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## From “Hakuna Matata” to “Hasa Diga Eebowai”: Paradoxical Bliss in *The Book of Mormon*

By Norman Cahn

### Abstract

With an onslaught of grisly stories pouring in from the news media, it is reassuring (and quite easy) to assign blame to movies, film, and theatre with “violent” content. Indeed, for patrons of the *The Book of Mormon*, it might seem alarming that numbers like “Hasa Diga Eebowai,” with such repugnant lyrical content, could earn the sweeping approval of audiences that it has. Surprisingly, *The Lion King’s* “Hakuna Matata” sheds light on the “Hasa Diga Eebowai” paradox. In this paper, I analyze the audiovisual elements of both songs—in particular, the participatory features that create an inclusive, familial environment. *The Book of Mormon’s* piece utilizes this buoyant, “no worries” façade to provide comforting nostalgia for the Disney classic. Juxtaposed against this upbeat tone, “Hasa Diga Eebowai’s” distasteful lyrics effectively augment the artificiality of the spectacle. Distanced from the events on stage, any congruence of lyrics, music, or meaning is severed, thus allowing attendees to critically engage with the disparate musical-theatre-components at play. Applying Roland Barthes’ ideas regarding a text of “bliss,” audiences assemble this plurality of meaning, causing a state of pleasure.

## From “Hakuna Matata” to “Hasa Diga Eebowai”: Paradoxical Bliss in *The Book of Mormon*

By Norman Cahn

Since its premiere in 2011, *The Book of Mormon* has garnered near universal acclaim. The musical, by Trey Parker, Robert Lopez, and Matt Stone, has received nine Tony Awards, five Drama Desk Awards, and four Outer Critics Circle Awards. During its first year alone, the Broadway production set twenty-two weekly sales records for the Eugene O’Neill Theater (Healy). The musical’s popularity has also extended beyond the realm of the stage, with its Original Broadway Cast Recording receiving a Grammy for “Best Musical Theater Album” in 2012, reaching No. 3 on the *Billboard* charts in June 2011 (Caulfield). *The Book of Mormon* follows Mormon Elders Price and Cunningham, whose unbridled efforts to share their scripture in Uganda are juxtaposed against a war-torn, impoverished population. The production’s success is achieved despite the its graphic, disturbing lyrics, which illustrate some of the struggles of “African life.” For instance, in the musical number “Hasa Diga Eebowai,” words such as, “eighty percent of us have AIDS” are met with thunderous laughter from the audience (Parker, Lopez, and Stone 18). How can such aggressive lyrics translate to critical success and hilarity?

Though seemingly dissimilar, *The Lion King’s* “Hakuna Matata” is the benchmark from which to understand the mechanisms that generate spectator pleasure in “Hasa Diga Eebowai.” In the following passages, I will discuss audiovisual similarities between the two songs—in particular, those that evoke a participatory musical style. I assert that *The Book of Mormon’s* audiences are comforted by a foundation of nostalgic cultural memory generated from *The Lion King* film. Distancing effects in “Hasa Diga Eebowai,” however, alienate *The Book of Mormon’s* audience,

allowing them to critically engage with the number's content without succumbing to its distressing lyrics. Consequently, Roland Barthes' concept of *bliss*, in which the perverse violently penetrates one's cultural, moral, and/or historical expectations, may rightly be applied to *The Book of Mormon*. This sense of *bliss* is achieved through the process of assembling the plurality of meaning, generating an arousal of amusement. And with that, I implore you, the reader, to suffer the following disclaimer—a sort of meta distancing effect, if you will: loathe though I am to overstate the significance of this case study, the subliminal mechanisms at play in *The Book of Mormon* are not unique to it. I do not seek to provide playwrights a ready roadmap for the generation of bliss. Yet, an understanding of the *Book of Mormon*-paradox illuminates the increasing presence of disturbance-driven musical theatre, and, provided my research is convincing, a rational means for moral vindication of its audience.

"Hasa Diga Eebowai" begins as American Mormon church missionaries Price and Cunningham arrive in Uganda. They discover Africa to be a bleak place, a squalid town littered with trash, villagers in t-shirts and shorts, and a man dragging a decaying donkey carcass across the stage. Two "very bad-ass guards with sunglasses and machine guns" violently steal the missionaries' belongings, as Mafala Hatimbi arrives, smiling, to lead the Americans to their quarters. The upbeat musical number, "Hasa Diga Eebowai" commences, as Mafala states, "In this part of Africa, we ALL have a saying—whenever something bad happens, we just throw our hands up to the sky and say, HASA DIGA EEBOWAI!" (Parker, Lopez, and Stone 16-17).

