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# On (Dang) Quesadillas and Nachos

## Mexican Identity and a Mormon Imaginary in the Films of Jared Hess

### ABSTRACT

Mormon director Jared Hess has produced several films, but none have achieved the popularity of *NAPOLEON DYNAMITE* (US 2004) and *NACHO LIBRE* (US 2006). These movies share several similarities: an interest in characters who do not fit the societal mold, low-brow humor, and – crucially for the current study – a fascination with characters of Mexican and Latin American descent. Hess’s representation of Mexican and Latin American people is difficult to place within current US discourses on race and ethnicity because it upholds racist divisions within humanity even as it decries racist acts against societal Others. As Hess affirms the humanity of the US’s southern neighbors, for example, he denounces xenophobic and anti-immigrant points of view. At the same time, however, he signals his Mexican characters as irreconcilably different from – and perhaps simpler than – their North American counterparts. In this article, I argue that Hess’s ambiguous representation of Mexican peoples and cultures reflects a type of “benevolent racism” that is common within white, North American Mormon communities who paradoxically view people of Mexican descent both as Others and as the physical and spiritual heirs of the peoples of the Book of Mormon.

### KEYWORDS

Book of Mormon, Immigration, Lamanite, *NACHO LIBRE*, *NAPOLEON DYNAMITE*, Mormon studies, Race and Religion

### BIOGRAPHY

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One of the most memorable lines of the Mormon director Jared Hess's 2004 smash-hit comedy *NAPOLEON DYNAMITE* (US 2004) occurs as the titular character's grandmother leaves to go four wheeling in the Idaho sand dunes. When Napoleon (Jon Heder) asks her what he should eat while she is gone, she replies, "make yourself a dang quesadilla!" The comedic aspect of this statement is difficult to communicate through writing because Hess highlights an ironic pronunciation – the grandmother pronounces the *ll* as one would in English rather than Spanish – that evinces her total ignorance of even the simplest forms of Mexican pronunciation and cuisine. This is one of many scenes within the film where white, implicitly Mormon, characters engage with Mexican culture in ignorant and/or offensive ways. Many of Hess's representations of the relationship between rural (white) Americans and Mexican immigrants could be read as paternalistic. At the same time, the director depicts the immigrants of Preston, Idaho in a generally positive light. Across his cinema, Hess has represented the Mexican Other in ambiguous ways that affirm the humanity of the United States' southern neighbors while at the same time signaling them as irreconcilably different from – and perhaps simpler than – their North American counterparts.<sup>1</sup> This holds especially true in *NAPOLEON DYNAMITE* and *NACHO LIBRE* (US 2006), his two most commercially successful films. The Mexican protagonists of both movies win the audience's affection in part by playing to stereotypes that rigidly separate them from US culture at large. Mexico's oversized role in Hess's aesthetic is obvious even to the casual viewer; however, few critics have attempted to reconcile the director's combination of paternalism and solidarity with people from south of the US border. In this article, I argue that Hess's ambiguous representation of Mexican peoples and cultures reflects a type of "benevolent racism" that is common within white North American Mormon communities that paradoxically view people of Mexican descent both as Others and as the physical and spiritual heirs of the peoples of the Book of Mormon.

None of the current scholarship has situated Hess's representations of Mexican people within the context of his faith. While there are many reasons for this, it mostly reflects the difficulty critics face when ascribing elements of directors' films to their faiths, particularly when the directors do not explicitly make the connections themselves. Nevertheless, there are several reasons why this approach feels justified and fruitful when viewing both *NAPOLEON DYNAMITE* and *NACHO LIBRE*. Firstly, Hess studied film at Brigham Young University (BYU), which is owned and operated by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS Church), the largest Mormon denomination in the world. Much of

1 In this article I use the term North American to refer to people and cultures from the US and Canada.

NAPOLEON DYNAMITE's cast studied with Hess; indeed, the film grew out of a short production, *PELUCA* (Jared Hess, US 2003), that Hess directed for a class at BYU. What is more, Hess said during publicity tours for *NAPOLEON DYNAMITE* that his experience as an LDS missionary – which he served in both Chicago and Venezuela<sup>2</sup> – influenced many aspects of his first feature film.<sup>3</sup> More recently, he has discussed the importance of religion in his films in general with the release of *DON VERDEAN* (Jared Hess, US 2018).<sup>4</sup> Indeed, critics and fans alike have noted the special attention he gives to religion throughout his filmography. Viewed in this context, it would make sense that his understanding of Mormon theology would influence his depictions of Mexican and Mexican-American characters. This holds especially true when we consider the fact that he served part of his mission in Venezuela. As Rebeca van Uitert argues, missionaries who serve abroad “are exposed to different cultures and traditions. They return to the United States with a broadened perspective, and as a result, are more open to accepting immigrants and strangers within their communities.”<sup>5</sup> There is a great deal of truth to her statement; at the same time, there is much to be made about the fact that many Mormon missionaries develop a paternalistic relationship with the people in the countries where they serve. This can lead to essentialist racist beliefs that become especially poignant in the case of Latin America owing to the region's ties to the Book of Mormon.

Latin America – particularly Mesoamerica and the Andean Region – holds a special, mythic position within official and popular Mormon theology. This infatuation is especially obvious with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the branch of Mormonism to which Hess belongs.<sup>6</sup> Latin America's privileged position within the religion is directly tied to popular and official readings of the Book of Mormon that hold that present-day Native Americans descend at least partially from the Lamanites, a group of people who came to the Americas from Jerusalem immediately prior to the Babylonian conquest. According to the Book of Mormon, the Lamanites were a “degenerate” people who abandoned God and became a scourge to the more righteous Nephites; however, after nearly one thousand years, the Nephites turned against the Lord and the Lamanites destroyed them. Despite the Lamanites' wickedness, the Book of Mormon asserts – or prophesies – that God has plans to redeem this choice nation. The Book of Mormon, for example, tells of the arrival of Europeans to the Americas,

2 For an allusion to how Hess's missionary experience in Venezuela has shaped his career, see Means 2006. For a discussion of how his mission in Chicago contributed to *NAPOLEON DYNAMITE*, see *Napoleon Dynamite Director* 2004.

3 *Napoleon Dynamite Director* 2004.

