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Postcolonialism and the Missionary Experience in *The Book of Mormon*

Diana Witt

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Abstract

In their irreverent 2011 musical, *The Book of Mormon*, writer-composers Matt Stone, Trey Parker, and Robert Lopez satirize the work of Mormon missionaries. This paper analyzes the musical’s book and lyrics, its cultural context and reception, and postcolonial scholarship. The paper argues that while *The Book of Mormon* operates as a postcolonialist text by critiquing cultural hegemony, it also reinforces stereotypes and practices present in colonization like othering and cultural colonialism.

Two bright-eyed Mormon missionaries experience culture shock when they leave their cushy life in the United States for their mission in a war-torn area of northern Uganda. *The Book of Mormon*, a 2011 musical by writer-composers Matt Stone, Trey Parker, and Robert Lopez, introduces characters and a story that satirizes Mormonism, the missionary experience, and colonialism. While *The Book of Mormon* critiques missionaries' encounters with indigenous people and cultural hegemony, it reinforces stereotypes, othering, and cultural colonialism.

The Book of Mormon follows overconfident and devout protagonist Elder Price, who is disappointed to be sent on a mission to northern Uganda with his sidekick, the quirky and unsure Elder Cunningham. After arriving in southeastern Africa, the pair is immediately thrown into the danger and destitution that the Ugandans live in. Aggressive warlord General Butt-Fucking Naked rules the people and threatens female genital mutilation. AIDS runs rampant in the community. Despite the challenges, Elder Price and Elder Cunningham successfully convert the Ugandans. The Ugandans' version of Mormonism, however, ultimately takes a different form.

In popular culture, LDS Mormons are often associated with big families and fresh-faced young people going door to door to spread the word.

Mormonism was founded by Joseph Smith, a prophet who allegedly received the word of God. Smith preached that God and humans were of the same order. The religion has continued to grow and, in 2020, approximately sixteen million people were members of the religion now known as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS; "2020 Statistical Report"). In popular culture, LDS Mormons are often associated with big families and fresh-faced young people going door to door to spread the word. As Richard Bushman notes in *Mormonism: A Very Short Introduction*, "All these [images] sug-

gest that Mormons are happy, uncomplicated, kindly, and innocent—if perhaps naive" (2). The creators engage this stereotype, revealing how it can be rooted in truth but also challenged to show how the characters can be complex. Along the way, they poke fun at the history of the Church. In "I Believe," Elder Price lists the touchstones of the faith. Here, the creators cast doubt on the Mormon beliefs: "I believe that God has a plan for all of us. I believe that plan involves me getting my own planet."¹ They also reveal some of the racist roots of the Mormon faith by saying, "And I believe that in 1978 God changed his mind about black people!"

By characterizing its protagonists as ignorant and naive, the musical invalidates their sense of cultural superiority.

The musical uses this satire to critique the missionary process and, in some parts, colonialism. Colonialism relies on the "colonizer's assumption of their own superiority" (Tyson 400). The protagonists, Elder Price and Elder Cunningham, are depicted as flawed people. Elder Cunningham is airheaded and frequently lies. In the song "Making Things Up Again," Elder Cunningham's propensity to fictionalize is revealed. He spreads false hope to the Ugandans by embellishing the Mormon teachings: "The Lord said to the Mormon prophet Joseph Smith 'You shall not have sex with that infant!'" Elder Price is self-serving, even though he claims to be devout and subservient to God. Both of them have an air of naiveté, as they are thrown into their missions when they are young adults. Elder Price explains through song that he is going to change the world: "Something incredible. I'll do something incredible. I wanna be the Mormon. Who changed all of mankind." By characterizing its protagonists as ignorant and naive, the musical invalidates their sense of cultural superiority, offering a momentary postcolonial lens.

¹ All song lyrics are taken from "*The Book of Mormon* (Original Broadway Cast Recording)" available on Spotify.