"Hasa Diga Eebowai" is rife with offensive diction, off-put with optimistic facial expressions, dancing, and upbeat sonorities. Throughout the song, Mafala maintains a deceptively wide smile and dances in unison amongst his fellow Ugandans, even as he sings about the harsh life he and

his people are living. To assess the number's distressing lyrical content, I will provide choice selections from the text. Between repetitions of the phrase, "Hasa Diga Eebowai," Mafala sings of the woes of African life:

There isn't enough food to eat,  
Hasa Diga Eebowai!  
People are starving in the street,  
Hasa Diga Eebowai!  
We've had no rain for several days,  
Hasa Diga Eebowai!  
And eighty percent of us have AIDS,  
Hasa Diga Eebowai!  
Many young girls here get circumcised, Their clits get cut right off,  
Way oh!  
And so we say up to the sky:  
Hasa Diga Eebowai! (Parker, Lopez, and Stone 18)

After each proclamation of the many woes of "African life," I noticed, as an audience-member, the theatre roaring with laughter. When Price questions what exactly the eponymous phrase means, Mafala enlightens him: "Well, let's see . . . 'Eebowai' means 'God,' and 'Hasa Diga' means 'Fuck you.' So I guess in English it would be, 'Fuck you, God!'" again, followed by much applause and laughter from the audience (Parker, Lopez, and Stone 19).

The observable laughter that permeates the theatre during "Hasa Diga Eebowai" is an arousal most contradictory to what one would expect, in light of the number's contentious lyrical content. This dichotomy raises issues in the analysis of the repertoire, for by its very nature, musical theatre employs a variety of media to create a cohesive piece. David

Savran, a preeminent musical theatre scholar, thus believes that "analysis [in musical theatre] requires an implicit or explicit theorization of multiple (and often conflicting) systems of signification" (216). Indeed, due to this complex equation in which many different performing elements are implemented (dance, music, and speech, just to name a few), musical theatre has the capability of adopting simultaneously multiple genres and forms, as we will see in the case of "Hasa Diga Eebowai." This intricate web thus complicates musical theatre's politics of pleasure, since any individual medium may not necessarily function to generate pleasure. Therefore, the audience's mirth from "Hasa Diga Eebowai" is not sourced *only* from what seems to be an overblown lyrical content; rather, it is derived from the unique interaction between the various elements of musical theatre. In evaluating this contention, it is helpful to consider the efficacy of arguments that insist there to be a direct causation between lyrical content and the listener's arousal.

### **LYRICAL CONTENT AND AROUSAL**

Incitement and arousal, as defined by popular music studies academiansacademics, Bruce Johnson and Martin Cloonan, must be distinguished from one another: incitement exists *within* the music's content, while arousal is the listener's response (123). In recent years, lyrical content that explicitly incites violence has been the subject of controversy. Opponents of these contentious texts often assert that they directly result in an arousal to violent behavior. In one particular instance, rapper Ice-T's "Cop Killer," featuring words such as, "I'm 'bout to dust some cops off . . . I'm a cop killer, better you than me," became a matter of debate in 1992. Dennis Martin, former President of the National Association of Chiefs of Police, cites, "while on patrol in July 1992, two Las Vegas police officers were ambushed and shot by four juvenile delinquents

who boasted that Ice-T's *Cop Killer* gave them a sense of duty and purpose, to get even with 'a fucking pig'" (Martin 161). Martin further claims that Time-Warner had released a half million copies of the rap single (159).

Martin's broad allegation that "Cop Killer's" negatively-inciting content *caused* the Las Vegas incident, however, remains statistically unconvincing. Liberally assuming that, by music's viral nature, "Cop Killer" has been heard since its release by three times the number of Americans claimed by Martin, criminologists Mark S. Hamm and Jeff Ferrell estimate that the song's listenership was more likely around 1.5 million individuals (3). Thus, the Las Vegas youths' arousal to murder would seem merely coincidental, rather than causal, since, "the probability of attacking a police officer with a loaded firearm after listening to 'Cop Killer' is . . . less than 1 in 375,000" (Hamm and Ferrell 29).

Hamm and Ferrell's generous estimate aside, music's arousal causation remains a matter not always attributed simply to its violent lyrics. Like "Cop Killer," "Hasa Diga Eebowai's" proxy expressly justifies brutal behavior: "It's the only way to get through all these troubled times . . . Many young girls here get circumcised, their clits get cut right off!" (Parker, Lopez, and Stone 18). It is clear, however, due to the popular response of laughter from the audience, that we can assume their arousal is not one toward violence. Considering lyrical content's failure to *universally* arouse violence, Johnson and Cloonan claim, "the wellsprings of arousal lie in two other sources which can operate singly or in concert: sonority and non-musical context" (140). Provided that the outcries explicitly articulated in the lyrics of "Hasa Diga Eebowai" do not elicit a collective violent response on their own, they must be framed within an *affective platform* as defined by the number's *sonority* (i.e. auditory) and *visual* features. This platform, according to Johnson and Cloonan, is

established through specific cultural memory and context (140). In the case of "Hasa Diga Eebowai," the memory triggered is one of *The Lion King's* "Hakuna Matata."