4 See Toone 2015.

5 See van Uitert 2007, 301–302.

6 In this article I use the terms Mormon and LDS interchangeably.

and it views the subsequent colonization of the continent by white “Gentiles” as a necessary event that allowed for the restoration of the gospel.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, Mormon theology holds that while devastating to the original inhabitants of the continent, European colonial projects were necessary for the eventual redemption of the Lamanites. The Book of Mormon itself states that the Gentiles will bring the gospel back to the Lamanites (read: Native Americans) prior to the Second Coming through missionary work.<sup>8</sup>

From the nineteenth until the mid-twentieth centuries, Mormons ascribed the Lamanite prophecies most directly to First Nations peoples of the United States. Even during these early years, however, most Mormons believed that all of the original inhabitants of North and South America descended from this Book of Mormon race.<sup>9</sup> Bruce R. McConkey, an apostle of the Church, canonized this view in 1981 when he wrote an introduction to the book that stated that the Lamanites “are the principal ancestors of the American Indians”.<sup>10</sup> During much of the twentieth century, Church attempts to build up the Lamanites dealt primarily with engaging Amerindian populations in the United States. One especially clear example of this was the Lamanite Placement Program (1954–1996), where the Church identified well-to-do (almost exclusively white) families as possible foster parents for baptized Amerindians – mostly Navajo – so that these could attend majority-white US public schools.<sup>11</sup> The principal goal of the initiative was to train Lamanite children to eventually become church leaders. The controversial program was most active during the 1960s and 1970s,

7 Although Joseph Smith published the Book of Mormon in 1830, adherents to the faith believe it was written by the original inhabitants of the Americas. According to Church doctrines, Smith served as a translator of this long-lost work. As such, prophecies surrounding the arrival of Columbus to the Americas are, according to believers, ancient prophecies that truly came to pass millennia later. See 1 Nephi 13 in The Book of Mormon 2013.

8 In the Book of Mormon, the prophet Nephi states, “then shall the fullness of the gospel of the Messiah come unto the Gentiles, and from the Gentiles unto the remnant of our seed [the Lamanites, or indigenous peoples of the Americas]”. See 1 Nephi 15:13–16. See also D. Smith 2003, 32.

9 John-Charles Duffy discusses two principal approaches to Lamanite identity in the LDS Church: Hemispheric Lamanite Identity, which suggests that everyone of indigenous descent in the Americas and Polynesia is a literal descendant of the Lamanites, and Limited Lamanite Identity, which holds that the Lamanites belonged to a small group that was ultimately completely engulfed by neighboring civilizations. The way that individual members interpret Lamanite identity generally reflects the stakes that Lamanite identity has (or does not have) in their own personal and spiritual relationship with the Church. Duffy’s entire article provides an excellent analysis of the fluidity of Lamanite identity in LDS teachings over the years. See Duffy 2008, 121–122.

10 See McConkey 1990. In 2006, after DNA evidence placed this assertion in question, the Church softened its stance and amended this foreword to the Book of Mormon, claiming that the Lamanites “are among the ancestors of the American Indians”.

11 For an in-depth discussion of the LDS Indian Student Placement Program, see Garrett 2016; see also Brandon Morgan 2009, 191–217.

but it eventually fell apart after facing severe political and legal pressure.<sup>12</sup> One contributing factor to the Church's weakened focus on Native American populations in the United States was that LDS missionaries began to have significant success while proselyting in Latin America during the 1970s.<sup>13</sup> Because church members and leaders understood this region also to be Lamanite in origin, LDS people began to proactively ascribe the Lamanite prophecies to Latin America.<sup>14</sup>

The problematic conflation of certain regions of the world with indigeneity (and by extension, with Lamanite identity) ironically racializes all people from these countries as indigenous regardless of an individual's actual ancestry. LDS people tend to conceive Latin America through US paradigms of race such as the "one drop policy", where a single drop of indigenous blood makes a person – or an entire nation – Lamanite.<sup>15</sup> Spencer W. Kimball, who served as an apostle and, later, prophet of the Church from 1943 to 1985, contributed to this understanding through racist assertions that people of (even partial) indigenous descent carried the blood of the heroes of the Book of Mormon in their veins.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, John-Charles Duffy notes that Kimball spearheaded a concerted effort by the Church to instill a "Hemispheric Lamanite Identity" that would unite people of indigenous descent throughout the United States, Latin America, and the South Pacific.<sup>17</sup> These projects were largely successful, especially with those people for whom Lamanite identity provided spiritual strength and inspiration. The Church was largely able to foster a sense of community between people from different countries and cultures based on the appeal of Hemispheric Lamanite Identity.

As a result of Kimball's efforts, most Mormons do not equate Latin American countries with indigeneity to demean them. Rather, the Church's emphasis on Hemispheric Lamanite identity has led many – if not most – Mesoamerican and

12 The principal critique of the Lamanite Placement Program was that, at its core, it was assimilationist. See Duffy 2008, 140; J.B. Allen 1998, 85; Garrett 2016, 180–182. Beyond the political challenges, Garrett notes that there were also controversies and disagreements between the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles; see Garrett 2016, 204–234. What is more, at least four students have sued the church more recently because they claim that they were sexually abused while staying with white foster families and that the Church did not do enough to protect them. See Fowler 2016.

13 Grover 2005, 85–88.

14 In recent years, influential Mormons like Bruce H. Porter and Rod L. Meldrum have argued that the term Lamanites refers solely to the Amerindian peoples that populated the US heartland; see Porter/Meldrum 2009. Nevertheless, theirs remains a minority view whose very title "The 'Heartland' Model" tends to emphasize nationalistic tendencies in the North American Church while ignoring much of the doctrine itself. Indeed, Matthew Roper provides a stinging rebuke of their book in Roper 2010.

15 For a discussion of the legal ramifications of the "one drop policy", see Hickman 1997, 1161–1265.

16 Kimball 1959, 57–58.

17 Duffy 2008, 143–144.

Andean Mormons to wear their Lamanite heritage as a badge of honor.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, the introduction of the Book of Mormon distinguishes the role of the Gentiles from that of the Lamanites (and the Jews, for that matter). Because of this, white US Mormons tend to view their Latin American counterparts as both brothers/sisters and Others.<sup>19</sup> They certainly view Latin Americans – and indeed, anyone descended even partially from Amerindian lines – as a covenant people who will play a special role prior to the Second Coming. However, LDS doctrines also hold that people from these countries must receive tutelage from the Gentiles until they become self-sufficient in the gospel.<sup>20</sup> This imaginary understandably results in an essentialist approach to the citizens of countries such as Mexico. Many white North American Mormons view people of Mexican descent as individuals whose closeness to the Spirit allows them to have great, childlike faith. Kimball expressed this view best when he stated, “the Indians have faith – a rather simple, pure, and unadulterated faith”. The subtext of this assertion is that Lamanites have a deeper faith than do their white North American counterparts.<sup>21</sup> At the same time, however, he asserted two times in that same talk that the Lamanites’ righteousness was making them “white and delightsome”. As such, while Lamanites may have greater faith, they must ultimately become like their (white) brothers and sisters to reach their full potential.<sup>22</sup>

## VOTING FOR PEDRO AND THE LAMANITE BIRTHRIGHT

NAPOLEON DYNAMITE reflects this (North American, white) Mormon imaginary in its treatment of Mexicans and Chicanos by asserting a special role for both in the rural Mormon communities of the West and in the United States at large.

18 For example, the Mexican author, historian, and Mormon ecclesiastical leader Agrícola Lozano Herrera fused Mexican nationalism with the Lamanite prophecies in his book *Historia del mormonismo en México* (Lozano Herrera 1984), which argues that the people of Mexico have a special role in God’s kingdom because they are members of the House of Israel.

