

Evil Dead: The Problematic Story of the Jonestown Corpses

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Abstract

“Evil Dead: The Problematic Story of the Jonestown Corpses” examines the issues that arose with handling the bodies after the mass suicide of Peoples Temple members on the Jonestown site in 1978. The Jonestown dead are treated as deviant and dangerous. This project examines strategies of classification and identification, and how these differed before and after the mass suicide. A particular emphasis will be on the disgust response as a shared signifier of danger. A comparison is drawn between the 2011 Jonestown memorial stone and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, examining how memorials can be made that separate the dead from controversial conflicts. The Peoples Temple saw themselves as participating in a ‘Revolutionary Suicide’ to advance a socialist agenda. This intent was lost in the aftermath of the suicides, and they were instead treated as irrational and excluded by their former allies. The eventual memorial only became possible by separating the dead from their cause.

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A Note on Sources

As a result of Freedom of Information act requests, a substantial body of data is available on Jonestown from the US Government. The divide happens in two different files, the RYMUR files, named for the murder of congressman Leo Ryan – RYan MURder – and the Peoples Temple Mass Suicide files. The RYMUR files are a much smaller body of work, focusing specifically on the murder of Leo Ryan and the other victims who were shot attempting to leave Guyana, is available in PDF format. When referenced, the format will be RYMUR (Page). The general Jonestown files have a much more complicated numbering system, coming from a variety of different agencies, and in response to different FOIA requests filed at different times. At this point, the Jonestown FBI archives are available as a series of 287 PDF files, ranging from ten to several hundred pages each. When referenced, the format will be Jonestown (File) (Page). The varying agencies and timelines means that these files are redacted in different capacities, with information that was released earlier being much more heavily redacted. Readability of different sections varies from totally clear to entirely incomprehensible. At this point, originals have been destroyed, and we are resigned to dealing with ‘best available’ even when this information is indecipherable. Any references to these files is my own reading of the information contained on these pages.

A substantial number of audio tapes recovered from the Jonestown site are available and are labeled Q001 through Q1059. Their numbers are largely irrelevant, and do not reflect chronological order, location where they were found, or any other information that might help a researcher. Audio cassettes are available for order through the FBI, but MP3s of nearly all tapes are available through the Alternative Considerations of Jonestown and Peoples Temple project hosted by San Diego State University. In addition, their website also works with Jonestown scholars and survivors to provide more accurate dating and identification of speakers than is available based on FBI accounts.

The FBI RYMUR files are available at <https://vault.fbi.gov/Jonestown>, and the FBI general Jonestown files are available at <https://vault.fbi.gov/jonestown>. The URLs are case sensitive, with the upper case J going to the RYMUR files, the lower case going to the general Jonestown files.

The index of tapes is available sorted by topic at http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=28703 or roughly chronologically at http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=29043

Introduction

While religious studies scholars have done a great deal of work on the Peoples Temple and the Jonestown mass suicides, most don't look at events that happen after the suicides on November 18, 1978. Most don't even acknowledge Michael Prokes who committed suicide in solidarity with the Peoples Temple in March 1979. Chidester's 1988 article "Rituals of Exclusion and the Jonestown Dead" focuses on the issues of the handling of the bodies directly. Jonathan Z. Smith's "The Devil in Mr. Jones" from 1982 makes some reference to the handling of the bodies, but mostly focuses on the reaction in the academic world of religious studies. A 1990 article "The nature of a Traumatic Stressor: Handling Dead Bodies" obliquely references the Jonestown bodies, but is an article about the psychological effects of handling the dead, including information from some individuals who worked clearing the Jonestown site. Beyond this, there aren't any published works I have been able to find dealing with the handling of the Jonestown dead. All of these were written before the availability of a substantial quantity of the FBI information was available, and before the building of the Jonestown memorial monument in 2011. The material used in this project comes from media sources and government archives which have been mostly overlooked in academic work. Focusing on these sources allows for a better understanding of how the public at large as well as government officials would have felt about the problem of the Jonestown dead.

This project endeavors to give some explanation for how and why the Jonestown dead were excluded. Chapter one establishes the context for the events that follow. In particular, it focuses on issues of race in California, and how perspectives from the Black Rights movement influenced Jim Jones and the perspectives of the Peoples Temple. From there, it briefly explains the history of the Peoples Temple from inception to the mass suicide, and gives an account of how the bodies were retrieved from Guyana, returned to the United States, and the issues that they had eventually finding a final resting

place. The chapter concludes with a brief overview of the Jonestown memorial that gets put in place in 2011, over thirty years after the bodies were buried.

Chapter two uses the work of Bruce Lincoln and Jean-Francois Bayart to explain reactions to the Jonestown corpses. While previously well integrated in their social context, after the mass suicide, the bodies are treated as anathema. Lincoln's account of mythmaking helps to explain the change in society Jones was attempting to evoke with the mass suicide, as well as the marginalization of their message by their former allies. Bayart's perspective allows for a nuanced account of identity, which combined with Lincoln shows how their former allies ostracized them. This account will focus on questions of Black/non-Black, Christian/non-Christian, and American/un-American.

Chapter three gives an account of the impact that disgust had on the handling of bodies. It centers on the work of Daniel Kelly, and explains how the Jonestown bodies were seen as not just as biological hazards, but moral hazards as well. The circumstances under which the deaths happened were a perfect storm, creating bodies that were not simply disgusting due to decay, but also morally dangerous: The attempt to exclude the bodies was an attempt to avoid contamination from the dangerous Jonestown dead – the 'evil dead'.

Chapter four is a comparison between the 2011 Jonestown memorial and the 1982 Vietnam Veterans memorial. While the two memorials hold physical similarities as simple listing of names carved in granite, the comparison is more than skin deep. Both memorials are attempts to commemorate a controversial event, where to this day different perspectives are hotly debated. These memorials use a minimal and ambiguous design, attempting to separate the individual from the larger narrative. This allows for visitors with different perspectives to experience the same monument in different ways.

Chapter One – Overview of Events

The treatment or exclusion of the Jonestown bodies needs to be understood in relation to the Black Rights movement in the 1970s. The Black Rights movement, especially the Black Panthers and Huey P. Newton, are instrumental for Jones's rhetoric, especially the concept of Revolutionary Suicide which is used as rationale for the mass suicide. I contend that these associations partially explain why the largely white US population react with fear and apprehension to the bodies¹. Having established the context of race relations and the Black Rights movement that informed the founding of the church, there will be sufficient context to look at church activities in the United States, as well as what drove members to Guyana. This will be followed by an unpacking of how Jones used Huey P. Newton's idea of Revolutionary Suicide and how the members would have understood their mass suicide on November 18th, 1978. From that point we will look at all the difficulties that arise in the handling of the bodies. This includes the practical concerns of getting over nine hundred bodies from the middle of a jungle thousands of miles from US soil and attempts to find a burial location, as well as problems with public perception, news coverage, and issues that arise with the eventual Jonestown memorial which came about in 2011.