### **"HAKUNA MATATA": AN AFFECTIVE PLATFORM**

Notwithstanding the theatrical similarities and differences between the staged *Book of Mormon* and the cinematic *Lion King*, the latter shares much of the critical acclaim enjoyed by the former. Among the 1994 movie's many accolades are two Academy Awards, three Golden Globes, and three Annie Awards (with an additional Academy Award nomination for "Hakuna Matata"). Becoming the highest worldwide grossing film of 1994 at \$858.6 million, the film has also been lauded by audiences ("1994 Worldwide Grosses"). Appreciating such figures sheds light on *The Lion King's* widespread viewership—reinforcing the film's capacity to evoke a cultural memory. Countless individuals, since 1994, have experienced Disney's beloved animation in some fashion. Indeed, the original film continued its legacy with television shows, video games, theme park rides, and a staged musical. As such, musical numbers such as "Hakuna Matata" have become intrinsically familiar to the collective public. This familiarity, as we will explore further, endures in *Book of Mormon* theatre-goers, forming the context that creates an affective platform for specific arousals.

### **"HAKUNA MATATA" AND THE SPIRIT OF UBUNTU**

"Hakuna Matata's" stylistic design offers the point of reference to set the initial agenda for "Hasa Diga Eebowai." The phrase "Hakuna Matata" is a Swahili phrase, translated to "no worries." This uplifting perspective resonates throughout the lyrics of the number with, "It means

no worries for the rest of your days / It's our problem free philosophy."<sup>1</sup> The context in which this song appears in the film—Timon and Pumbaa teaching Simba how to live off the land by eating grubs and forgetting about the past—supports the humanist South African concept of *ubuntu*. This theory is perhaps best represented by Nobel Peace Prize winner Desmond Tutu, who claims that, "when we want to give high praise to someone we say, 'Yu, u nobuntu'; 'Hey, he or she has *Ubuntu*'" (Tutu 34-35). Christine Gichure, professor of ethics and philosophy at Strathmore University, elaborating on Tutu's statement, affirms that one with *ubuntu* "has what it means to be human; he has the human qualities of magnanimity, hospitability, generosity, friendliness, caring, affection and compassion" (128).

Unlike the dichotomy between lyrics and sonority in "Hasa Diga Eebowai," "Hakuna Matata's" carefree lyrics function in unity with its sonority and visual constructs, thematically aligned around an *ubuntu* mentality. Gichure alleges that "a significant element of *ubuntu* cultures is that it lends itself to a communal and traditional lifestyle in which every person is their neighbor's keeper" (127). Following this essence of *ubuntu* philosophy, "Hakuna Matata" is highly participatory, as Timon and Pumbaa encourage Simba to get involved in the song ("Yeah, sing it kid!"). Ethnomusicologist Thomas Turino emphasizes the importance of repetition in participatory music, which provides a "security in constancy" (40). Indeed, constant repetition of the titular phrase "Hakuna Matata" achieves this, serving to ease Simba's eventual entry into the performance. Shortly before Simba begins singing, he is seen "dancing," bouncing his rump to the rhythm of the music. In this way, the cub's body movements prepare him for the integrated flow of the ensemble, since

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<sup>1</sup> Dialogue was acquired from *The Lion King* film. *The Lion King*, directed by Roger Allers and Rob Minkoff (1994; Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Pictures, 2003), DVD.

"moving together and sounding together in a group creates a direct sense of *being* together and of deeply felt similarity" (Turino 43). Simba begins as an outsider, just as his counterparts, Price and Cunningham do in "Hasa Diga Eebowai"; however, when finally encouraged to *participate*, his contribution indeed combines beautifully with the other "performers," resulting in stunning major 3rds during the second iteration of the chorus with, "It's our problem-free philosophy." With Simba's inclusive use of the diction "our," he is no longer an outsider, either of the ensemble or amongst his new friends. Thus, the *ubuntu* foundation of togetherness is maintained by participatory events "founded on an ethos that holds that everyone present can, and should, participate in the sound and motion of the performance" (Turino 29).