19 Duffy 2008, 141–143.

20 Just as the Church used the Lamanite Placement Program to prepare future leaders for Native Americans in the United States, it installed El Benemérito de las Américas, a Church-sponsored high school, in Mexico with a similar mission. A recent newspaper article highlighted the fact that 25% of Mexico’s stake presidents – lay leaders charged with leading clusters of local congregations consisting of approximately 5,000 individuals – were alumni of the institution. Given that only a tiny fraction of Mormons actually attended that school, it becomes clear that Church leadership viewed this preparation of Lamanites as important in calling leaders within the Church. See Barbara Morgan 2013.

21 Kimball 1960.

22 Kimball was referencing 2 Nephi 30:6, a scripture in the Book of Mormon that states that Lamanites who accept the Book of Mormon teachings will become “white and delightsome.” See the Book of Mormon 1830, 117. In more recent publications, the Church has changed the language to “pure and delightsome” with the explanation that this verbiage more closely reflects the original meaning of the translated text.



Characters of Mexican descent are kind and wholesome, but they also come off as simplistic and unintelligent. The director asserts a type of Anglo normativity through his comical representations of Mexicans, yet he also undermines outspoken proponents of border security by emphasizing that his foreign characters pose no threat to US culture or way of life. Numerous critics have discussed how *NAPOLEON DYNAMITE*'s style makes it difficult to place both aesthetically and ideologically; indeed, the movie's bizarre aesthetics and political discourse have caused even computer algorithms to struggle to determine viewers' entertainment preferences based on their reaction to the film.<sup>23</sup> Hess's surprising success at the box office, where he leveraged a \$400,000 production budget into a \$46 million profit, has led many scholars to discuss the film's business model.<sup>24</sup> In these cases, *NAPOLEON DYNAMITE* becomes the posterchild for independent directors who dream of one day making it big in Hollywood. Perhaps owing to its almost complete lack of plot, few critics have attempted to find ideological consistency within the film. However, *NAPOLEON DYNAMITE*'s ties to Mormon culture – particularly as it relates to the “Lamanite” peoples – lie at the heart of its appeal. Any critic who wishes to discuss how the movie diverges from Hollywood must take this religious backdrop into consideration. This Mormon influence is especially visible with Pedro's arc, which both provides a new look at Mexican and Chicano identity in the United States and serves as an allegory for the ultimate union between white North American Mormons and the descendants of the peoples of the Book of Mormon.

Hess uses his main protagonists' friendship to emphasize the relationship between Mormon “Gentiles” and Mexican “Lamanites”. Interestingly, scholars like Bill Jenkins assert that Pedro is the only explicitly religious character (Catholic) in the film;<sup>25</sup> indeed, Jenkins claims that while Hess's Mormonism “may account for the lack of profanity and explicit teenage sexuality in the movie, *Napoleon Dynamite* evinces no propagandistic intention”.<sup>26</sup> The movie may not strive to convert its audience,<sup>27</sup> but both Napoleon and his brother, Kip (Aaron Ruell), give off clues throughout the film that performatively signal them as Mormon. Hess never explicitly mentions his characters' religion, a fact that leaves the LDS element invisible to uninitiated viewers. Eric Samuelson refers to the movie as a

23 Golbandi/Koren/Lempel 2011. See also Mackey/Weiss/Jordan 2010, 713; 717–718; Read/Robertson 2009, 3–5.

24 Young/Gong/Van der Stede 2008, 30.

25 Jenkins 2005, 2.

26 Jenkins 2005, 4.

27 Nicolaas Mink reports that many residents of Preston, Idaho, were uncomfortable with the film's representation of their lives, where, “rather than viewing hard work or a vibrant religious culture, Americans witnessed a comedy about a frontier community sitting a few decades back in the Turnerian evolutionary social progression that was struggling to come to grips with modernity”. See Mink 2008, 156.



Mormon “cross-over” because it combines an LDS cast, crew, and family-friendliness with an “indie” feel.<sup>28</sup>

The aforementioned fusion of styles played a pivotal role in *NAPOLEON DYNAMITE*’s financial success in expanding its audience beyond that of the more explicitly Mormon films that came out around the same time.<sup>29</sup> However, as Nicolaas Mink notes, this expansion of the film’s audience created a degree of double signification that caused the film to resonate differently outside Idaho and the Mormon Belt than it did within.<sup>30</sup> Napoleon’s singular vocabulary, for example, includes his overuse of words like “gosh”, “dang”, “flip”, and “freaking”. His speech serves as one of the distinctive elements of the film by setting the protagonist apart from characters of more typical Hollywood productions. Far from representing a mere character quirk, Napoleon’s obvious substitution of vulgar terms with ridiculous expletives also codes him as a practicing Mormon. The titular character performs his religion through more than just speech; at one point he wears a Ricks College (now BYU Idaho) shirt. One of the most interesting indicators of Napoleon’s religion centers on an old farmer who appears only two times in the film. During this man’s first appearance, Hess shows him approach a cow with a shotgun. He then cuts to a school bus that Napoleon boards. At this moment a gunshot fires, and several children scream. In the post-credits section, this same man officiates at the marriage of Kip and his sweetheart, LaFawnduh. To the uninitiated viewer, the farmer’s role at the wedding seems like a hilarious gag, and perhaps a commentary on small-town America. Mormon viewers, however, immediately recognize that the shotgun-toting farmer is also Kip’s bishop.<sup>31</sup>

I am ultimately less interested in proving Napoleon’s Mormonism than I am in discussing how his faith colors his relationship with Pedro. Mink categorizes *NAPOLEON DYNAMITE* as a school film and coming-of-age movie, but he notes that the aforementioned characters “fail to fit into the typical generic teenage categories constructed by scholars in cinema studies”.<sup>32</sup> Numerous critics have observed that one of the aspects that separates *NAPOLEON DYNAMITE* from other school films is the fact that the film’s protagonists – particularly Napoleon – deviate from conventional articulations of gender.<sup>33</sup> I wish to add to the conversation by pointing out that both Napoleon and Pedro play important allegorical roles within a racialized cosmology where white Mormon Gentiles

28 Samuelson 2007, 226.

29 Two particularly noteworthy films that came out in the years prior to the release of *NAPOLEON DYNAMITE* are *THE SINGLES WARD* (Kurt Hale, US 2002) and *THE R. M.* (Kurt Hale, US 2003).

30 Mink 2008, 164.

31 Mink 2008, 166.

32 Mink 2008, 157–158.

33 Russo 2006, 7–11; Buchbinder 2008, 237; Quail 2011, 466–467.

must teach (Mexican) Lamanites the gospel. Mink argues that Hess included a Mexican character to highlight the migrant community's almost invisible contributions to Preston and other rural towns in Idaho and throughout the western United States.<sup>34</sup> He provides an excellent discussion about the discrimination and marginality that migrant workers have historically faced in Preston, but he ignores the implicit Lamanite identity that the town's LDS majority ascribes to migrant communities. Perhaps by accident, then, Mink highlights the fact that despite – or perhaps as a result of – doctrinally signaling Amerindians and Latin Americans as a chosen people separate from white Gentiles, Lamanite identity also extends an irreparable Otherness to people from these communities.

