this violent act. As instructed in the stage directions, “*The General, walks over to the man [. . .] and shoots the man in the face. A very realistic and large squib blows blood and brain matter all over Elder Price. All the villagers scream and run away*” (41). In his next appearance, Elder Price enters covered in stage blood. He proclaims, “Africa . . . is NOTHING like *The Lion King* – I think that movie took a LOT of artistic license” (44). Manifesting violence and suffering, the theatricality of “Africa” no longer appears as inauthentic; rather, “*very realistic*” simulated blood and brain matter splatter on Elder Price. Extreme violence thus indexes the “real” Africa, circulating ambivalent laughter through the audience. Whereas *The Book of Mormon* subjects the make-believe of Disney to repeated scorn, its make-believe of African violence and abjection becomes a make-belief performance in the “very realistic” reproduction of African difference.

The Book of Mormon animates many American national anxieties in its impressions of “Africans.” For example, the musical projects homophobic fears of violent homosexuality onto its stage Africans, circulating impressions of Africans and queers as threats to normative heterosexuality. For instance, the character General Butt-Fucking Naked references the nickname of Roosevelt Johnson (aka “General Butt Naked”), a Liberian warlord of the 1980s–1990s, while conflating him with the founder of the Lord’s Resistance Army, Joseph Kony, who operated out of Uganda during the late 1990s and early 2000s (Edmondson 102). However, the alteration of Roosevelt Johnson’s nickname transforms this generic “African warlord” character into a figure whose very name threatens sodomy. General Butt-Fucking Naked carries out his eponymous threat in his performance of punitive sodomy on Elder Price, inserting a copy of the Book of Mormon into Price’s anus (71). In this scene, African racial difference appears as a (homo)sexual threat to the integrity of the white, missionary body, a threat that literally inverts the would-be American evangelist from his power position. The audience circulates sustained laughter at this scene of Elder Price in a culturally feminized posture of anal

submission (77), which poses a grave threat to his normative, national, racial masculinity (Bersani 220; Puar 72). General Butt-Fucking Naked thus performs a violent sexual act that exceeds American conceptions of normative queerness, one that marks him as what Jasbir Puar terms “a queer, nonnational, perversely racialized other” to American (white and rational) sexual normativity (37).

The General therefore indexes the circulation of sexual difference as a marker of alterity and abjection throughout Parker and Stone’s oeuvre. Prior to their work on *South Park*, they created *Orgazmo*, a film in which a Mormon missionary in Los Angeles becomes a pornographic film star. As in *The Book of Mormon*, *Orgazmo*’s comedy relies on the absolute difference between the protagonist – a spiritual Mormon – and his surroundings in the secular, “real” world. *Orgazmo* takes place within the US adult film industry. In this setting, *Orgazmo* tropes on discordant encounters between Mormons putatively lacking in carnal knowledge and sex workers who appear as excessively sexual and insufficiently rational. Thus sex work appears as the extreme abjection of the secular “real” world, framing the secular/spiritual divide in terms of sexuality rather than race. In contrast, *The Book of Mormon* conflates non-heteronormative sexuality with non-whiteness in the “real” Africa, perpetuating discursive imbrications between sexual and racial difference in Enlightenment thought (Gilman). In its performance of violent sexual abjection as comedy, *The Book of Mormon* cites the sexual and spiritual anxieties of *Orgazmo* while making believe that impressions of Africans as racially and sexually abject are “real.” *The Book of Mormon* therefore circulates an impression of the General as a militant terrorist, asserting the fundamental sexual and racial difference of his hypermasculine Africanness. Displaced onto “Africa,” this impression of sexual abjection circulates within an American “homonational” affective economy (Puar 39–40), in which American sexual politics are also exceptional when compared to the putatively illiberal, “backward” politics of the non-western world (8–10). Despite the entanglements of actual American missionary work intent on institutionalizing postcolonial homophobia throughout Uganda, *The Book of Mormon* makes believe that Africans are exceptional in their hypersexual, homosexual violence, all of which appears as part of the “real,” non-Disney “Africa.”