The sonority in "Hakuna Matata" further supports its characteristics as participatory music. The music borrows from many traditions, including African instrumentation and Zydeco. It begins with a roughly "feathered" beginning, in which the instrumentation is not concretely delineated; this is characterized by the marimba (an African percussive idiophone) trembling at the beginning. In participatory music practice, this "feathered" introduction allows "one or two people [to] begin pieces and others [to] join in gradually as they recognize it and find their place" (Turino 38). Indeed, after the vague marimba beginning, the characters quickly "find their place," as Pumbaa and Timon pick up their words: "Hakuna Matata, ain't no passing craze." The "feathered" introduction leads to a heavily Zydeco-inspired sonority, which permeates throughout the piece. Instrumentation such as the accordion, bass guitar, electric guitar, clarinet, and soprano saxophone, all part of a typical Zydeco ensemble, are implemented. Zydeco, developed in the Louisiana black Creole community, blends European (particularly French, but also Spanish, German, and English styles), Native American, and Afro-Caribbean musical

traditions; it is a fusion of blues, rhythm and blues, and music native to the peoples of Louisiana (Ancelet 33). As such, Zydeco has become a highly participatory musical form, as the term itself refers "to dance as a social event and to dance styles as well as the music associated with them" (Ancelet 37).

The dense musical texture, characteristic of a Zydeco ensemble, further maintains "Hakuna Matata's" participatory soundscape. This density occurs when the various "voices" in the music overlap and merge. A prime instance of this is the section in which Timon and Pumbaa show Simba how to eat in the wild; the singing is interrupted, allowing for dialogue: "Listen, kid, if you live with us, you have to eat like us." However, the music does not cease—a Zydeco ensemble can be heard in the background, performing in a heterophonic texture. The instruments play variations of the theme, accompanied by an underlying, syncopated groove in 4/4 time, in which stress is placed on beats 2 and 4. The instruments are phased into the rhythm, including the accordion, clarinet, electric bass, and trombone. Steven Feld defines this as *in-sync-out-of-phase*, in which the variations will be in sync with the background rhythm, but since they are not playing in unison, the different voices or instruments are somewhat out of phase with each other (82). The dense texture that is created provides a *cloaking function* that helps inspire musical participation. This non-delineated, cloaked texture allows for the assorted musicians to enter the soundscape at will (Turino 46). Cloaking the music also serves the non-sung dialogue of the scene quite well: without a defined melody or structure to the song, during this interlude the characters are at liberty to speak. Considering the non-existent "musical requirements" for contribution in a participatory piece, even these speaking roles may be regarded as further participation in the music itself.

The aural and extra-musical participatory components of "Hakuna Matata" are thus characteristic of the *ubuntu* doctrine. Within the film, the song commences after the traumatic death of Simba's father, Mufasa. Simba, alone and afraid, consequently assimilates into a pseudo-familial relationship with Timon and Pumbaa. This communal affiliation is central to *ubuntu* morality. Gichure stresses that, "participation in the life of the community, whether in the circle of one's kinsfolk or in public life, was considered an important duty and the right of all" (Gichure 128). Though his community is small, Simba's adoption into the trio embodies the *ubuntu* ideology. Audiences of *The Lion King* have the pleasure of witnessing this brotherly unification in-real-time, through the practice of participation.

#### **NOSTALGIA AND COMFORT BY FAMILIARITY IN "HASA DIGA EEBOWAI"**

*The Book of Mormon* recalls, in a twisted way, many of the techniques that make *The Lion King's* "Hakuna Matata" a socially bonding, joyous experience. In the text alone, there are many direct, and, at times, implied comparisons to the Disney classic. In "Hasa Diga Eebowai," Price and Cunningham ask Mafala the meaning behind the titular phrase: "Does it mean no worries for the rest of our days?" (Parker, Lopez, and Stone 18). Indeed, even the name "Mafala" is a nod toward *The Lion King's* "Mufasa." Later in the musical, when the missionaries witness warlord Butt fucking Naked murdering a villager in front of them, Price proclaims, "Africa is nothing like *The Lion King!* I think that movie took a lot of artistic license" (Parker, Lopez, and Stone 44). The bleak realities revealed in the lyrics of "Hasa Diga Eebowai" are in stark contrast with the uplifting message in "Hakuna Matata." Nevertheless, despite this dissimilarity, the two pieces remain aligned in their visual and musical elements, which define them as case studies in participatory music.

Similar to "Hakuna Matata," "Hasa Diga Eebowai" demonstrates various participatory techniques, which deceptively create an atmosphere of social bonding. Just as Timon and Pumbaa encourage Simba to join them in song ("Yeah, sing it kid!"), so too are the missionaries, by Mafala: "Now you try!" (Parker, Lopez, and Stone 19). As we have seen with "Hakuna Matata," the inclusion of newcomers of all skill levels is essential for the success of a participatory piece of music. The eponymous phrase, "Hasa Diga Eebowai," also is repeated, causing a similar "security in constancy" that we have explored in "Hakuna Matata." Phrase repetition works in conjunction with a synchrony of movement: as the villagers sing, they dance in unison—when the missionaries finally contribute, they too mimic the movements of the participants. In *The Lion King*, these features serve to create a deepened sense of being and similarity. In *The Book of Mormon*, they too allow the missionaries to integrate with the villagers, becoming effective participants within the musical number itself.