As Hess emphasizes the contributions of Mexican people like Pedro to Preston and similar communities, he reminds his LDS viewers of the Lamanites' special role in building a New Jerusalem – which the faith's founder, Joseph Smith, prophesied would be built in Jackson County, Missouri – prior to the Second Coming.<sup>35</sup> As the film shows, many North American Mormons have ignored certain aspects of the Lamanite prophecies as they have minimized the contributions of Mexican and Chicano actors in their communities. Hess critiques this (white) Mormon ambivalence to immigrant communities through Napoleon and Pedro's friendship, which represents the communion of Lamanites and Gentiles in the Promised Land. My reading calls for a reevaluation of Joseph M. Spencer's assertion that *NAPOLEON DYNAMITE* has “not a word to say about scripture”.<sup>36</sup> While the film never explicitly mentions any sacred texts, it definitely operates within an LDS imaginary based on scripture. Indeed, Hess alludes to the teachings of Mormon scripture to critique the racist elements of small-town Mormon communities. Napoleon allegorically preaches Pedro “the gospel” by showing him how to navigate a small-town US high school. The pair meets shortly after Pedro arrives in the country. The migrant goes to school, where his new principal – who seems to take no interest in his foreign student – constantly humiliates him. Napoleon intervenes on Pedro's behalf, and the principal asks him to show Pedro to his locker. It does not take long for Napoleon's pupil to become the master, a fact that becomes especially clear when Pedro announces that he will run for student body president.<sup>37</sup> Napoleon has never taken such a step despite years of experience at the institution. This inversion of master and pupil resonates especially well with Mormon doctrines, which hold that the Lamanites will one day assume the principal role in building the Kingdom, after the Gentiles have shared the gospel with them.

34 Mink 2008, 163.

35 See 3 Nephi 21:23 in *The Book of Mormon* 2013.

36 Spencer 2012, 171.

37 Several activists have cited this aspect of the film when advocating for a more liberal border policy. For example, see Hoyt 2009, 21–24.

Given that most Mormons – including the leadership of the LDS Church – understand the Lamanite prophecies to apply particularly to people of Latin American descent, it becomes literally impossible for the Second Coming to occur without immigration to the United States. Certainly, not all US Mormons – or even most – favor undocumented immigration or immigrants;<sup>38</sup> nevertheless, the LDS leadership (and many members) favor a liberalized approach to US-Mexican border policies that will keep families together and allow people to work in the country if they are not committing major crimes.<sup>39</sup> *NAPOLEON DYNAMITE* clearly communicates a pro-immigrant discourse even as it signals Mexican people as Other. The film never overtly clamors for immigrant rights, but it is important to note that there is no reference to *La Migra* (immigration enforcement), nor does anyone question Pedro's right to be in the town. *NAPOLEON DYNAMITE*'s ambiguous representation of immigrants and immigration makes it difficult to place in relation to other examples of popular culture. Some of Hess's illegibility to a broader US audience almost certainly results from a complex racial determinism that he has inherited from his faith in which Mexicans are on the one hand foreign Others and on the other hand a chosen people destined to (re)populate North America. Hess's eccentric representation of Mexican and Mexican-American culture makes it difficult to categorize his work as a social justice film, but his use of a charismatic immigrant for a major protagonist places him at odds with films focused on national security and/or securing the border.

The movie reverberates with a rarely taught, though canonical, aspect of Mormon doctrine that holds that the Lamanites will “return” to the land of the Gentiles (read: the United States) after the Gentiles have drifted away from the faith. One of the most interesting events of the Book of Mormon details the arrival of Christ to the Americas following his crucifixion and resurrection. At one point, Jesus himself prophesies,

It shall come to pass that whosoever will not believe in my words, who am Jesus Christ, which the Father shall cause him to bring forth unto the Gentiles, and shall give unto him power that he shall bring them forth unto the Gentiles, (it shall be done even as Moses said) they shall be cut off from among my people who are of

38 Indeed, Arizona's infamous HB 1070 was championed by the Mormon state senator Russell Pearce. What is more, *The Salt Lake Tribune* reported that “a little less than half of Mormons in the state agree with the Utah Compact, despite the church leaders' support of the document that seeks to keep local police from enforcing federal immigration laws”. See Montero 2011.

39 The Church's most recent public declaration about immigration focused primarily on keeping families together; however, it also recognized the right of sovereign states to “enforce [their] laws and secure [their] borders”. See Immigration 2011. The Church's relaxed policy toward illegal immigration is especially visible with regard to policies surrounding membership. The Church will not allow investigators to be baptized if they are currently breaking the law or serving a prison or probation sentence. That said, undocumented immigrants can be baptized despite being in the country illegally. See van Uiter 2007, 309.

the covenant. And my people who are a remnant of Jacob [the Lamanites] shall be among the Gentiles, yea, in the midst of them as a lion among the beasts of the forest, as a young lion among the flocks of sheep, who, if he go through both treadeth down and teareth in pieces, and none can deliver.<sup>40</sup>

The LDS Church does not have an official interpretation of this passage, but many of the Church's General Authorities and lay members – particularly in Latin America – believe that it refers to Mexican, Central American, and perhaps even Andean immigration to the United States that will occur prior to the Second Coming.<sup>41</sup> This interpretation provides a useful angle from which to view Pedro in *NAPOLEON DYNAMITE*; he is a foreign Other, but his presence in Preston, Idaho, is also God's will. Local residents like Napoleon teach him how to operate in this new land, but in the end Pedro's birthright is to attain a position of prominence in the town. He fulfills his potential by winning the student body election and normalizing his place in the community at large.

Given that one of the prerequisites for the Lamanite "reconquest" of North America is Gentile apostasy, it is not surprising that Hess shows a student body administration that has lost touch with its roots. The favored candidate, Summer (Haylie Duff), is a popular cheerleader whose boyfriend, Don (Trevor Snarr), bullies students like Napoleon. In associating with Don, Summer has adopted a self-centered worldview and distanced herself from her peers. In so doing, she has created the framework from which a new order may emerge. William C. Sewell views Napoleon, Pedro, and indeed most of the student body as "deviant" because popular students and even administrators have normalized the position of people like Summer and Don.<sup>42</sup> Pedro's winning coalition consists of numerous quirky or, in the words of Hope W. Levin and Steven Schlozman, "peculiar" people.<sup>43</sup> The discourse of peculiarity takes on a deeper meaning when applied to LDS circles, where the term signifies both a people's differentiation from the "world" and their great worth.<sup>44</sup> Pedro's victory normalizes peculiarity, as the student body elects someone who, like them, does not fit a generally understood rubric of normal. Beyond serving as a "revenge of the nerds" tale, Pedro's victory also validates a Mexican presence in Preston, Idaho. Certainly,

40 See 3 Nephi 21:11–12 in *The Book of Mormon* 2013.

41 According to van Uiter 2007, the Church has never made any official statements in favor of (or against) illegal immigration, but she notes that "a compassionate stance toward immigrants may be extrapolated from various statements made by Church leaders" (306). She also notes that LDS doctrines allude to the "special role" that the Lamanites will play prior to the Second Coming as key to understanding the Church's institutional approach to – and permissiveness toward – immigration (305).