A story told in riots

In order to understand the Peoples Temple, we begin with the context in which it prospered. The Peoples Temple was primarily based in California in the 1970s and was a church that combined socialism with Protestant Christianity and focused on black liberation. The 1960s and 1970s were times of tense racial conflict, as black civil unrest, failing to make progress through nonviolent action, increasingly became expressed through revolutionary movements and riots. Tracing the history of the

¹ There are other elements at play here, notably the Peoples Temple's being openly socialist in an era of McCarthyism. For an analysis that focuses more in this perspective, Catherine Abbott's *Communism, Marxism, and Socialism: Radical Politics and Jim Jones* has a section which deals more explicitly with these issues.

black rights movements in this era would be a project in its own right, so what is offered is a brief highlight of the aspects of the movement which were most influential to the Peoples Temple. The Peoples Temple was a revolutionary church, so it is best understood by looking at the political shifts that happened before it.

Perhaps the most famous riot of this era is the Watts Riot, a protest that happens in August 1965 in the Watts neighborhood of the greater Los Angeles area. The riots happen in response to an incident where an individual named Marquette Frye is pulled over for drunk driving.² While the initial arrest is performed by a black officer, the backup that arrives is a white officer, and the situation escalates after Marquette attempts to punch one of the officers and is taken down³. At this point the situation rapidly deteriorates as the gathered crowd perceives this as yet another case of unnecessary white violence against a member of the black community. The resulting riots rally around chants of "Police Brutality."⁴ The riots that followed last five days. In the end, "More than 600 buildings were damaged by burning and looting."⁵ There are over a thousand reported injuries and 35 deaths⁶. The US Government does a report on the events, commonly referred to as the McCone commission, investigating the root causes of the events, which it reported were unemployment, insufficient schooling, and a resentment of the police, who are seen as representative of the government they believe is keeping them down⁷.

² Jerry Cohen and William S. Murphy, *Burn, Baby, Burn* (New York, New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., inc, 1967), 29

³ Cohen and Murphy, *Burn, Baby, Burn*, 34

⁴ Cohen and Murphy, *Burn, Baby, Burn*, 73

⁵ Cohen and Murphy, *Burn, Baby, Burn*, 254

⁶ Cohen and Murphy, *Burn, Baby, Burn*, 254-255

⁷ Governor's Commission on the Los Angeles Riots, *McCone Commission*, (Los Angeles, California: 1965), The Crisis: An Overview, <https://web.archive.org/web/20150905062819/http://www.usc.edu/libraries/archives/cityinstress/mccone/contents.html>

1967 is a period of widespread protest, especially June and July, which would eventually be called the long, hot summer of 1967. This is a period when a large number of riots break out across the United States. The period encompasses what the government termed to be 164 "disorders"⁸ which varied in intensity from largely peaceful demonstrations to protests where people died, with a year-long death total of 83⁹. The US Government writes a report on these events too, commonly referred to as the Kerner Report. This report lists the root causes of the event as being "Pervasive discrimination in employment, education, and housing, which have resulted in the continuing exclusion of Negroes from the benefits of economic Progress,"¹⁰ as well as discussing the creation of Ghettos and the problems that arise in those communities¹¹.

In 1972 the Government makes a report called the Rockefeller commission¹², which focused on presenting current trends of the population in the US, as well as making predictions about what it would look like going forwards. This report contains an extensive analysis of the displacement of black populations and the creation of ghettos.¹³

All of these reports speak to similar issues in the black community. The Peoples Temple grew fastest in the early and mid 1970s when these issues were most pressing. Each of the commissions make a number of suggestions to help prevent more racial violence. The recommendations are largely ignored. Note, this is the same area where the Rodney King riots erupted in 1992. The Christopher

⁸ National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, *Kerner Report*, (New York: Bantam Books, 1968), Chapter 1, <http://www.eisenhowerfoundation.org/docs/kerner.pdf>

⁹ Kerner Report, Chapter 2

¹⁰ Kerner Report, Chapter 4

¹¹ Kerner Report, Chapter 4

¹² There are two Rockefeller commissions. This one, on population trends, and another from 1975 on CIA action inside the united states. This project focuses exclusively on the former.

¹³ Commission on population growth and the American future, *Rockefeller Commission* (Washington, D.C.: 1972), Chapter 3, http://www.population-security.org/rockefeller/001_population_growth_and_the_american_future.htm

Commission on that riot references the same claims of racial bias¹⁴, police racism¹⁵ and needless brutality¹⁶. The main differences being that by 1992 there is an increased focus on sexism¹⁷ and homophobia¹⁸, and new technology made it much easier to have textual proof of police expressing these opinions¹⁹. All this to say - the issues that were raised in 1965 are there in the 1970s during the Peoples Temple's rise, and remained long after they were gone.

Education and Unemployment

The black community at this time suffers tremendously from a lack of access to formal education which severely limits opportunities for advancement. Illiteracy rate are exceptionally high - in disadvantaged areas like those that epicenter the focus of the Watts riots, the average fifth grade student is unable to read and understand their textbook or even the newspaper²⁰. The number of students who finish high school is less than fifty percent; an analysis of three high schools in the area shows that two thirds of students drop out before graduating²¹. Those who do continue to go to school are subjected to issues like substandard buildings, violence from peers are those who hang around the area, and inferior educational materials²².

¹⁴ Report of the Independent Commission on the Los Angeles Police Department, *Christopher Commission* (Los Angeles: 1991), xii, http://web.archive.org/web/20140716150318/http://parc.info/client_files/Special%20Reports/1%20-%20Chistopher%20Commision.pdf

¹⁵ Christopher commission, 8

¹⁶ Christopher commission, 15

¹⁷ Christopher Commission, xii-xiv

¹⁸ Christopher Commission, xiii

¹⁹ Full list of MDT messages is in Christopher Commission, 49-54, a highlight being "A full moon and a full gun make for rewards from god", 50

²⁰ McCone Commission, Education: our fundamental resource

²¹ McCone Commission, Education: our fundamental resource

²² McCone Commission, Education: our fundamental resource

Unemployment rates in the area are three times higher than the county average²³, with the Watts county in particular having around 160,000 unemployed²⁴. Despair is passed down generation to generation, so that "the parent's frustrations and habits become the children's,"²⁵ with children not seeing any value in education ("Go to school for what?" one youngster said to us).²⁶ The prevailing sentiment of despair at the lack of jobs is further reinforced by difficulties in getting a job even with proper training, when "all too often a youth in the south central area goes through training, acquires the necessary skill to fill a job only to find that no job awaits him."²⁷ These factors combined create a community where there is little interest in education, and employment is seen as unattainable. This lack of employment ties directly to the economic state of the community, and the feelings of humiliation and disrespect from being unable to attain employment due to racial discrimination.