The texture of the sonority in "Hasa Diga Eebowai" also shares similar participatory elements found in "Hakuna Matata." Like the Zydeco-flavored instrumentation in *The Lion King's* musical number, *The Book of Mormon's* demonstrates a fusion of different styles, combining African and Western instrumentation. Notably, the song heavily employs the marimba and shekere—a dried gourd with woven beads that tap its surface to create a rhythmic pulse; Western voices, such as the bass guitar, electric guitar, flute, and trumpet, reinforce this instrumental diversity. Like "Hakuna Matata," "Hasa Diga Eebowai" has a feathered introduction, featuring the marimba and shekere. These two instruments create the underlying groove from which the other instruments, singers, and spoken dialogue can phase in and out. The dense texture permitted by the repetitive underlying groove occurs most significantly in short bursts during iterations of the chorus, in which the phrase, "Hasa Diga Eebowai"

is sung. At these moments, the choir is characterized by choral polymelodic antiphony, in which two vocal sections intermingle by singing independent melodies, to the same underlying groove. Both melodies proclaim the same words, "Hasa Diga Eebowai," creating an imitative effect. The instruments too are given participatory liberties; during this chorus, the Western instruments phase in and out of the soundscape, contributing to the dense texture. Just as in "Hakuna Matata," this density has a cloaking function, which further eases newcomers to participate in the music.

In this instance, however, the audience becomes starkly aware of the differences between the Ugandans and the Mormon missionaries, *despite* musical and visual participatory unity. From appearance alone, it is apparent that the missionaries and the Africans come from worlds apart: Price and Cunningham are dressed primly, with tucked white-collared shirts and black ties, while the Ugandans wear an assortment of filthy T-shirts, shorts, and faded African tunics. The lyrics too signify a divide between the Mormon world and that of "Ugandan life." While Mafala laments that, "There isn't enough food to eat," the missionaries chime with, "Somebody took our luggage away!" and, "The plane was crowded and the bus was late!" (Parker, Lopez, and Stone 18-19). Contextually, choreographically, and musically, there is no interruption: the Ugandans do not scoff at the trivial woes of the Mormons or stop their dancing, nor does the music identify to the audience, in any way, the triviality signified by the words. Few details, beyond lyrical content and general physical appearance, designate the immense disparity between the two worlds.

The affective platform of *The Lion King's* "Hakuna Matata" sets the agenda for the arousal of pleasurable nostalgia in *The Book of Mormon's* "Hasa Diga Eebowai." As demonstrated by a comparative analysis of both pieces, participatory sonic and visual elements in both generate an

atmosphere conducive to social bonding. It is these *similar* elements (excluding the divergent lyrical content between the two) that creates a "cultural memory and context" (Johnson and Cloonan 140) of *The Lion King* when listening to *The Book of Mormon*. This nostalgia drives the collective audience response of laughter and pleasure for "Hasa Diga Eebowai." One eminent scholar on dramatic criticism, Rebecca Rugg, notes that *nostalgia*, coined in the seventeenth century as a translation of the German *heimweh* (homesickness), "retains the etymological link, as a longing for something in the past that never actually existed [. . .] nostalgic memory selects only the carefree, blissful past"; she later claims that, "the sense of having experienced the story once before, of knowing all the songs already, creates familiarity and a feeling of personal nostalgia. The combination may provide comfort in a post-modern world, as well as provoke a questioning of that comfort" (Rugg 46-47). Hence, nostalgia serves as the first line of defense for *The Book of Mormon's* patrons, guarding fragile sensibilities from inflammatory lyrics.

### **SYNTHESIS OF "DISTANCING EFFECTS" TO CREATE "BLISS"**

The separation between song and scene evident in "Hasa Diga Eebowai" additionally functions to protect the audience from the number's offensive lyrics, allowing the prevailing arousal of mirth. Musicologist Raymond Knapp claims that, "the effect of adding music to a dramatic scene that might otherwise play naturalistically serves to exaggerate its content, adding a dimension of artificiality at the same time that it often also strives to tap into a deeper kind of reality, one accessible only through music" (12). The artificiality mentioned by Knapp represents the essential nature of musical theatre, to *suspend the plot for the song*. As both plot and song operate simultaneously, the audience is aware of both concurrent elements, interpreting both the performance of the music

by the characters, and the emotional content of the music itself. For musical theatre scholar Millie Taylor, this suspension produces the ability for each medium—dance, song, music, and dialogue—to investigate different aspects of the action and the characters (Taylor 61). It is this separation of song and scene—demonstrated by juxtaposing nostalgic sonorities with distasteful lyrics—that creates artificiality in "Hasa Diga Eebowai." Knapp contends that this artificiality affords "protection from the dangerous, potentially destructive effect of emotions felt too deeply" since, the "music, singing, and often dancing decisively remove that situation from anything even remotely like the real world" (14). From the text alone, the audience faces the potential destructive effect of emotions incited by such words as, "Some people in [Mutumbo's] tribe believe having sex with a virgin can cure their AIDS" (Parker, Lopez, and Stone 22). However, the audience is distanced from the lyrics' destructive effects by the artificiality of the piece's sonority, which evokes nostalgia of the carefree style demonstrated in "Hakuna Matata."