42 Sewell 2008, 12–13.

43 Levin/Schlozman 2006, 431–433.

44 Mormons build on the term peculiar as used in the Old Testament to refer to a "covenant" people. See W. E. Smith 1992.

Pedro remains culturally different from his peers, but he is also very much welcome to stay. The story of Pedro's victory reverberates with the Mormon idea that the Lamanites – aided by worthy Gentiles – will establish a New Jerusalem in the United States while leaving unworthy Mormon Gentiles (allegorically coded as Don and Summer) behind.<sup>45</sup>

Throughout the campaign, Napoleon and Pedro emphasize the racialized “skills” that Pedro brings to the table. After witnessing a student get bullied, Napoleon approaches the victim and says, “Pedro offers you his protection.” Hess cuts to another scene, where the same bully attempts to steal the student's bicycle. Pedro's cousins – who look like stereotypical Latino gangsters from Hollywood films – show up in a hydraulic lowrider with loud music and look at the bully. They shake their heads disapprovingly and the bully flees. Hess certainly filmed the aforementioned scene for comedic effect; nevertheless, in asserting an alliance between the bullied student and these “dangerous” Mexican immigrants, Hess deconstructs the idea that whites of all stripes must join forces against threatening people of color. Instead, he suggests that oppressed whites and people of color should focus on their common interests. Pedro's cousins appear dangerous to white characters – and perhaps even audiences – throughout the film, but Hess emphasizes their kindness. These characters never speak English, but they constantly help people whether or not they know them. In one scene, Napoleon is forced to walk to his prom date's home after his uncle refuses to give him a ride. Luckily, Pedro's cousins find him and offer to take him and his date to the dance. Hess's shots in this sequence once again produce a comedic effect, as they subvert common filmic tropes that equate Latino youths with criminality. Viewed allegorically, this episode has Hess remind faithful Gentiles and Lamanites to work together in building the “Kingdom”.

Napoleon has to help Pedro navigate a new culture also so that he can avoid committing major faux pas. At one point, for example, Pedro makes a piñata of Summer that his supporters beat with a stick. Afterwards, Hess cuts to the principal's office, where the school's top administrator says, “I don't know how they do things down in Juarez, but here in Idaho we have a little something called pride.” A bit flustered, Pedro tells Napoleon, “we do that in Mexico all the time!” Pedro's innocence – or at least his lack of familiarity with the student election process – remains clear throughout the film. Given Napoleon's own eccentricities, which have led many critics to suggest he may have Asperger's syndrome,<sup>46</sup> it is surprising that he would be the one to show Pedro how to properly act in the United States. Nevertheless, his desire to help his friend despite his own social challenges reverberates within the racialized imaginary that

45 Mink 2008, 158.

46 Levin/Schlozman 2006, 430.

the film promotes. Together the duo is much stronger than it would be if each character were left to his own devices.

The duo wins the support of the majority of the students by emphasizing a shared marginality, a fact that Hess emphasizes when Summer and Pedro square off in a presidential debate of sorts. Summer does a dance with the cheerleading squad, while Pedro simply says, “If you vote for me, all your dreams will come true.” He walks dejectedly off the stage, and then Napoleon comes to his aid by dancing to LaFawnduh’s brother’s audition tapes. Easily one of the most memorable scenes from the movie, it finishes as students jump to their feet and cheer. Richard J. Allen questions the reigning interpretation that holds that Napoleon’s dance wins Pedro supporters, but he also argues that this scene emphasizes that “the majority of [Napoleon’s] classmates ... are more in tune with his eccentricity than the bullies and mean girls who taunt him”.<sup>47</sup> As Pedro positions himself as an Everyman for the student body, he assures his victory and undermines the position not only of Summer but also of the racist principal. Hess emphasizes the allegorical union between the Gentile and the Lamanite by crosscutting between the film’s several protagonists, showing them reconcile the problems they were facing throughout the film. When he depicts Pedro’s election party, he shows a diverse group of people, all of whom celebrate this major achievement. The religious discourse in this film remains hidden from the casual viewer, but the relationship between Napoleon and Pedro holds deep significance within Mormon thought.

## FAITH, CELIBACY, AND CHILDLIKE ADULTS IN *NACHO LIBRE*

Hess emphasizes the religious element of his representations of Mexican people and cultures more explicitly in *NACHO LIBRE* than in *NAPOLEON DYNAMITE*, but the Mormon backdrop is less obvious. The film stars Ignacio (aka “Nacho”) (Jack Black), who is the child of a Mexican Catholic and a European missionary. After growing up in a monastery following his parents’ deaths, he chooses to become a friar and dedicate his life to the Lord. Hess’s ironic take on Catholicism in general – and Mexican practices of the religion in particular – acquires a deeper meaning as we consider his own Mormon upbringing. *NACHO LIBRE* builds on a common imaginary within Mormon thought in which God has apparently blessed the people of Mexico with an especially acute ability to feel the Spirit.<sup>48</sup> While laudable, this quality at times leads them to make childish

47 R. J. Allen 2013, 9–22.

48 Most academic discussions of Mormonism in Mexico center on the North American immigrants who arrived in the northern state of Chihuahua after the United States passed anti-polygamy laws. See Janzen 2018. Nevertheless, the majority of Mormons in Mexico are ethnic Mexicans who have converted to the faith as a result of aggressive proselytization.

mistakes when practicing their faith. This imaginary helps Mormons to explain why people from Mexico (and throughout Latin America) are more likely than those from other countries to listen to Mormon missionaries. This ability to feel the Spirit leads to caricatures that depict Mexicans – and people purportedly of Lamanite descent generally – in a simplistic light. Within this view, Lamanites may have a predisposition to accept the gospel, but they also often struggle with superstition.<sup>49</sup> Throughout the film, Nacho, the orphans, the clergy, and even the atheist, Steven, exhibit a simple borderline-superstitious faith in their cosmologies of choice. As a result, *NACHO LIBRE* pokes fun at what it frames as sincere yet simplistic Mexican belief systems while viewing the practitioners themselves as generally good.

Despite working at the orphanage, Nacho never earns the respect of the other friars, all of whom ridicule him. He takes solace in the fact that the children love him, but he still feels ostracized. He begins to pursue a clandestine career as a masked *luchador* (wrestler) who participates in local *lucha libre* (professional wrestling) events in order to secure more funds for himself and the orphans. When a new nun named Encarnación (Ana de la Reguera) moves to the orphanage, Nacho immediately falls in love with her. However, their chastity vows interfere with any budding romance. Nacho begins to question his faith, particularly a supposed clause that holds *lucha libre* to be sinful. He befriends the atheist Steven (aka Esqueleto) (Héctor Jiménez), and together the duo starts to fight independent battles on the weekends. They lack any skill in their trade, but they soon learn that they can make good money even when they lose because the audiences enjoy their performances. At the end of the movie, Nacho earns the opportunity to fight Ramses, a wrestler whose golden mask is a combination of those of El Santo and Blue Demon, the two most popular *luchadores* – or professional wrestlers – in Mexican history. Nacho receives divine intervention that helps him defeat Ramses and win enough money to buy a bus for the orphans.