Poverty and Ghettoization

Given the difficulties with attaining a good, steady job, it should be unsurprising that poverty is widespread. The McCone commission states that "in August 1965, approximately 344,000 persons received some form of welfare aid... in the Watts area, approximately 24% of the population received such assistance."²⁸ With nearly a quarter of the population of the poorest neighborhoods on welfare, it becomes apparent that the community is unable to support itself. The Rockefeller commission describes it thusly

The first problem is racial and economic separation—blacks and the poor in the inner city, whites and the better off in the suburbs. While job opportunities have been moving to suburban areas, the disadvantaged remain locked in declining areas of the central city. These areas have many of the same characteristics as the depopulating rural areas: a population with low skills and inadequate education, deteriorating and abandoned housing, poor public facilities. Conditions are aggravated by selective

²³ McCone Commission, The Crisis: An Overview

²⁴ McCone Commission, Employment: key to independence

²⁵ McCone Commission, Employment: Key to independence

²⁶ McCone Commission, Employment: key to independence

²⁷ McCone Commission, Employment: Key to independence

²⁸ McCone commission, Welfare and Health

outmigration. Those who can, leave. Those unable to cope with the problems of social and economic isolation remain.²⁹

The Ghetto areas suffer from inadequate and overpriced public transit, as well as much lower rates of car ownership³⁰ which severely limits residents' ability to find employment, as well as limiting them to shopping where they are made to pay higher prices for lower quality food and goods³¹. This is seen prominently during the Watts riots, with businesses putting up signs indicating they are black owned to prevent damage and looting.

In addition, the structure of the welfare program has a number of detrimental effects on the community. The monthly minimum wage is "\$220 per month, against which there would be transportation, clothes, and other expenses...the average AFDC family received from \$177 to \$238 per month."³² The system is set up in such a way that it might be more profitable to be on welfare than to take one of the few menial jobs that are available. In addition, because welfare is easier to obtain for families where the father is not present, the program incentivized fathers to leave single mother families³³. The structure of the welfare program incentivized the 'broken home', making it more profitable for a family to have an absent father than one who is working.

The post World War 2 migration included a great deal of black people who were eager to escape rural areas for a metropolitan life that promised more opportunity, such that by 1975 74 percent of the US black population is metropolitan³⁴. In particular, the new arrivals in Los Angeles "understandably gravitated to the areas already occupied by Negroes - Central Avenue and Watts. Accentuating the concentration here was the fact that deed restrictions and other forms of discriminatory practices made it extremely difficult, often impossible, for Negroes to purchase or rent homes in many sections of the

²⁹ Rockefeller commission, Chapter three: Population distribution

³⁰ McCone commission, the consumer and the commuter

³¹ McCone Commission, the consumer and the commuter

³² McCone Commission, welfare and health

³³ McCone Commission, welfare and health

³⁴ Rockefeller Commission, Chapter Three: population distribution

city and county."³⁵ This resulted in a population distribution of Los Angeles in 1965 where "88.6 percent resides in areas considered segregated, concentrated for the most part in the 46.5 square miles of south central Los Angeles placed under curfew"³⁶ during the Watts riots. The community is without mobility, forced to stay together in their area by economic factors, as well as issues that arise from racism.

Racism

The Rockefeller commission describes the movement of black people into the cities as having "traded the isolation imposed by rural racism for the isolation of the inner city and the institutional racism of metropolitan America."³⁷ The Kerner commission of the widespread racial uprisings that took place in 1967 identifies a number of issues that precipitated the events, but says that "of these, the most fundamental is the racial attitude and behavior of white Americans toward black Americans."³⁸ The reports mention the general issue, and individuals interviewed during the Watts riots recount individual experiences. An individual who got fired from his job not for participating in the riots but for living in the Watts area³⁹, another laments having a college education and being unable to get a good job⁴⁰, a third being unable to start a business because they are deemed unqualified because of their race⁴¹.

The popular sentiment is that white people only ever took an interest in black communities as means of exploiting them, overcharging and underpaying them⁴². The community links race with exploitation. The general sentiment is that white people have a vested interest in keeping black people

³⁵ McCone Commission, neither slums nor urban gems

³⁶ McCone Commission, Neither slums nor urban gems

³⁷ Rockefeller Commission, Chapter Three: population distribution.

³⁸ Kerner report, Chapter four

³⁹ Cohen and Murphy, *Burn, Baby, Burn*, 204

⁴⁰ Cohen and Murphy, *Burn, Baby, Burn*, 206

⁴¹ Cohen and Murphy, *Burn, Baby, Burn*, 207

⁴² Cohen and Murphy, *Burn, Baby, Burn*, 206

down, and are only interested in the black community to the extent that they can be taken advantage of. This sentiment was further influenced by the role of the police in the community.

Police

At this time the police force is overwhelmingly white. In 1965 only four percent of the police department and six percent of the Sherriff's department are black⁴³. Because of the general government indifference to these communities, often the only government official that they would have any experience with would be police officers, who would almost always be white. They would also be called in primarily under circumstances that were high stress, and were associated with the punishment of jail, rather than seen as positive members of the community. This was emphasized by race - because the community was so racially segregated, their skin color made it much more apparent that they were outsiders.

This issue was exacerbated by the widespread racism in the police department. In Watts for example "Watts and other Negro neighborhoods were known as 'fuck ponds', where policemen, without giving their actions a second thought, continued to use expressions like 'boy' or 'nigger'."⁴⁴ Accounts of the Watts riots talk about hearing police officers bragging about racial violence, saying things like "I killed two niggers."⁴⁵ Not only is racism prevalent in the police force, there are also widespread accounts of unpunished police brutality.