Bertolt Brecht defined these alienating effects as "*verfremdungseffekt*,"<sup>2</sup> claiming that by separating the various mediums involved in musical theatre, the audience is distanced from the spectacle, and is thus compelled to engage it intellectually (Brecht 33-42).<sup>3</sup> Millie Taylor, elaborating on the concept as it is deployed in theatre, claims that "distancing [is] to be achieved by turning familiar objects into something peculiar, striking or strange" (76). As we have seen in "Hasa Diga Eebowai," upsetting the musical genre causes a disruption of expectations. From the start, the sonority and the inviting, participatory behavior of the characters suggests a musical genre evocative of *The Lion King's* "Hakuna Matata," a style that is familiar to the audience. However, at various

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<sup>2</sup> The term "*verfremdungseffekt*" was first coined in the essay, "Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting," presumably inspired by a Mei Lan-fang Company performance in 1935.

<sup>3</sup> In his notes to *Mahagonny*, Brecht elaborates on the separation of musical theatre elements.

moments, *verfremdungseffekt* is used to turn these familiar moments into ones that are peculiar. The identification of these moments within the piece is easy; the critical engagement of the spectators manifests itself as emotional arousal. To assess this, I once again channel my own first-person observations. As an audience member, one can clearly distinguish the sections that trigger an emotional response: each statement of "African struggles" is followed by much laughter (this amusement is initiated by many phrases: "There isn't enough food to eat," "People are starving in the street," and "Eighty percent of us have AIDS")—perceptions which were noted previously (Parker, Lopez, and Stone 18). At these times, the *lyrical* content is thematically separated from the expected genre indicative of its Disney-esque *musical* accompaniment. Thus, the spectators are distanced from the words, allowing them to safely react with laughter instead of being negatively provoked by the text. Indeed, we quickly discover that the phrase "Hasa Diga Eebowai" does *not* have the same *ubuntu*-inspired humanism attached to it. Mafala educates us: "'Eebowai' means 'God,' and 'Hasa Diga' means 'Fuck you'" (Parker, Lopez, and Stone 19). This further distances the audience. With the titular phrase defined, the spectator can no longer stylistically equate the musical accompaniment with its lyrics. This disruption, yet another *verfremdungseffekt*, triggers uproarious laughter.

The juxtaposition of mediums via *verfremdungseffekt* creates a plurality of the text, which ultimately produces bliss in the audience. Roland Barthes claims that a text of "bliss" is one "that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts [. . .] unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language" (*The Pleasure of the Text* 14). Although Barthes' classification of "bliss" refers merely to the text itself, it is clear that "Hasa Diga Eebowai" does indeed unsettle our

cultural assumptions. The juxtaposition of "Hakuna Matata's" upbeat sonority with dark lyrical content imposes a state of loss by distancing the spectator through *verfremdungseffekt*. In this way, the multichannel-medium of musical theatre is able to create a plurality of the text. Barthes claims that this plurality is "woven entirely with citations, references, echoes, cultural languages . . . which cut across it through and through in a vast stereophony" (*Image, Music, Text* 159-160). This text is "bound to *jotrissance*, that is to a pleasure without separation" ("From Work to Text 164).<sup>4</sup> Expanding on Barthes' theories, Millie Taylor proposes that, although the various elements in a performance are thematically separated, their singular meanings are not identified individually (93). The process by which the audience combines and makes sense of this plurality is the cause for their enjoyment and bliss. Indeed, as discussed earlier, emotional arousal occurs at key moments in "Hasa Diga Eebowai"—moments when the jovial sonority is accompanied by the number's most distasteful lyrics. At these instances, the audience actively synthesizes the separate audiovisual elements into a singular epiphany: "Oh I get it, the sonority is a *joke*, while the lyrics are horrible!" Their collective response to this irony is laughter.