The film builds on several genres, but its most obvious influence is the Mexploitation cinema of the mid-twentieth century.<sup>50</sup> Heather Levi places *NACHO LIBRE* within an emerging tradition of US film and television that appropriates Mexican wrestling also known as *lucha libre* into the US context.<sup>51</sup> While such

49 In his talk “The Day of the Lamanites,” given during the October 1960 LDS General Conference, Spencer W. Kimball validated such views when he stated that in a recent visit to the Lamanites, he had “found evidence of waning superstition and growing faith in the gospel”. Even as he distances these new members of the Church from their “superstitious” forebears, Kimball also establishes superstition as a persistent element of Lamanite subjectivity.

50 Carlos Losilla notes certain similarities between *Nacho Libre* and the Spaghetti Western because it is a foreign (US) imitation of a Mexican style of cinema. See Losilla 2007, 122. For an in-depth discussion of Mexploitation, see Greene 2005.

51 Levi 2008, 222.



films give the sport greater visibility, she laments that “ripped from its historical and social context, these representations of *lucha libre* tend to emphasize its ‘wacky’ qualities”.<sup>52</sup> Ilán Stavans, however, provides a different perspective when he states that the film’s “apparent bad taste in popular Mexican artifacts” imbues it with “subversive power”.<sup>53</sup> Both critics make crucial observations, and I extend their work by showing how Hess’s kitschy representations of Mexican culture reflect North American Mormon imaginaries. While the movie deals heavily with notions of religion and faith in Mexico, any references to Mormonism remain hidden in the negative space. Nacho is a devout Catholic, yet he must repress his dreams because of religious inhibitions that would not exist were he Mormon (or Protestant). The film never comes across as anti-religious even as it criticizes certain aspects of Catholicism.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, Nacho’s spiritual struggles come from two principal sources that would be nonissues were he LDS. First, he wishes to pursue a romantic relationship with the nun Encarnación, but he cannot because of his (and her) chastity vows. Secondly, he wishes to be a *luchador*, but Encarnación and other religious leaders claim that the wrestling lifestyle is sinful because it creates false idols who seek only the glory of the world.

Given that Hess bases his film loosely on the story of Fray Tormenta [The Storming Friar], a Catholic priest who moonlighted as a masked wrestler for 23 years, the historical veracity of the tension between *lucha libre* and the Catholic Church in Mexico is certainly suspect.<sup>55</sup> Nevertheless, the tension between Nacho’s love of the sport and his affiliation with a church that views it as immoral sits at the heart of Hess’s story.<sup>56</sup> In one iconic scene, Chanco – an overweight orphan who serves as a character foil of sorts for the film’s protagonist – walks in on Nacho while he dresses in his bedroom for an upcoming match. In an attempt to cover up his secret life, Nacho says “Chanco, when you are a man, sometimes you wear stretchy pants in your room. It’s for fun.” Donald Moss interprets Nacho’s use of stretchy pants as a “flirt[ation] with the marker of a once-repudiated femininity”.<sup>57</sup> The critic correctly notes that the less-than-ath-

52 Levi 2008, 222.

53 Stavans 2013, 111–112.

54 The US Conference of Catholic Bishops came out strongly against the film owing to its blasphemous and supposedly anti-clerical nature. See McDannell 2008, 29.

55 Interestingly, Fray Tormenta was forced into early retirement after his true identity became known. This was not because the Church opposed his wrestling, but because other wrestlers did not want to hurt their own popularity by fighting a priest. See Barberena 2009, 159.

56 It is possible that Hess conflated statist postures with those of the Church in making this film. Unlike the Church, which took a generally laissez-faire approach to *lucha libre*, state officials labeled it as immoral and even took the extraordinary step of banning it from television because they feared that it would contaminate the masses. See Levi 2008, 181; Dalton 2018, 147–149.

57 Moss 2012, 2.

letic Jack Black undermines many ideals of masculinity throughout the film. Nevertheless, Moss's lack of familiarity with Mexican professional wrestling (and the costumes that these *luchadores* wear) leads him to overstate the significance of Nacho's stretchy pants in undermining constructs of masculinity. Indeed, El Santo, Blue Demon, and Mil Máscaras articulated an idealized hyper-masculinity on the Mexican silver screen while wearing stretchy pants of their own.<sup>58</sup> Far from showing Nacho deviate from traditional articulations of masculinity, this scene shows that the friar has decided to enter into a hyper-masculine world of violence that is supposedly unbecoming of his ecclesiastical position. When Chanco promises to keep Nacho's secret, he is referring to the fact that he will never tell anyone else that the orphanage's cook moonlights as a professional wrestler because such a revelation would destroy Nacho's career as a friar.

While working at the orphanage, Nacho has to maintain the illusion that he opposes *lucha libre*. In one scene, for example, he breaks up a wrestling match between Chanco and another orphan. He hypocritically tells the children that they should stop wrestling "because it is in the Bible not to wrestle your neighbor". When Chanco asks Nacho if he has ever wrestled, the friar replies that he has not; Chanco shows his loyalty when he decides not to publicly call Nacho out on this lie. Nacho proceeds to tell the children of the wonders of life for those who do not wrestle. This scene is especially interesting because it interweaves Nacho's desire to wrestle with his love for Encarnación; as such, it shows how the two great stumbling blocks of his faith converge. In the nun's presence he tells the children that because he does not wrestle, "I get to lay [sic] in a bed by myself all of my life. It's fantastic!" Hess crosscuts between Nacho and Encarnación during this monologue; Encarnación's physical reaction shows mild surprise, but she says nothing. Nacho shares a flirtatious smile with her after the children decide that they will not wrestle in the monastery.

Hess's Mormonism influences how he approaches Nacho's infatuation with Encarnación. The LDS Church posits heterosexual marriage as a saving ordinance that people must undertake if they wish to achieve the highest degree of exaltation in the afterlife.<sup>59</sup> Beyond playing a pivotal role in Mormon theology, marriage is prerequisite for most positions of leadership within the LDS hierarchy. Nacho's desire for Encarnación reflects a quintessentially Mormon ideal in which personal – and even ecclesiastical – growth depends on marriage. His desire for Encarnación may subvert Catholic teachings, but it does not undermine his ability to be a religious leader from an LDS perspective. This Mormon approach to marriage and sexuality lies in the background of many of the scenes in which Nacho attempts to woo his muse. In one case, Nacho takes

58 Dalton 2018, 154; Rubenstein 2002, 577.

59 The Doctrine and Covenants 2013, 131:2.

Encarnación out at night, supposedly so that they can “preach the gospel” – itself an act more commonly associated with Mormonism than (contemporary) Catholicism – to some “bums” he found on the street. In a wink at the fixed nature of *lucha libre* matches,<sup>60</sup> Nacho has actually asked Steven to bring a threatening, though fake, mob so that he can appear to bravely protect Encarnación and thus win her love. Nacho, ostensibly in an attempt to find the men they will teach, moves ahead and leans on a corner building. In reality, he wants an excuse to model for her. He awkwardly points his butt in Encarnación’s direction, and when she tells him that his clothes look expensive, he replies, “underneath the clothes you find the man”. He tries to save face when he realizes what he has said by continuing nonsensically: “underneath the man you find the ... nucleus”. Shortly afterwards, Nacho erroneously identifies two men as the people that Steven has agreed to bring. He picks a fight with them, but they beat him to the ground. This scene produced comedy gold for both Jack Black and Jared Hess, but beyond getting a laugh from the audience, it also explicitly ties Nacho’s frustrations and marginalization to his religion. His vows of celibacy have created what the film frames as an unreasonable hurdle for finding true love.