This is what was generally understood to be the catalyst for the Watts riots. The reason that there was such a strong reaction to Marquette Frye being restrained in a way that onlookers perceived as brutal was because of frustration in the community with police brutality in general. The McCone analysis of the events describes it as a result of "a deep and longstanding schism between a substantial

⁴³ McCone Commission, *Law Enforcement: the thin thread*

⁴⁴ Cohen and Murphy, *Burn, Baby, Burn*, 210

⁴⁵ Cohen and Murphy, *Burn, Baby, Burn*, 179

portion of the Negro community and the Police Department. 'Police Brutality' has been the recurring charge."⁴⁶ Police are widely seen as racist and cruel, with widespread accounts of individuals who claim instances where police had verbally or physically harassed them without justification.⁴⁷

In addition, there was a general sentiment that the police were untouchable. Claims against various officers very rarely make any progress, and could potentially cause retaliation against those who complained. The Kerner Commission, which looked at 164 cases of racial disorders states that "virtually every major episode of violence was foreshadowed by an accumulation of unresolved grievances and by widespread dissatisfaction among Negroes with the unwillingness or inability of local governments to respond."⁴⁸ This caused a widespread feeling of mistrust for authority, where there was a general perception that in the event of a crime it would actually be worse for everyone if the police were involved. The overall feeling in the black community was that "...the police officer is hated. Even worse, he is feared. A contempt and disregard for law and order are synonymous with such an attitude. This attitude is of course in complete antithesis to the feelings of the white community..."⁴⁹ This feeling of powerlessness was much more general than just the response to the police, however.

Powerlessness

While the migration to the inner city had been done to escape the racism of the rural community, especially the rural south, the new community faced different challenges. Rather than the rural racism they had experienced before, moving to the city gave them a much more visceral experience of institutionalized racism. While those immigrating had been promised a better life "he lacked education, training, and experience, and his handicaps were aggravated by racial barriers which

⁴⁶ McCone Commission, Law Enforcement: The Thin Thread

⁴⁷ McCone commission, Law Enforcement: The Thin Thread and Burn, Baby, Burn, 304

⁴⁸ Kerner Commission, Chapter 10

⁴⁹ Cohen and Murphy, *Burn, Baby, Burn*, 304

were more traditional than legal."⁵⁰ Black men and women felt they were without a place, with neither the rural nor the urban setting being one which would allow them to live a good life. They feel "for reasons which he had no responsibility and over which he had no control, in a situation in which providing a livelihood for himself and his family was most often difficult and at times desperate."⁵¹

This sentiment of powerlessness against a system that was at best indifferent and often hostile eventually led to the riots and violence. Given that perception was that all legitimate avenues of discussion and success were closed to them by virtue of the color of their skin, they turned to the possibility of demolishing the system. Eventually this feeling of "alienation and hostility towards the institutions of law and government and the white society which controls them"⁵² turned into an expression of "racial consciousness and solidarity reflected in the slogan 'Black Power'."⁵³

Revolution

"'Never again,' said Marquette, 'Never again in this neighborhood will any young man, like my brother and me, stand by and take abuse from an officer' "⁵⁴

At this time, there are a variety of figures offering perspectives on how revolution might be achieved. Contemporary depictions of this era in black rights focuses on the non-violent leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. At the time, however, there are competing ideas for how the black community could best liberate itself, including a number who thought that peaceful cohabitation with whites was either impossible or only possible after violent revolt.

⁵⁰ McCone Commission, a summing up

⁵¹ McCone Commission, a summing up

⁵² Kerner Commission, Chapter 4

⁵³ Kerner commission, chapter 4

⁵⁴ Cohen and Murphy, *Burn, Baby, Burn*, 47

The sentiment of what revolution might look like, as presented by the rioters, was understandably fairly violent. The Watts riots has individuals making inflammatory statements, one rioter saying "next time the trouble won't be in the Negro neighborhoods, it'll be in the white man's neighborhoods.... When it starts in one city, it will spread to all cities."⁵⁵ They speak to a grander revolution, with statements like "You hear people say it wasn't a race riot. Let them... A civil revolt. That's what it was-a civil revolt. At first it was against the white police. Then - not just the white police, but all whites."⁵⁶ The idea of a revolution that was based on bringing down the current government order, rather than peacefully changing it, gathers a great deal of support in some circles. In the Watts riots "More than 3,000 weapons were stolen... less than a third of which were later recovered."⁵⁷ These communities are making long term plans, preparing for an armed revolt.

To their credit, the authors of the McCone Commission saw this coming, and even made recommendations for how this could be achieved, focusing on schooling, training, and improved relations with law enforcement, none of which were substantially realized. The commission did foresee a change, although it didn't occur in quite the way they wanted

If the recommendations we make are to succeed, the constructive assistance of all Negro leaders is absolutely essential. No amount of money, no amount of effort, no amount of training will raise the disadvantaged Negro to the position he seeks and should have within this community - a position of equality - unless he himself shoulders a full share of the responsibility for his own well being. The efforts of the Negro leaders, and there are many able and dedicated ones among us, should be directed toward urging and exhorting their followers to this end.⁵⁸

Black Panthers

The black community took this advice to heart, though the black leaders that came forth weren't quite what the McCone commission had hoped for. The Black Panthers were founded in 1966 by Bobby

⁵⁵ Cohen and Murphy, *Burn, Baby, Burn*, 49

⁵⁶ Cohen and Murphy, *Burn, Baby, Burn*, 102

⁵⁷ Cohen and Murphy, *Burn, Baby, Burn*, 123

⁵⁸ McCone Commission, A summing up

Seale and Huey P Newton⁵⁹ and is established as a political vehicle for black voices. It took as its foundation a ten point plan, which was directly in response to these issues in the black community. To respond specifically to the issues addressed above, their points included "2. We Want full employment for our people... 3. We want an end to the robbery by the capitalist of our black community... 4. We want decent housing, fit shelter for human beings... 5. We want education for our people that exposes the true nature of this decadent American society. We want education that teaches us our true history and our role in present-day society...7. We want an immediate end to POLICE BRUTALITY and MURDER of Black people [emphasis in original]....10. We want land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice, and peace. And as our major political objective, a United Nations-supervised plebiscite to be held throughout the Black colony in which only Black colonial subjects will be allowed to participate, for the purpose of determining the will of Black people as to their national destiny."⁶⁰ Their ranks swelled early, and it was soon seen as a political force to be reckoned with in the California area.