Materializations of violence therefore assert the reality of African difference in contrast to Disney fantasies, an inversion of utopian and dystopian “Africas” that relies on the binary imaginations of the continent only to affirm its fundamental abasement. In *The Book of Mormon*, African abjection is all too real. Africa must be different – from the Mormons, the audience, and its Broadway representations – in order to be made unfamiliar, discomfiting,

and funny. Stone affirms the dramaturgical function of “Africa” as a space of difference:

We just wanted it to be that place that you always read about where – and a lot of times it’s sub-Saharan Africa, it seems like [. . .] where it’s just that place you go, can this place get a break? You know, they have earthquakes and then cholera and then a warlord, you know, and then a famine and then, you know, no water. And you know, it was just supposed to be that place. And we settled on Uganda honestly because they speak English there. So that seemed one, like, less leap to make. [. . .] We didn’t start with Uganda. It’s supposed to be just generic, war-torn worst-place-on-Earth that where – if you are from Utah, nothing you’ve learned in Utah when you’re 18 or 19 years old makes any sense when you get there. (qtd. in Gross)

Stone justifies the musical’s framing of “Africa” as necessary for its dramatic structure. Simultaneously, his explanation situates “Africa” as a paradoxically essential and arbitrary place. Whereas “Uganda” serves as an emblem of the “generic, war-torn worst-place-on-Earth,” it also requires no further specificity than its status as a space of abjection, one that stands in opposition to American and Mormon common sense. Such impressions of “Africa” generate feelings of exceptionalism among American audiences. They produce the impression of an African dystopia dialectically opposed to the secular utopia of the United States; the musical thereby makes belief in the common sense of American secular utopianism.

Though *The Book of Mormon* animates an ironic sensibility that critiques the “make-believe” of Disney, its affective and ideological investments in African difference reveal the musical’s make-belief performances. The musical makes belief that “what makes any sense” in Uganda is irreconcilable with American sensibilities and “common sense.” The musical hails the audience into a structure of feeling and belief in which “Africa” represents the abject, marked by lack and negation in contrast to Mormon and American fullness. Nowhere is this relational dynamic more apparent than in “Hasa Diga Eebowai,” in which belief, negation, vulgarity, and abjection chafe against one another.

THE ABJECTION OF AFRICAN ALTERITY

The Book of Mormon insistently juxtaposes feelings of pity for Africa with contrasting, upbeat, happy-go-lucky music. The first number performed in the African setting deploys this dramatic structure to parody the feel-good sentiments of *The Lion King*’s “Hakuna Matata.” The Ugandan villagers, rather than expounding a carefree philosophy of “no worries,” express deep feelings of resentment in the joyous song “Hasa Diga Eebowai,” or “Fuck you,

God!”² Here, the musical intensified the audience’s affective bonds with Elders Price and Cunningham by staging a confrontation between “Africa” and the audience in which African characters turn their attention from the Elders to the theatre house, singing:

If you don’t like what we say
Try living here a couple days.
Watch all your friends and family die. (23)

The phrase concludes with the African characters turning their ire from “God” to the audience, with the entire cast at the downstage edge of the apron proclaiming outward, “Fuck you!” (23). If Disney’s “make-believe” made belief that Africans espouse rose-tinted optimism, then *The Book of Mormon*’s rejoinder makes belief that Africans have nothing to be optimistic about, nothing in which they believe, and that such optimism and belief are out of place in Africa. If Mormons just “believe,” then Ugandans lack belief. The musical later physicalizes this binary, staging Elder Price’s enthusiastic proclamation “I Believe” alongside the dispassionate, glowering African General (68–71). Whereas belief and good feelings move Mormon characters to dance, African characters are moved only by their negative feelings or are not moved at all.

When the African characters *are* moved by their negative feelings, the musical stages Ugandan characters who sing, to the jangly strains of Disneyesque music, about the exaggerated prevalence of several stereotypical “African” social problems: famine, drought, AIDS, female genital mutilation, and infant rape (17–23). Despite the fact that Uganda is eighty-four per cent Christian and twelve per cent Muslim (“Uganda”), “Hasa Diga Eebowai” circulates the impression that Ugandans have no religion and that their beliefs are marked by vulgar denial: “Fuck you, God!” (23). The song’s lyrics circulate an impression of African belief as an affective economy of retribution: if Uganda is a cursed place, then Ugandans should curse God in return. Whereas the choreography of Mormon belief cites Broadway spectacle, the choreography of African non-belief cites “black dance” as oppositional and vulgar. The Ugandans perform “the scoop” en masse, each scoop ending with characters’ middle fingers to the sky in a physical gesture vulgarly repudiating belief. The song concludes with a collective “African dance” in which the Africans enthusiastically embody their spiritual negation. Indexing the “breakdown” dances of blackface minstrelsy, this showstopping dance perpetuates the representative and affective tropes through which Africa circulates not only as different but also as a space of negation (Mbembe 4; see also Gottschild 81–128). These corporeal and affective impressions circulate beyond visible signs; they are also transmitted through the repeated strains of

“Hasa Diga Eebowai” as the introductory music for scenes located within the Ugandan village. The sound of the village thus becomes one of absolute negation, despair, and resentment. Indeed, the African characters do not *do* anything other than consent to or negate the actions of the Mormon protagonists. They do not feel anything other than the terror generated by the dystopian “Africa” or the hope to escape from it. As the character Mafala asserts, “It is the world we live in! We don’t have a choice!” (41). Thus, *The Book of Mormon*’s Ugandans fundamentally lack agency or any potential for change. Through sung lyrics, embodied gestures, and musical strains, *The Book of Mormon* asserts the negativity of African affect and belief.