Because he is a friar, most of the women that he meets are nuns who have also made vows of celibacy. Thus, his religious circumstances have created an environment of sexual frustration, but they have also made it so he only interacts with women who will not appreciate his advances. Nacho eventually realizes that he should not put Encarnación in uncomfortable situations, but his infatuation continues. During one of the most popular scenes in the film, Nacho spontaneously breaks into song about his love for Encarnación while in the locker room awaiting his match with Ramses. One verse is especially interesting: “To kiss your mouth/ I’d break my vow/ no, no, no/ no, no, no way, José/ unless you want to/ then we’d break our vows together.” Nacho has decided that he would leave his life in the ministry to pursue a relationship with Encarnación; however, he will also respect her own commitment to her vows. He now hopes to win her love and convince her to abandon life in the convent for the chance to marry – and presumably raise a family – with him. At no point does the director explicitly denounce Catholic teachings regarding celibacy and religious leadership, but his satirical approach reverberates within Mormon thought. Much of the film’s success among Mormons reflects the fact that Nacho’s (thwarted) love life resonated with LDS viewers who believe that this particular problem could not occur within their own religious tradition.<sup>61</sup>

60 Levi 2008, xvi.

61 Much of Hess’s success with Mormon audiences comes from the fact that the community upholds his work as some of the best ever produced by someone of their ilk. In the days leading up to NACHO LIBRE’s release, for example, the local Utah radio station KSL published a story about NACHO LIBRE’s BYU and Mormon ties. See High Expectations 2006. Over a decade after

The film does not set out to reject Catholicism outright. Despite prominent voices to the contrary, most Mormons view Catholicism as a positive “preparatory gospel” that (re)introduced Christianity in the Americas.<sup>62</sup> Certainly, a folk Catholicism based more on tradition than on readings of the Bible probably lies at the heart of what Mormons tend to refer to as a “simplistic” Lamanite faith. It is problematic to call Nacho a Lamanite; Jack Black is hardly Native American, and while his character lives in the especially indigenous Mexican state of Oaxaca, Nacho himself is probably *criollo* (creole) or possibly *mestizo* (or mixed race). Alejandro Hermosilla Sánchez argues that *NACHO LIBRE* is symptomatic of a US cinematic tradition that caricatures – rather than comprehends – *mestizo* identity.<sup>63</sup> Hermosilla Sánchez correctly identifies the fact that Nacho’s character largely diverges from Mexican understandings of *mestizaje*, but he does not mention how Hess’s religious referent leads him to present the titular character as Lamanite regardless of the degree of indigenous blood he may (or may not) have. The fact that Nacho lives in an indigenous space marks him as Lamanite regardless of his genetic ancestry. In stark contrast to Mexican racial discourses that posit *mestizaje* as a strategy for “de-Indianizing” a population with genetic ties to indigeneity,<sup>64</sup> notions of Hemispheric Lamanite Identity tend to emphasize the fact that racially hybrid individuals maintain an Amerindian (and thus Lamanite) essence. Whether or not Nacho can truly claim ties to Lamanite progenitors, he certainly has received his spiritual upbringing in a Catholic orphanage in a highly indigenous state. As a result, he has acquired the “childlike” faith that Mormon leaders like Kimball saw in the Church’s Lamanite members. As such, Nacho must eventually temper this faith with greater knowledge and (spiritual) maturity.

Hess highlights Nacho’s immature faith through his relationship with his teammate, Steven. At one point, Nacho advises Steven to “pray to the Lord for strength” as he prepares for his first fight. Steven replies, “I don’t believe in God;

the film’s release, *BYU Magazine* continues to publish stories on Hess and his productions, a practice that certainly keeps films like *NACHO LIBRE* in Mormons’ collective memory. See Rogers 2018a; Rogers 2018b.

- 62 Bruce R. McConkey popularized the notion that the Catholic Church was the Great and Abominable Church mentioned in the Book of Mormon with the publication of the *Mormon Doctrine* in 1958. Here he stated that “it is also in the Book of Mormon to which we turn for the plainest description of the Catholic Church as the great and abominable church”. See McConkey 1958, 130. However, the First Presidency of the Church demanded that he amend his assertion. In the second edition, he walked back the claim to a degree, asserting instead that “the titles church of the devil and great and abominable church are used to identify all churches or organizations of whatever nature – whether political, philosophical, educational, economic social, fraternal, civic, or religious – which are designed to take men on a course that leads away from God and his laws and thus from salvation in the Kingdom of God.” See McConkey 1966, 100.

- 63 Hermosilla Sánchez 2015, 17.

- 64 Bonfil Batalla 1987, 41–42.

I believe in science.” In a later scene, the director crosscuts between Steven, who eats vegetables, and Nacho, who flushes a toilet and stands in the doorway between the locker room and the bathroom. He asks Steven why he never chose to be baptized, and his partner expresses outrage at being “judged” for a personal decision. This conversation is especially noteworthy because Catholic babies do not have a say in whether they will be baptized. Rather, Hess’s focus on Steven’s ability to choose reverberates within a Mormon paradigm where people must be at least eight years old to be baptized. Catholicism serves as a mask that makes the discussion legible to non-LDS viewers, but the scene is, at its core, one of Mormon teachings and practices. Indeed, Hess presents Nacho as a Lamanite whose eagerness and childlike faith lead him to commit procedural errors in his efforts to build up the Church. The aspiring *luchador* fills a bowl with water and dunks Steven’s face in it before saying “felicidades” (congratulations) and informing Steven that he has been baptized. Nacho’s justification that the duo can only win that night’s match if both men are baptized evinces a serious lack of understanding of basic doctrines of baptism. Nacho sees no problem with the validity of this sacrament despite the fact that he never received Steven’s consent. Nacho’s enthusiasm causes him to ignore the Church’s – both LDS and Catholic – established modes of decorum, as he has apparently baptized a man against his will.