### QUESTIONING THE AUTHENTICITY OF THE WORK'S "AFRICAN" REALITY

It is ultimately the patron who, presumably shaped by a reasoned exposure to current world events, chooses which "Africa," Parker/Lopez/Stone's or Disney's, they believe to be authentic. Fortunately for *The Book of Mormon*, its *verfremdungseffekts* and the reactions they elicit clarify audience members' opinions in this matter. Naturally, *verfremdungseffekts* arise from the confliction between

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<sup>4</sup> Note that the word "jotrissance," as it is used in the text, seems to be referring to "jouissance," a term Barthes uses frequently. This may be a typographical error.

opposing motivic sets (in this case, a dreary reality vs. optimistic nostalgia). Additionally, for two respective sets of rival components to spar with each other, the musical or film certainly must feature both sets. As we have examined, the *Book of Mormon*-goer's reception of optimistic nostalgia also relies on his or her cultural memory, or simply, *what they bring to the theatre*. But just as the optimistic nostalgia distances us from the dreary reality, it is conversely true that the dreary reality distances us from the optimistic nostalgia. It is conceivable to imagine a *receiving* motivic set (the set that we are distanced from) to be grounded completely and utterly within the narrative. Presumably such a work would have to be exceptionally long, that the author could cultivate a stand-alone motivic set to indoctrinate his or her devotees, later subverting the receiving set with its alienating antithesis. For dramatists and filmmakers, their narrow window of two to three hours reasonably forces them to repurpose their followers' lifetimes of preexisting sentiments about both respective sets to provoke arousal at the points of impact between them. Accordingly, *The Book of Mormon's* receiving set, a dreary reality, must too be grounded in the viewers' preconceived notions. This is especially true for this receiving set, since "reality" is an objective state of affairs, regardless of any fantasy weaved by scriptwriters. To account for the other side of the equation, mutual laughter from the crowd, a qualified hypothesis of the audience's latent beliefs relative to that "reality" is helpful.

Consider, for a moment, that the audience did *not* believe *The Book of Mormon's* African "reality" to be authentic—let's go so far as to assume that their notions of "Africa" are more reflective of the *ubuntu* optimism in *The Lion King*. Taking the optimistic nostalgia as our *verfremdungseffekt*-set, we would be distanced from an inauthentic, dismal representation of the *real* Africa, a rosy, carefree, and prosperous place. This would hardly elicit merriment from the spectators. Generally knowledgeable about the

same lovely, authentic reality (which would be necessary to justify a mutual response), the scoffing mockery of such a truth would appear to be clumsy, nihilistic demagoguery: playwrights attempting to exploit the ignorance of their audience with a grim falsehood, while simultaneously discrediting the truth as naïve and foolish.

Hence, while viewers don't necessarily have to unconditionally subscribe to *The Book of Mormon's* afflicted "Africa," their opinions of its conditions must align closer to its portrayal, as opposed to that given in *The Lion King*. Still, one might argue that without the dreary reality motivic set, authentic or not, *The Lion King*, lacking incongruous elements impacting scenes, does not have any *verfremdungseffekts*. The Disney fantasy suspends our disbelief to a far greater degree than does *The Book of Mormon*: its world of singing animated animals performing *Hamlet* is one unlike any on Earth. Yet, beneath all the computerized cel shading and anthropomorphism lies a very real point of reference, named without alteration, to refer to its world: *Africa*. If the *Lion King* listener's rooted judgments of non-fictional "African" realities subvert or are subverted by the film's characteristic *ubuntu*-isms—which could possibly inform us of their perception of the reality's authenticity—it is not reliably apparent. Assigning adverse motivic sets for the film in relation to its more burlesque musical counterpart, we could perhaps put forth the conflict between the literal concept/usage of the word, "Africa," and the overall *ubuntu*-ism throughout the film. However, since the term "Africa" is intrinsically tied and refers to the entire affair, including its *ubuntu*-ism, movie-goers are tasked with the impossible challenge of maintaining their *disbelief* in the face of Disney's masterful storytelling. It does not follow that Disney intended to misrepresent "Africa" or beguile the misinformed—though, if *The Book of Mormon's* "Africa" is authentic, *The Lion King* clearly

exemplifies potent devices that, if willfully designed, have the power to subconsciously manipulate the public's impressions of real-world entities.

### **THE DRAMA AS A DISTINCTLY ENGINEERED PRODUCTION**

As challenging as it is to identify the seams at which the authenticity of *The Lion King's* "Africa" could collapse, anthropologist Edward Bruner's observations in 1999—a mere five years after the Disney film's release—expose a less-vigilant production, in which unintended distancing elements managed to seep through. In "The Maasai and the Lion King: Authenticity, Nationalism, and Globalization in African Tourism," Bruner illustrates "Hakuna Matata's" application as a tool for tourism, illuminating the phrase's dissociative potential. As a participant of an "Out of Africa Sundowner" party at the Kichwa Tembo camp near the Masai Mara reserve in Kenya, Bruner describes the event as, "basically a cocktail party with buffet on a river bank in the bush" (891). Amidst the revelry, camp employees sing a round of "Jambo Bwana"—which notably features repetitions of "hakuna matata"—as African Maasai warriors walk amongst the tourists, taking their hands, and encouraging them to dance. They too perform "Kum Ba Yah," a song originating in Africa, interpreted with a New World Caribbean reggae beat (Bruner 892-893).