Armed Patrols

The Black Panthers decide to respond to the problems of police brutality in a very direct way, "By patrolling the police with arms."⁶¹ The black panthers would send out young men who were armed, usually with a shotgun, who follow police officers in their community to make sure that nothing untoward happened. Newton would bring his law books with him in his car, and read relevant passages of the penal code aloud when an officer was bothering an individual⁶². As a result of these patrols "the statistics of murder and brutality by policemen in our communities fell sharply."⁶³

⁵⁹ Huey P. Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide* (New York, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973), 112

⁶⁰ Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*, 116-118

⁶¹ Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*, 120

⁶² Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*, 121

⁶³ Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*, 121

This dramatic response is what allows these communities to fight back. Because the method of reporting police to the police was totally ineffective, the black community began to take matters into its own hands. The police department immediately recognized that it had a problem and began to do what they could to the Black Panthers, but the nature of their actions was totally legal. It succeeded in shaking many police officers to their core - they had no idea how to respond to armed, legally knowledgeable young men. These are the men who had taken the responsibility for the well being of the community that the McCone commission had urged, but they did it not by collaborating with the police force, but by forcing them through threat of violence. In a broader sense, this helped to cement the idea that black liberation was directly tied to visible threats of violence.

Community Activism

The Black Panthers don't just respond to the problem of police brutality which was the proximal cause of the Watts riots and so many of the riots of 1967. They also take an interest in making up for the shortcomings of the state in feeding and educating their communities. Perhaps the Panthers' most well known program is the free breakfast program, where by November of 1969 "Twenty-nine branches served over 22,000 children regularly."⁶⁴ This expanded further into an education program (and later a full school) where children would be brought to get a free meal, then learn black-centric history, critical appraisals of current news, and the Black Panther party's ten points⁶⁵.

The program is a smashing success at both increasing awareness of the party's politics, as well as making the communities see them as a force for good. By 1972 the party expands to include 'survival conferences', where they would give away food, clothing, and shoes if those who showed up had their

⁶⁴ Gerald Horne and Donna Jean Murch, *Living for the City: Migration, Education, and the Rise of the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 174

⁶⁵ Horne and Murch, *Living for the City*, 180

voter registration cards, or those who did not would get registered⁶⁶. This was a way to further push their agenda, causing poor minorities who typically did not turn out to vote as often to be registered, eventually having Panther party members run for office.

Lightning in a bottle

The Black Panther Party had already begun to split by 1971⁶⁷ and eventually was dissolved in 1980⁶⁸. The way it was constructed was not ideal for long-term survivability. It was at the start a youth-based organization, and while it had clearly stated goals, there was not a clear consensus on how to achieve them. While it was able to put up a unified front at the beginning, as time went on and it started to have to deal with more complicated questions, and became involved with the political sphere it had started out undermining, different viewpoints caused splinters in the group. While the initial movement died out, Black Panther efforts to provide food, clothing, education etc. to black communities where white governments were failing pushed the idea that black communities could be self-sufficient and run outside of dominant white power structures.

The ideological heart of the Black Panthers, however, was always Huey P. Newton. He is one of the founders of the movement, and is active writing ideological material which influences a whole generation - his rhetoric and philosophy influencing how race is thought and talked about even now. One of those who was most influenced by him, in particular his concept of Revolutionary Suicide, was Jim Jones.

The context of Jim Jones

⁶⁶ Horne and Murch, *Living for the City*, 200

⁶⁷ Horne and Murch, *Living for the City*, 188

⁶⁸ Horne and Murch, *Living for the City*, 221

The story of Jim Jones has been written many times by many different individuals, most of whom had a vested interest in putting a particular spin on the story. Among the most thorough is *Raven* by Tim Reiterman, which notably includes a sudden shift to first person as he describes being shot as a result of Peoples temple assassins⁶⁹. Rebecca Moore, who wrote *Understanding Jonestown and the People's Temple*, and who runs the "Alternative Considerations of Jonestown and People's Temple" site which hosts a great deal of the primary material on Jonestown, had two sisters die in the Jonestown event. Tim Carter provides a compelling account of the lived experience of the Peoples Temple because he was in Jonestown until fleeing the morning of the mass suicide. All this to say – many individuals writing on Jonestown have a very close connection to the material. There are many questions about Jonestown that can never be answered because of the death of all those involved, and one should be aware that many Jonestown accounts serve varied interests.⁷⁰

While this is a story of the bodies of Jonestown and not the story of Jones himself, an abridged version of his life will be presented here. Jim Jones is born May 13th, 1931, near Princeton, Indiana⁷¹. In his youth he made money from a variety of odd jobs, he "even imported little monkeys from South America and sold them door-to-door for \$29 each."⁷² Jones starts doing ministerial guest spots, focusing on faith healings, in Indianapolis in 1950⁷³. In 1956 Jones gets his own church, which he almost immediately names Peoples Temple⁷⁴. It is an integrationist church, and he takes on a black associate

⁶⁹ Tim Reiterman, *Raven* (New York, New York: E. P. Dutton Inc., 1982), 527-528

⁷⁰ I have, unless specifically used to show inaccuracy in reporting etc., used what I think are the best available resources. As an individual, I also have my own biases. But it is important to note, as will be brought up more in depth in chapters two and three, that there are a number of individuals who invoke Jonestown not to explain Jonestown, but to marginalize things associated with it – socialism, fringe religious groups, black rights etc. While this is certainly not a problem that is unique to Jonestown, the signal to noise ratio on most casual references to Jonestown is particularly bad. Many Jonestown accounts looking to marginalize religious groups don't mention the link between People's Temple and race at all, for example.

⁷¹ Reiterman, *Raven*, 9-10

⁷² Reiterman, *Raven*, 46

⁷³ Reiterman, *Raven*, 47-48

⁷⁴ Reiterman, *Raven*, 49-50

pastor named Archie Ijames,⁷⁵ which was controversial in his community at the time. His church from its early days speaks about issues of social justice, poverty, brotherhood, love and charity⁷⁶. Jones starts pushing a communist agenda, sneaking into his sermon lines from Marx, and calling Jesus "the first communist"⁷⁷. Jones around this time starts to exert more political influence, in 1961 using his influence to integrate businesses like movie theaters⁷⁸.

Jones grew increasingly frustrated with the open racism of Indiana, and in July 1965, he and some of his most devout followers went to do travelling sermons, and based themselves in Ukiah, California⁷⁹. His flock was a tight-knit family, and they formed a strong, largely closed community⁸⁰. By the early 1970s the church community is growing fast, recruiting from all over California with his socialist message⁸¹. The message becomes increasingly critical of standard religion, the message shifting to focus on the god of Christianity being a false god, and the true god being socialism of which Jones himself was socialism manifested.⁸² The church makeup shifts increasingly black at this time, with as many as three thousand members by the mid 1970s, mostly middle and lower class blacks picked up from the revival circuit⁸³. At this time the church became better known for speaking to the same problems that the Black Panthers had - drug counselling, feeding and clothing the poor⁸⁴.