Steven also exhibits an immature faith in a discourse that he does not fully understand. He almost certainly uses the term “science” as a euphemism for Darwinian evolution theory. His rejection of religion, then, comes from his acceptance of a different version of the Creation from that taught in a literal rendition of the Bible. Steven’s assertion mischaracterizes the nature of scientific discourse by trying to make it commensurate with religious knowledge. Science is not – nor should it be understood as – an ideological counterweight to religion. Where the former attempts to provide clear-cut answers about the nature of the world, life, and the afterlife through inductive means, the latter is, at its core, a system of knowledge based on falsification.<sup>65</sup> Many people trust the findings of scientific inquiry over the teachings of a religious text, but this does not constitute faith in science. Rather, it reflects a deeper trust in the observational rigor of scientific inquiry. Scientists rarely describe their findings as truth; instead, they frame scientific knowledge as the most correct representation currently available about a given reality. Rather than refer to existential or cosmological truths, science exists as a process for acquiring and organizing knowledge. In asserting a belief in “science”, Steven ironically alludes to the fact that he probably knows very little about scientific discourse in general. As such, Steven accepts Darwinism on the basis of faith rather than in-depth understanding.

65 Kuhn, 1996, 10–11.

This purported faith in science is especially interesting when viewed through a Mormon or Catholic lens because neither church views the Darwinist notion of human evolution as blasphemous.<sup>66</sup> Lay members from both faiths often hold outspoken views against Darwinism and human evolution, but this possibility for the origin of humanity does not pose a doctrinal threat in either case.

Hess shows that these characters' eccentric faith borders on superstition when, after suffering a particularly crushing defeat, Steven tells Nacho that he can become a better wrestler if he consumes eagle eggs. Steven's certainty that these eggs will imbue his friend with strength makes it clear that while he may profess a belief in science, he espouses certain mystical worldviews as well. The following scene ironically parodies the tropes of the Campbellian hero's quest as Nacho travels by boat to a cliff hanging over the ocean.<sup>67</sup> Hess captures the characters with a high-angle longshot that emphasizes their insignificance, while supposedly mystical, vaguely Native American instruments play in the background. Hess undermines the indigenous element to the scene when the shaman turns out to be a white, European conman.<sup>68</sup> The director shifts to a soundtrack of holy Catholic music as Nacho scales the rock wall. After consuming the yolk, Nacho attempts to dive off the cliff; however, he both farts and belly flops. Once again, Hess undermines familiar tropes of cinema and mythology to emphasize the titular character's flawed faith. After losing yet again, Nacho realizes he was tricked and angrily tells Steven, "the eggs were a lie". He decides that he should not continue fighting because his place is with the orphans at the monastery. This scene both shows Nacho's growing maturity – he realizes that he has duties that he must attend to – and sets up the circumstances under which he can finally fight "for the Lord".

Hess posits Nacho's faith and his resulting closeness with deity as key contributors to his ultimate decision to continue fighting. In a last-ditch attempt to save his wrestling career, he angrily reproaches God for creating him with a desire to wrestle despite the fact that he is no good. Shortly thereafter, he suggests that he will abandon his dreams unless God sends him a sign showing that "you bless my mission and want me to be a wrestling servant of you". Hess employs deceptive film strategies here, particularly low-angle close-ups that frame Nacho against the ceiling mural; however, he later cuts to a side shot where we

66 In 2002, LDS prophet Gordon B. Hinckley stated that "what the church requires is only belief 'that Adam was the first man of what we would call the human race.' Scientists can speculate on the rest." See Jarvik 2006. The Catholic Church has recognized no intrinsic tension between evolution and Church doctrines since the reforms of Pope Pius XII. See Pius XII 1950, 1:36.

67 Campbell identified a basic, mythic structure to hero tales in which "a hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man." See Campbell 1973, 30; Jung 1964.

68 Criollo/Nava/Aviña 2011, 241.



realize that Nacho's robe has caught on fire. The audience never knows whether the candles fell on Nacho with God's aid or if the protagonist's incompetence has created yet another comical scene. These plausible interpretations are not mutually exclusive, and it ultimately does not matter which is correct. Nacho's robe burns off and reveals the *lucha libre* costume he wears underneath. The monks expel him from the monastery, and Nacho turns to wrestling out of necessity. He interprets his banishment as a form of punishment, and he claims that he will atone for his sins by beating Ramses in the ring and using the proceeds to buy the orphans a bus. Despite its simplistic flaws, Nacho's faith helps him to be a selfless individual who works tirelessly in the service of others.

Nacho's belief, coupled with his love for the orphans (and Encarnación), ultimately makes him into the champion he always wished to become. His fight with Ramses goes very badly until the children arrive along with his beloved nun. As Carlos Cesar Domingos do Amaral notes, Nacho finds success as he fights for a cause greater than himself.<sup>69</sup> In an especially bizarre moment, he apparently conjures eagle powers that allow him to jump 50 feet into the stands to tackle a fleeing Ramses. The film never fully explains Nacho's leap, but it is possible that the superstition that led Nacho to consume the eagle eggs may not have been unfounded after all. At the very least, Nacho has become a champion through divine (and mystical) intervention. This scene elucidates Hess's take on Mexican spirituality perhaps more than any other part of the film. Nacho's childlike faith has helped him to be kind and caring, two traits that the film – and Mormon theology – view in a positive light. His faith becomes a powerful force when he chooses to fight for an appropriate cause. Nacho's religion has helped him organize and better leverage his faith, but Hess emphasizes that Catholicism does not offer him the best path because it will force him to abide by his vow of celibacy. As the film ends, Nacho and Encarnación share several sidelong glances, and the titular character nods his head in satisfaction. Clearly he believes that she will, perhaps, decide to break her vows as well. Nacho's faith appears as a great redeeming quality, even as his Catholicism seems to impede his continued personal and spiritual development. As he cuts to the credits, Hess implicitly posits Mormonism as a better spiritual path both for Nacho and for Mexican Lamanites in general. If Nacho and Encarnación were LDS, they could marry with no problem. Hess's critique lies in the background, visible only to those familiar with Mormon doctrines and theology.

In conclusion, a major draw for both *NACHO LIBRE* and *NAPOLEON DYNAMITE* is Jared Hess's unique characterization of Mexican characters and cultures. The director's problematic representations of Mexican and Mexican-American identity reflect his subject position as an LDS filmmaker. As this study has shown,

69 Domingos do Amaral 2016.



Latin American countries – particularly those with large indigenous populations – hold a special place within Mormon thought owing to the belief that the inhabitants of these countries descend from the peoples of the Book of Mormon. Most Mormons view Lamanite identity as an honor, but white North American adherents of the faith also signal the descendants of the Book of Mormon as Other. This quintessentially (white, North American) Mormon approach to Mexican and Mexican-American identity lies at the heart of Hess's cinema. Characters like Pedro and Nacho certainly affirm the humanity of Mexican subjects to a greater degree than do their counterparts in Hollywood. Nevertheless, these films' comedic representations of Mexican peoples and cultures create a clear division between North American and Mexican cultures. The fact that Hess's cinema highlights cultural and linguistic distinctions between white America and Mexico does not make him unique. What distinguishes his work is the way that he so effectively posits white (particularly Mormon) and Mexican subjects as both brothers/sisters and Others. This interracial and interethnic union, predicated as it is on division, both highlights his religious referent and creates fertile ground for excellent comedy.

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