We Were Othering the Mormons

Much of the initial controversy regarding *The Book of Mormon* centered on its critique of Mormonism. In a 2011 NPR interview with Stone and Parker, the questions centered on religion, rather than race, and Stone and Parker did not mention how race played a role in the production. When Stone and Parker discussed why they chose the setting of Uganda, they said they wanted a place where the people speak English. According to the Pew Research Center, Uganda's population is predominantly Christian, unlike parts of northern Africa which have a higher Muslim population ("Chapter 1"). Stone and Parker narrowed in on the northern region because of the humanitarian crisis there.

The musical is not supposed to be a direct reflection of that region, but highlights the "generic, war-torn worst place on earth." This illuminates that Stone and Parker did not approach writing with a strong emphasis on the Ugandan experience. Their story is generalized so that it could apply across different countries. Writer Herb Scribner addressed this glossing over of racial issues in a 2020 *Deseret News* article: "While I knew it skewered religion and insulted Latter-day Saints, I hadn't heard anything about racial concerns surrounding the musical. It felt inappropriate. It didn't feel right." Here, Scribner suggests that the creators' lack of attention to the racial implications in the musical takes away from its impact. By failing to address these issues, they devalue their importance to the story and miss an opportunity to make a statement about how race affects cultural perception.

The musical's lack of attention to racial implications is exemplified by a song called "Hasa Diga Eebowai." In their interview, Stone and Parker called "Hasa Diga Eebowai" an "anti-*Lion King*" song. It presents upbeat tempos and jolly thump of the drums, but the message of the song is much more grim. "Hasa Diga Eebowai" is a saying that helps the people get through their day, but unlike "Hakuna Matata" from *The Lion King*, it does not mean no worries. The song title translates to "Fuck You God." In some

respects, "Hasa Diga Eebowai" shifts away from a certain African stereotype and therefore functions as an anti-colonialist work. The subverted stereotype, however, still portrays the Africans in a negative manner by furthering the point that they are rough talking and antagonistic. In this way, it promotes colonialist ideals.

Even The Book of Mormon plot points grounded in truth can stigmatize Ugandan culture and Africa more broadly.

Even *The Book of Mormon* plot points grounded in truth can stigmatize Ugandan culture and Africa more broadly. For instance, the musical focuses heavily on HIV and AIDS, which are extremely prevalent in the region of northern Uganda. According to Peter Atekyereza in his 2014 *African Sociological Review* article titled "Deprivation, HIV and AIDS in Northern Uganda," "Sub-Sahara Africa still accounts for almost 69% of HIV/AIDS despite having 10% of the world's population" (92). The disproportionate rates of infection could be caused by factors such as poverty, family disintegration, civil strife, and lack of sexual regulation. There is also evidence that cultural practices regarding having multiple sexual partners have an effect on the number of infected individuals (Atekyereza 93). While the association of northern Uganda with AIDS is rooted in truth, the portrayal of the Ugandans' demeanor surrounding this aspect of their life can lead to *othering*.

Othering is the practice of defining groups or individuals who are different as subhuman. It involves framing colonized people as "other" or "savage." *Critical Theory Today* author Lois Tyson writes in her chapter on postcolonial criticism that "The 'savage' was usually considered evil (the demonic other) as well as inferior" (401). The Ugandans swear frequently, cursing God. These stereotypes are evident in the musical's warlord character called General Butt-Fucking Naked. He is associated with aggressive, violent

tendencies. In one scene, he shoves the Book of Mormon up Elder Price's rectum. The Ugandans take a passive attitude to the disease ravaging their village. One Ugandan describes having "maggots in my scrotum." The depictions of the Ugandans as out of control and unclean positions them as other, which prevents the musical from functioning as a critique of colonialism.

The exaggerated stereotypes are directed at a theatre audience that may not have the background knowledge to balance them with reality.

The interpretive challenge is compounded by the fact that the exaggerated stereotypes are directed at a theatre audience that may not have the background knowledge to balance them with reality. Since the culture of northern Uganda is not often represented in contemporary American media, mainstream tourists and theatregoers who see the musical may not recognize the satire. Moreover, according to an annual demographic report conducted by the Broadway League and reported by the *New York Times*, 77% of the Broadway audience in 2018 was white (Paulson). These viewers and similar touring production viewers may be influenced by exaggerated or even inaccurate depictions of northern Uganda and Africa more broadly.