Indeed, from their earliest entrance to the musical’s closing number, the African characters express themselves in the language of negation. Their only contributions to the pious Mormons’ lexicon comprise obscenities: “fuck,” “shit,” “clit,” and so on. These linguistic formations of African abjection recur throughout, most notably in the “fuck frogs” of Elder Cunningham’s syncretic “fourth book” of the Bible (54–59; 97–98). In “Joseph Smith American Moses,” the Ugandans perform their revised version of the Mormon origin story: they prevent Joseph Smith from raping an infant, cure Brigham Young with a “magical AIDS frog,” and embody the effects of dysentery on the digestive system (82–89). The song’s vulgarity serves as the sole “translation” necessary to bring Mormonism to Ugandans and their “real” concerns. The song ends with a physical embodiment of corporeal vulgarity. The men adorn themselves with large, black phalluses, thrust their pelvises, and sing,

Fuck your woman
 Fuck your man,
 It is all part of God’s plan. (87)

To paraphrase Frantz Fanon, this performance circulates impressions of the black African male body as “a penis” or a “thing” – that is, as vulgar, corporeal, and excessive (Fanon 170). If Ben Brantley interprets correctly that this scene cites *The King and I*’s similar piece of intercultural metatheatricality, “Small House of Uncle Thomas,” then it also marks the shared inheritances of blackface minstrelsy – and African abjection – in both “all-American [. . .] inspirational book musical[s]” (Brantley). Moreover, the music and lyrics of “Joseph Smith American Moses” vulgarize Nigerian Afrobeat innovator Fela Anikulapo-Kuti’s music and liberatory politics through a satire of the 2008 musical *Fela!* In *The Book of Mormon*’s ironic repetition of the lyric “And we fight the oppression” and in the parodic imitation of Kuti’s Afrobeat music, the musical transforms a figure of revolutionary African politics and cultural expression into a minstrel joke about Joseph Smith as a Mormon “liberator” (Parker, Lopez, and Stone 84). By whitewashing Afrobeat, *The Book of*

Mormon makes the libidinal potential of African self-actualization and liberation into a scene of minstrelized sexual abjection. The musical's performances of African abjection echo minstrelsy's impressions of slave subjection, structuring the American audience's circulation of sentimental pity and carnivalesque enjoyment, an affective economy that secures black alterity and normative white American superiority (see Berlant).

As in blackface minstrelsy and its afterlives, vulgar performances mark *The Book of Mormon*'s black Africans as abject, rationalizing their negative affect as a putatively logical response to their everyday lives. At no point does the musical give the impression that Ugandans may not belong to this realm of abjection and its concomitant affective structures of despair. While Mormons wrestle with the flux between hope and despair, Ugandans speak only of their hopelessness or vocalize suffering in inarticulate moans. Emphasizing this framing, a recurring joke insists on the binary division between Mormon hope and African despair. In the Act One finale, "Man Up," Gotswana, the local doctor, interrupts the layered high notes of utopian longing by belting a discordant declaration: "I have maggots in my scrotum!" (51). The musical's finale reprises the joke and its structure. As the entire company harmonizes, "Tomorrow is a latter day," Gotswana again interrupts to belt the musical's closing line, "I *still* have maggots in my scrotum!" (99; emphasis added). The word "still" performs a great deal of work in the reprise. In Act One, none of the Ugandans yet believe; in the finale, however, they proselytize for their syncretic religion. Gotswana's interruption asserts that the Africans' new-found beliefs and their hopeful strains of music are merely make-believe. Resonating with the repeated satires of Mormon belief, Gotswana suggests that belief is *still* just pretend. The joke insists on the persistence of "Africa" as a dystopia, one that resists the utopianism of Mormon and Ugandan belief alike. *The Book of Mormon* asserts that no amount of affective labour or belief can change the material circumstances of Uganda: belief can only make believe; it cannot *do* anything more.