Jones's ministry is popular enough by this time to start to open satellite churches, with Jones eventually shifting his main church to Los Angeles in order to better be able to minister and expand his

⁷⁵ Reiterman, *Raven*, 53

⁷⁶ Reiterman, *Raven*, 53

⁷⁷ Reiterman, *Raven*, 61

⁷⁸ Reiterman, *Raven*, 71

⁷⁹ Reiterman, *Raven*, 98

⁸⁰ Reiterman, *Raven*, 100-102

⁸¹ Reiterman, *Raven*, 132

⁸² Reiterman, *Raven*, 147-149

⁸³ Reiterman, *Raven*, 156

⁸⁴ Reiterman, *Raven*, 157

congregation⁸⁵, as well as pushing up to San Francisco⁸⁶. This time period and the nature of the ministry put him in the same areas as where the Black Panthers were starting to fragment and look for alternatives. While the Black Panthers had been openly hostile to established government agencies, the status of Peoples Temple as a church allows it to draw on the long tradition of church charity work to push the same agenda for public good that the Black Panthers had without much controversy.

Comparing Jones and Newton

Jones is influenced by the kind of language and reasoning that Newton used, using "The same sources of political and cultural identity... the same historical references to slavery as well as the more contemporary days of Jim Crow laws, to draw in the more politically active segment of the Bay Area's population, both black and white."⁸⁷ Jones's rhetoric presented American society in the same terms that the Black Panthers had - corrupt, racist, fascist, capitalist - that needed to be made pure through socialist revolution⁸⁸. Jones, however, presented his ministry in a different way. His status as a minister, and potentially his race⁸⁹, gave him a legitimacy in society that the Panthers were not able to achieve⁹⁰. Different answers to how to address these kinds of concerns led to the splitting of the Black Panthers, but Jones was able to present a unified message that allowed him to extend political power while pushing his socialist agenda.

The most central difference between the Peoples Temple and the Black Panthers, however, was an understanding of how the revolution should come about. For the Panthers, they "fought the

⁸⁵ Reiterman, *Raven*, 164

⁸⁶ Reiterman, *Raven*, 166

⁸⁷ Duchess Harris and Adam John Waterman, "To Die for the Peoples Temple" in *Peoples Temple and Black Religion in America*, ed. Rebecca Moore, Anthony B Pinn, and Mary R. Sawyer (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004), 110

⁸⁸ Harris and Waterman, *To Die for the Peoples Temple*, 110

⁸⁹ Jones being white made him a less controversial figure to rise to prominence in this era, but the extent to which this was a factor is difficult or impossible to know.

⁹⁰ Harris and Waterman, *To Die for the Peoples Temple*, 111

revolution on the streets of Oakland, Watts, Harlem, Detroit, and Chicago, to bring about a better life for black people where they were."⁹¹ The Peoples Temple, however, "turned inward, and tried to establish the new society from within."⁹² The Panthers went to where Blacks were being oppressed and fought with them to raise them up, and went out to do consciousness raising. Jones and the Peoples Temple tried to deal with the same issues - poverty, police violence, drug abuse - but it did so by bringing them in to their much smaller community. This method allowed them a great deal of control over membership, and allowed the church proceed in a much more unified direction than the Panthers did.

Jones's Message

Jones's church pushes the kind of socialist agenda that the Black Panthers had been aggressively pursuing, but caches the rhetoric in Protestant Christian trappings. Jones took this socialist message and presented it from the pulpit of a church, giving sermons arguing that Jesus was a socialist, and pushing for a strong, devoted membership. While the church would perform high energy faith healings, the church also supports medical programs, with members arguing that "this church is primarily concerned with human service, it is only secondarily concerned with a calm sane spiritual healing ministry known for its coordination with medical science."⁹³ Jones arranges for programs for free food, medical, and dental care for members of the church⁹⁴ as well as drug treatment programs, rest homes for senior citizens, animal shelters, and care for mentally disabled children⁹⁵.

The FBI analysis of People's Temple membership breaks the membership into several categories. First are "Young Adults [who] were college graduates out of upper-middle-class backgrounds which provided privilege or even luxury. Their parents were often college-educated professionals or

⁹¹ Harris and Waterman, *To Die for the Peoples Temple*, 118

⁹² Harris and Waterman, *To Die for the Peoples Temple*, 118

⁹³ Prokes speaking on Q144, available at http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=27341

⁹⁴ Reitman, *Raven*, 267

⁹⁵ "Race and the Peoples Temple", *PBS*, Accessed July 1st, 2016, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/general-article/jonestown-race/>

executives”⁹⁶ and notes that often “families were active in demonstrations against the Vietnam war, campaigns for racial equality, and other social causes.”⁹⁷ These members would be drawn to the ideology of the People’s temple. They saw their membership as joining a movement working to resolve issues of racial and income inequality.

There was also a large number, “especially young blacks” who were “the products of poor ghetto neighborhoods and limited education, some had been drug addicts, prostitutes, and street hustlers.”⁹⁸ This distribution is the same as the Black Panthers party. There was a smaller number of educated socially conscious members, then a larger component came from oppressed neighborhoods. These are individuals who not only had extremely limited access to higher education, but often no or limited access to even high school. Jones not only offered programs to alleviate immediate concerns – medical care, drug treatment, housing etc. that the government was failing to provide, the church also offered an explanation for their circumstances as well as a means of improving their lot. Jones also offered the same protection from police brutality that the Black Panthers had been able to in a different way. The Panthers had offered protection by having armed guards that caused police to be apprehensive. Because the People’s Temple had legitimacy as a religious organization, the same causes that had been viewed as subversive and anti-government were instead presented as Christian humanitarian aid. The same projects that the Black Panthers had sponsored in these communities – food, medical care, drug treatment, housing – were seen as religiously rather than racially motivated, and correspondingly treated as less controversial.

One group strongly represented in the People’s Temple that was not in the Black Panthers were the “elderly, again predominantly black... They appeared to find in Jones an abiding and protective

⁹⁶ Jonestown 45, 103

⁹⁷ Jonestown 45, 103

⁹⁸ Jonestown 45, 103

concern.”⁹⁹ These individuals were often in situations where they were unable or barely able to support themselves, and often without family or community members who could give them the assistance they needed. Because the People’s Temple operated more in concert with society than the Black Panthers, this also assisted the church by their getting funding from old age social security checks, something that would be vital to funding the Jonestown settlement¹⁰⁰.