In many ways, Bruner's Sundowner experience resembles those performed in Disney's "Hakuna Matata." The Maasai welcome the tourists by inviting them to dance, lessening the distance between "tourist" and "African." For *The Lion King's* characters, the participatory elements function the same way, melding Simba into his new community. Though, therein lies the distinction: while an American tourist may actively be adopted (if only temporarily) by the Maasai, audiences watching a film (or, in the case of *The Book of Mormon*, a musical) have the mere opportunity to *observe* the familial integration. Thus, whereas Simba may enjoy the

lessening-distance between "outsider" and "community," the spectator is corporeally separated from the events on screen/stage. This separation severely handicaps the sensations available to theatre/movie-goers: sitting in an auditorium, an individual cannot personally be *taken by the hand* to join the festivities.

The Sundowner, Bruner contends, is produced by tour agencies, specifically for, "selling a product to an audience" (896). As its primary participants are Western visitors, said agencies are inclined to tailor the experience toward familiar sounds and images. Participants are given "African" sights (Maasai warriors dancing) with Americanized "African" sounds (the recognizable "hakuna matata" phrase in "Jambo Bwana" and the reggae "Kum Ba Yah"). Exempt from a spectator's perspective, the tourists, like Simba, are characters in their own drama. Bruner asserts that, "The Americans [. . .] feel comfortable and safe, as they recognize this familiar representation and respond positively, for it is their own" (893). By reflecting Western perceptions of "Africanness"—via "Kum Ba Yah" and "Jambo Bwana"—back to the American tourists, the Maasai avoid revealing any otherwise objectionable virtues of their world.

Patrons of *The Lion King* and *The Book of Mormon* are, likewise, tourists of their respectively tailored "Africa." Yet, their non-participant status is the vehicle that initiates the latter's artificiality, allowing them to assemble the performance's pluralities from a distance. Bruner affirms this concept, recounting one notable breach in the Sundowner fantasy. Passing through several impoverished Tanzanian villages, the tourists witnessed "emaciated children dressed in rags [that] ran after the cars with outstretched hands, hoping for a handout." (Bruner 901). Dancing in the African bush, the tourists were active participants. However, when passing the villages by bus, the narrative was unraveled—its characters, the tourists themselves, reduced to audience-status, free to scrutinize the

spectacle from a distance with what Bruner calls the "questioning gaze" (899). Whether or not devotees of *The Lion King* maintain a "questioning gaze" while enjoying the film is a matter for debate. Countless individuals, decades older, first experienced the Disney animation as children—the film's target market. Some of these minors may indeed have questioned the authenticity of *The Lion King's* illustration of Africa, nonsensical though the notion may be. Notwithstanding, for the majority of the film's audience, it is safe to assume that *The Lion King* and jubilant songs such as "Hakuna Matata" were, upon first listening, appreciated for their musical and visual elements at face value. *The Book of Mormon's* "Hasa Diga Eebowai" thereupon blatantly transposes Disney's juvenile virtues into bleak "African" realities, revealing the misleading nature of its own affective platform.

## CONCLUSIONS

Although this evaluation of spectator bliss from *The Book of Mormon* suggests that the audience is *aware* of the musical's satire, the prospect that their amusement comes from the musical at-face-value is a very dark prospect. One cannot assume that, despite this analysis, *all* the applause and laughter come from a conscious synthesis of the disparate mediums involved in musical theatre. Indeed, Frank Rich makes no reference to *The Lion King* in his liner notes for *The Book of Mormon: Original Broadway Cast Recording* saying, "However skeptical their show may be of the Church of Latter-day Saints [. . .] its faith in the Broadway brand of tuneful, funny, well-told and uplifting musicals is orthodox and unshakeable." Rich suggests that *The Book of Mormon* has the capacity to entertain, merely by its merits as an addition to the musical theatre repertoire. Such non-discriminate enjoyment may be permissible for *The Lion King*—its message, naïve though its depiction of Africa may be,

evokes a positive *ubuntu* philosophy throughout all its various audiovisual elements. However, how can this pleasure be justified in the context of *The Book of Mormon*, which unashamedly brings up such actions as *forced circumcision*? Despite all its not-so-subtle allusions to Disney's production, *The Book of Mormon* dares its audience to enjoy the spectacle without realizing its social commentary. It functions as if to say, *Hey, you enjoyed The Lion King, didn't you? Well, this one is just like it!* Though, the very entertainment value created in *The Lion King*, if valued in *The Book of Mormon*, exposes the audience as irreparably sinful. For how might one conscionably laugh at AIDS, starvation, rape, and murder? In the end, Trey Parker, Robert Lopez, and Matt Stone may have the last laugh: the joke's on us, tasteless patrons in moral decline.

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