The audience laughs at each of Gotswana's interruptions, likely in response to its multivalent effects: in acknowledgement of the joke's repetition, in recognition of the comic reversal from utopia to dystopia, and in their apprehension of its deeper signification of African impossibility. Such impressions of "Africa" as an unchanging dystopia are not new to Parker and Stone. In an episode of their animated television show *South Park* titled "Starvin' Marvin in Space," Africans resign themselves to their hopeless fate – and to inefficacious missionaries – until they are saved through the *deus ex machina* intervention of aliens (Parker and Stone). Though framed as satire, the episode concludes with a solution to African suffering: Starvin' Marvin and his community relocate to a utopian alien planet. As a prefiguration of *The*

Book of Mormon, “Starvin’ Marvin” models how Parker and Stone imbricate secularism, spirituality, and African abjection throughout their oeuvre. In “Starvin’ Marvin in Space,” African abjection appears as constant until the Africans escape from the earth itself. In *The Book of Mormon*, Gotswana cannot be rid of his earthly suffering through religious belief. Similarly, Nabulungi’s utopian longing for “Sal Tlay Ka Siti” (that is, Salt Lake City) draws derision from her fellow Ugandans because, ironically, they do not believe that such an unearthly place exists (91). These narratives circulate the impression that African abjection is inherently secular: it *belongs* to the “real” world and, specifically, in Africa.

African suffering is presented as real and as of the “real”: it is impervious to the make-believe. Simultaneously, the musical conveys the impression that African beliefs may be easily remade through syncretic processes since Africans were already figured as lacking belief. Cunningham becomes the first Mormon missionary to convert Ugandans to the Church by “making things up” – and by making Mormonism more vulgar and “real” in the process. Thus African abjection works to bring Mormon belief down to earth, desecularizing belief by making it secular. “The Book of Arnold” dispenses with spiritual belief, reaffirming the pragmatism of the secularist everyday. These impressions make belief that religious belief is something unfit for the world. In other words, *The Book of Mormon* pretends – hard enough and to great effect – that Africans cannot be saved, that believers are inherently mystified, and that the secular and the spiritual are irreconcilable.

The Book of Mormon circulates far beyond the theatres in which it is performed. Merchandise for the musical indexes this circulation as well as its investments in affective economies as sources for capital accumulation, ironically aligning *The Book of Mormon* with the commodified “Disneyfication of musicals” that it purports to critique (Sternfeld 320). At each performance, vendors sell printed T-shirts proclaiming “Hasa Diga Eebowai” and boxer shorts announcing “I Have Maggots in My Scrotum” (“Apparel”). The circulation of these material objects extends the affective matrices of *The Book of Mormon* outside of the make-believe performance and into the everyday lives of its audiences. There, “Hasa Diga Eebowai” enables secular Americans to adorn their bodies with a coded, vulgar renunciation of “God” and religion. Similarly, “I Have Maggots in My Scrotum” becomes an inside joke about African abjection to be shared in moments of intimacy in American bedrooms. The joke works only if the subject wearing the shorts does not – and presumably could not – have actual maggots in his scrotum. In other words, the joke turns on American exceptionalism from African suffering. American pleasure, public and intimate, thus sticks to the impressions of Mormons and Africans as different and abjected.

This is not to say that *The Book of Mormon*'s audiences or those who purchase the musical's merchandise are necessarily "racist" or bigoted – at least not in the model of agential individualism that these terms often imply. Rather, the musical's entanglements of race, belief, and sexuality circulate through the precognitive "common sense" of shared affect, a circulation that makes beliefs and impressions about the world. These entanglements of affect that extend beyond the theatrical stage are the strains of the Enlightenment, strains that connect the atonal cries of enthusiasm about the illegitimacy of Mormon belief in the audiences of the Salt Lake City productions of *The Book of Mormon* to the affective pull of superiority predicated on racial difference. The affects generated through Mormon and African abjection make up the undertones to *The Book of Mormon*'s high notes. They mark the (re)making of American secular rationalist belief through the workings of affective economies predicated on feeling exceptional, together. The musical makes believe that such beliefs are "common sense" when, ironically, it reveals the hard affective work of performance required to remake such beliefs through the circulation of laughter and strain.

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NOTES

- 1 Author's notes on the performance and audience responses were taken during a performance of the touring production of *The Book of Mormon* in Las Vegas, 2 October 2015. Additional audience responses were drawn from a recording of the Broadway production on *YouTube* (Yauk), which is no longer available for viewing due to a copyright claim.
- 2 "Hasa Diga Eebowai" is an invented phrase in an invented language. There is no precedent, linguistic borrowing, or near-translation available.

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