There was a contrast between older and younger members of the church, with older member being “attracted by what they saw as the evangelical nature of people’s temple”¹⁰¹ while younger members had “little if any religious motivation in joining... Rather, they tended to be compelled by humanitarian interests... they were impressed by Jones’ involvement in social causes and what they saw as ‘political sophistication’ .”¹⁰² They did not have the same evangelical leanings as older members, but rather “to the extent that a religious motivation was involved, it was seen chiefly in terms of Jones’ seeming concrete application of Judeo-Christian principles.”¹⁰³ Their membership in the church was a practical consideration rather than a religiously motivated one. Being affiliated with the church allowed them to maintain legitimacy in the eyes of the community in ways that being a member of a radical group like the Black Panthers did not, while allowing them to pursue the same agenda.

Membership in the People’s Temple allowed individuals to “escape the misery of their lives in the ghettos.”¹⁰⁴ This membership extended beyond practical concerns to provide the “dignity and pride in the temple that racism had previously denied them.”¹⁰⁵ Jones’ message focused on issues of racial inequality, often involving high theatrics like “throwing bibles on the floor, spitting on the American flag,

⁹⁹ Jonestown 45, 103

¹⁰⁰ Interestingly this factor is one of the things which led to many scholars believing that Jones had been planning the mass suicide in advance, because the social security cheques for November 1978 were not cashed.

¹⁰¹ Jonestown 45, 103

¹⁰² Jonestown 45, 103

¹⁰³ Jonestown 45, 103

¹⁰⁴ Jonestown 42, 43

¹⁰⁵ Jonestown 42, 43

and denouncing generally the United States. Jones compared the United States to Hitler's Germany and stated that what happened to the Jews in Germany was certainly going to happen to the blacks in the united states."¹⁰⁶ His preaching offered what might be charitably called alternative interpretations of the bible and Christianity. This included resurrection through the power of socialism¹⁰⁷, the bible being written in 1611 to support slavery,¹⁰⁸ and an alternative cosmology featuring a sky god who created angels by farting¹⁰⁹.

Jones argued in support of the idea of an earthly utopia. He believed it was possible to build a community where there would be a socialist order, free from racism, that would be a paradise on earth¹¹⁰. This was especially pressing given how he would often argue that the US government would engage in a racial purge of blacks, as well as being on track to go up in a nuclear firestorm. This is the vision that led to the construction of the People's Temple Agricultural Project, commonly referred to as Jonestown, his attempt to build an earthly paradise in the jungles of Guyana. Funding this was no small task. While Jones did not initially take offerings, by 1969 there is a required 25 percent tithe to be a member of the church,¹¹¹ with church assets at the time of the mass suicide being 15-20 million dollars¹¹². As time went on, the church grew more controlling, exerting stricter control over the lives of members, eventually reaching the point where he would sometimes state that individuals who left the church would be killed¹¹³.

¹⁰⁶ RYMUR, 50

¹⁰⁷ David Chidester, *Salvation and Suicide: Jim Jones, The Peoples Temple, and Jonestown Revised Edition* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2003), 58

¹⁰⁸ Chidester, *Salvation and Suicide*, 65

¹⁰⁹ Chidester, *Salvation and Suicide*, 107

¹¹⁰ Chidester, *Salvation and Suicide*, 95

¹¹¹ RYMUR, 50

¹¹² Jonestown 6, 31

¹¹³ RYMUR, 50

Given the rather extreme nature of some of Jones's theological claims, there is some discussion about how sincerely Jones held any of these beliefs. Importantly, he openly admitted on many occasions that "the ends justify the means to any activity."¹¹⁴ Questions of whether or not Jones should be considered an authentic Christian depend on the perspective of the speaker, and this question will be examined in light of reactions after the mass suicide in chapter two.

How legitimate were Jones's Concerns?

Jones took some rather large swings with some of his rhetoric, with FBI analysts pointing out that "Comparison of ideological tracts of Jones and [Charles] Manson are almost identical. Each describes and used with the followers the inevitability of an interracial war which would be signaled by some type of apocalyptic event."¹¹⁵ A comparison like this may be easy to make, but it could also have been a rhetoric move by the FBI in order to present an image of a group they were hostile to. Taking a moment to examine some factors that influenced these type of claims Jones was making may make these assertions seem less ridiculous than they initially appear.

The sentiment of imminent nuclear war was widespread throughout the cold war era, perhaps most infamously remembered through the 'doomsday clock', the report in 1953 saying that the world was two minutes from midnight, and that with "only a few more swings of the pendulum, and, from Moscow to Chicago, atomic explosions will strike midnight for Western civilization."¹¹⁶ This concern for the immediacy of nuclear war was certainly not limited to Jones, with many groups, even staunchly republican ones, building bunkers and teaching children to hide under desks in the event of a nuclear attack. Jones was more concerned with this than many to be sure, because of his distrust of a racist, incompetent government. This was far from a rare opinion however, with many people believing the US

¹¹⁴ RYMUR, 4

¹¹⁵ Jonestown 1, 38

¹¹⁶ Eugene Rabinowitch, "The Narrowing Way," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* Vol 9 issue 8 (1953), 294

government was incompetent, something that was especially pronounced after a nuclear bomb that was being transported over US soil was accidentally dropped in 1958¹¹⁷. While there was no nuclear core in the device, a number of citizens were understandably concerned that a nuclear bomb had accidentally been dropped over Mars Bluff, South Carolina¹¹⁸.

Jones's concerns about the US government eradicating black people similarly make more sense in context. The state of affairs of rampant police brutality without oversight has already been discussed, which was an ongoing nationwide problem. In addition, going back a little bit in the past to Tulsa in 1921, we can see another example of why Jones would be concerned about building a community. In response to rampant and oppressive racism, in the 1910s several black communities began to pop up. They hoped that by having their own businesses and police forces, they would be able to escape racism. The most prevalent of these in this era was Tulsa, which was known as 'black wall street'. In 1921, a misunderstanding between a white woman and a black male elevator operator (the specifics of which are contested), a riot broke out, ending with 300 dead and 35 city blocks burned to the ground¹¹⁹. Initial rumblings of mob justice of white men coming to kill the black elevator operator drew a crowd of black supporters to protect him. After a gunshot from the crowd, the city burned. White rioters tore through the city, shooting and starting fires, with some reports even including white men in planes shooting rifles and dropping firebombs into crowds¹²⁰. Despite all the carnage, once the rioting calmed down, there were no arrests¹²¹. The community never recovered.

¹¹⁷ Universal Studios, *'Dead' A-bomb hits US Town*, Newsreel, March 13th, 1958, accessed at https://archive.org/details/1958-03-13_Dead_A-Bomb_Hits_US_Town

¹¹⁸ There is a small plaque there to this day. This is possibly my favorite fact to have come out of this project.