The Price of Evangelism

In "Missionary Writing and Postcolonialism," Elisabeth Mudimbe-Boyi argues that the written discourse surrounding Christian missions in Africa reveals a duality of intentions (83). On one hand, the missions aimed to evangelize Africans. In this process, European Christians also aimed to colonize Africans, attempting to "civilize" and alter native cultural expressions. Evolution was viewed as a justification for this viewpoint: "The missionary enterprise, like the colonizer's, is framed in the discourse of evolution, progress (with reference to primitiveness and the lack of development) and personal growth (with reference to paternalism), which are part of the co-

lonial discourse representing Africans" (Mudimbe-Boyi 84). *The Book of Mormon* does critique the colonialist ideals of the mission experience through its depiction of Mormonism and the Mormon characters, but it lacks a realistic presentation of how the native people are harmed by the missionary discourse.

The missionary dynamic also informs how the musical deals with hegemony. Hegemony is a colonialist practice in which one culture views itself as superior. In *Hegemony: The New Shape of Global Power*, John Agnew posits that Americans consider other cultures to have a "lessness," in that they are less blessed when it comes to consumption, technological advancements, and social aspirations (6). In *The Book of Mormon*, Stone, Parker, and Lopez both critique and promote the perception of lessness that hegemony licenses. In the song "Sal Tlay Ka Siti," one of the young women in the village, Nabulungi, sings about wanting to go to Salt Lake City. She has a highly romanticized and fantastical idea of the city: "My mama once told me of a place with waterfalls and unicorns flying." By emphasizing how absurd her perception of the Elders' lives is, the creators indirectly show how the Elders' sense of superiority depends on fiction. They, after all, are the ones who planted the stories. But these untrue stories still impact cultural interactions. Later in her song, Nabulungi sings, "Sal Tlay Ka Siti. A land of hope and joy. And if I want to get there. I just have to follow that white boy." This lyric furthers the perception of Uganda as a third world country, a place the natives want to leave. It also perpetuates the white savior trope, conveying that the Ugandans have to rely upon the Mormons, thus stripping the Ugandans of their agency.

Hello Cultural Colonization!

Cultural colonization, which is when a dominant culture gives or inflicts cultural values or aesthetics onto a receiving culture, is a type of "psychological inheritance" that devalues and eventually eradicates the pre-colonial culture (Tyson 400). In *The Book of Mormon*, the Mormons spread culture to the Ugandans in the form of religious

tenets. In this way, religion and culture feed into each other. In *Christian Moderns: Freedom and Fetish in the Mission Encounter*, anthropologist Webb Keane describes the very existence of a rigid separation of religion and culture “politically dubious” (86). Missionary ethnography is often characterized by “the tension between the relativizing perspective and the vocation to change the native” (Keane 98). Missionaries of the nineteenth century strove to overlook cultural differences between them and the native people in hopes of spreading the Gospel. Yet, as Keane notes, this distinction was not always clear: “Although the missionaries had the task of defining Christianity for the natives, and regulating it, the natives were supposed to decide for themselves which parts of their previous culture were compatible with Christianity. Of course, in practice, the natives were hardly left to sort through the culture themselves” (98). Culture may not always be synonymous with religion, and the missionary dynamic can strip native people of parts of their cultural identity. When Christian tenets clash with native culture, native peoples can be conflicted about their identity.

Ultimately, the Ugandans do convert to Mormonism, thus undermining any potential of keeping their culture intact.

The Book of Mormon shows how the Ugandans maintain their sense of culture even through their acceptance of Mormonism. When Elder Cunningham is teaching the Ugandans scripture, he fabricates a story inspired by *Star Wars*. He also responds to their cultural norms with specific made-up tenets: “And lo, the Lord said unto the Nephites: ‘I know you’re really depressed, what with all your AIDS and everything but there is an answer in Christ.’” In the song “Joseph Smith American Moses,” the Ugandans put on a pageant, showing off what Elder Cunningham has taught them. Their version of Mormonism includes the same main ideas—belief in the prophet, faith in God, and devotion to scripture—but they adapt the teaching to their way of life. They show how religion does not replace

culture but can still affect it. The musical portrays a hybridity of the Ugandan and Mormon lifestyles. In this way, both religion and culture exist on a spectrum. According to anthropologist Hans-Rudolf Wicker, they are not rigidly defined but part of an elusive and contextual whole. But ultimately, the Ugandans do convert to Mormonism, thus undermining any potential of keeping their culture intact.

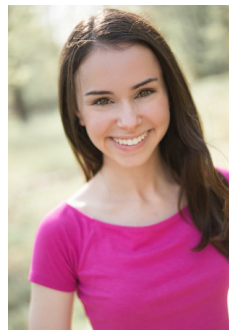
The Book of Mormon explores culture erasure heavily in its second act. By the end of the show, the Ugandans are clearly the subjects of cultural colonization, as they accept the Mormon faith. The finale mirrors the opening number. In the opening number, “Hello!” the Mormons ring doorbells to preach the Book of Mormon and spread the word. In the last song of the show, the Ugandans are shown doing the same. The success of the Mormons’ mission undercuts the postcolonial critique by suggesting that they prevailed. The strength of the satirical elements of the book and score lie in the scenes in which Mormonism is critiqued. By resolving the plot in a manner where the Mormons prove successful, the creators fail to critique missionary structures.

The Nature of Art

Storytellers have a responsibility to their audience, as they can affirm and perpetuate ideas about certain cultures. In her TED Talk, “The Danger of a Single Story,” author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie explains how representation can alter perceptions of culture. She details experiences from her youth, in which she read books about British and American children. She then describes going to college and having her roommate assume that she must listen to tribal music since she was from Africa. Here, Adichie illuminates how homogenizing African experiences in the media can both license viewers to see all of Africa as a single country and block viewers from understanding that cultural similarity between Americans and Africans is possible. When the only story being told is characterized by poverty, the media-consuming society can develop misconceptions regarding the culture behind that story.

When it came out in 2011, *The Book of Mormon* received excellent reviews and won nine Tony Awards, including Best Musical. In the age of the Black Lives Matter movement, there is a greater emphasis on racial sensitivity in American society and culture. In June 2020, Griffin Matthews, who wrote and starred in the musical *Witness Uganda*, spoke out in a much-shared Instagram post against Broadway's racist tendencies. After a long list indicting seemingly everyone associated with Broadway, and thus the system as a whole, Matthews closed with this: "And one more thing, *Book of Mormon* is racist. There, I said it." Josh Gad, who played Elder Cunningham in the original Broadway production, acknowledged in a July 2020 interview that the culture in 2011 affected how the musical was received, saying, "I don't know that the show could open today and have that same sort of open response as it did then." Yet Gad argued that the musical still had value at its core. He proposed that it could be changed to fit with the times, stating, "It is the nature of art to adapt."

The interculturalism in the uplifting end of *The Book of Mormon* promotes acceptance and emphasizes the universality of humanity. Through satirical depictions of the missionary dynamic, the creators critique colonialist practices and question the idea of hegemony. They do so in a few moments by revealing flaws in the Mormon characters and stripping them of their power. Some of the musical's depictions of the Ugandans perpetuate harmful stereotypes that can support the process of othering. In *The Book of Mormon*, Matt Stone, Trey Parker, and Robert Lopez at times uphold postcolonial ideology, which allows audiences to think critically about colonialist processes. In certain scenes, however, they reinforce stereotypes and harmful perceptions of colonized peoples. Storytelling in contemporary theatre can affect audiences by changing perceptions and disseminating information. With modifications, *The Book of Mormon* could support a stronger postcolonial viewpoint that would more accurately convey the harmful nature of cultural hegemony, othering, and cultural colonization.



Author's Note

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Diana Witt ('22) is a Theatre and Independent Scholars (with a focus in writing) double major with a minor in Honors Interdisciplinary Studies. During her time at JMU, she has been recognized by the Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival for her work in theatre journalism. She has been a part of JMU's Semester in London program and The Second City's Comedy Studies semester. Diana extends her gratitude to Dr. Dennis Beck for his support in developing her project and the *JMURJ* Editorial Board for its assistance in refining her paper.

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