¹¹⁹ "1921 Tulsa Race Riot", *Tulsa Historical Society and Museum*, <http://tulsahistory.org/learn/online-exhibits/the-tulsa-race-riot/>

¹²⁰ "Race Riot Timeline", *Tulsa World*, <http://www.tulsaworld.com/app/race-riot/timeline.html>

¹²¹ Richard Wormser, "Tulsa Riot (1921)", PBS, http://www.pbs.org/wnet/jimcrow/stories_events_tulsa.html

Similarly, the life expectancy of Black Rights Leaders was exceptionally short around this time. While at the time it was a conspiracy theory, information revealed much later through Freedom of Information Act requests about FBI and CIA activities toward black rights groups has shown widespread government activity against them. On the ground at the time, however, one could only piece together a fairly lengthy list of black rights leaders who had died in sudden, violent ways. The most high profile of these would be the assassination of Malcolm X in 1965 and Martin Luther King Jr in 1968, but they were far from alone, and not the most egregious. The first Black Panther recruit outside of founders Huey P Newton and Bobby Seale was Robert Hutton, commonly called 'Lil Bobby Hutton, who was killed in a police shootout. He was in the middle of the street, having stripped down to his underpants to show he was unarmed, at which point he was shot a dozen times¹²². Black Panthers Fred Hampton and Mark Clark were killed in a raid in 1969, where police shot an estimated 99 times to a single bullet fired from the Panthers¹²³. Hampton's pregnant fiancée described the raid after he had been shot saying "Heard a pig [police officer] say 'He's barely alive, He'll barely make it'... then they start shooting again... pig said 'He's good and dead now'."¹²⁴ The autopsy later declared that Hampton did not die from bullets fired from the raid, but rather two bullets fired into his head from point blank range.

This was also not the only plan for a black organization to form their own community to escape what they thought was unfair treatment. These included groups like the Nation of Yahweh, House of Israel, and the Nuwubian Nation,¹²⁵ all of which attempted to form their own communities. The House of Israel was even based in Guyana, though their population was mostly local Guyanese, and was much

¹²² "Bobby Hutton", PBS, http://www.pbs.org/hueypnewton/people/people_hutton.html

¹²³ "Police Kill Two Members of the Black Panther Party", History Network, <http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/police-kill-two-members-of-the-black-panther-party>

¹²⁴ Interview with Deborah Johnson, Hutton's Fiancée is shown as a clip in an interview with an author of a book on Fred Hampton, Amy Goodman, Juan Gonzalez, and Jeffrey Haas, "The Assassination of Fred Hampton: How the FBI and Chicago Police Murdered a Black Panther", *Democracy Now*, December 4th 2014 http://www.democracynow.org/2014/12/4/watch_the_assassination_of_fred_hampton

¹²⁵ Brentin Mock, "The Jonestown Massacre and the Seduction of the 'Racial Utopia'", *Citylab*, November 20 2015, <http://www.citylab.com/politics/2015/11/the-jonestown-reminder-that-there-is-no-racial-utopia/416628/>

smaller than the People's Temple community was¹²⁶. Perhaps even more surprising was that there was a similar initiative inside US borders that had strong republican support, including Richard Nixon's. The planned community, Soul City, North Carolina, was supposed to be "a self-sustaining and self-contained community in which residents would work, play, shop, worship, and receive healthcare all within the town's borders."¹²⁷ While the community never materialized – in a turn of events that should surprise no one who is familiar with Nixon the only thing that ended up materializing on the site was a prison¹²⁸ - it had republican support to help the black community develop skilled labor¹²⁹.

Leaving for Jonestown

By 1974, the Peoples Temple is named by the *Sacramento Bee* as "probably the largest Protestant congregation in Northern California."¹³⁰ Jones's political actions get him named Humanitarian of the year by the Los Angeles Herald in 1976, and he is invited to the White House by Rosalynn Carter¹³¹. In 1975 he founds the People's Temple Agricultural Project, a communal living experiment based in the Guyanese Jungle. After an article is published in *New West Magazine* in 1977 which exposed the temple's "financial misdealings, beatings, intimidation, brain-washing and hints of murder,"¹³² Jones goes to Guyana to be in Jonestown, and his most devout followers come with him.

In May 1977 Jonestown's population is 70, and "between late July and December 1977, Jones and some 900 other congregants"¹³³ make the trip. Once in Guyana, Jones redoubles work to make the

¹²⁶ Rakesh Rampertab, "House of Israel", *Guyana Under Siege*, 2001, <http://www.guyanaundersiege.com/Historical/House%20of%20Israel.htm>

¹²⁷ Dervin Fergus, "Black Power, Soft Power: Floyd McKissick, Soul City, and the Death of Moderate Black Republicanism", *Journal of Political History* Volume 22 Issue 2, 2010, 149

¹²⁸ Fergus, *Black Power, Soft Power*, 179

¹²⁹ Fergus, *Black Power, Soft Power*, 150

¹³⁰ Jonathan Z Smith, "The Devil in Mr. Jones" in *Imagining Religion*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), 107

¹³¹ Smith, *The Devil in Mr. Jones*, 107

¹³² Smith, *The Devil in Mr. Jones*, 107

¹³³ Smith, *The Devil in Mr. Jones*, 107

encampment habitable. While out there, Jones grows increasingly paranoid about the possibility of US Government intervention, and takes more coercive control over the lives of member of the church. He takes increasingly paranoid measures out of fear of CIA infiltration. His message focuses on the idea that though they had left the US to avoid racism and harassment, the CIA was unwilling to leave them alone because it was too “high profile” to have “such a large group of socialists from the united states find freedom in another land so they harassed them by sending their lackeys.”¹³⁴ This increasing concern about the US government leads to more radical actions, notably requiring members to sign blank pages to be made into confessions of crimes if members left¹³⁵ as well as threats against the president and other revolutionary claims.¹³⁶ This distancing from the US government culminates in an affidavit sent from the People’s Temple to the state department, signed by the majority of those who were in Jonestown, indicating that they were armed and would treat visits from US officials as an act of provocation, and that they would rather die than be harassed from another continent¹³⁷.

Revolutionary Suicide

Jones begins to use the expression of revolutionary suicide with his inner circle in 1973,¹³⁸ an idea that was taken from Huey P Newton, who discussed it in the provocatively titled *Revolutionary Suicide*. This was initially published in 1973 but includes some writing from earlier dates. The work is a mixture of autobiography, philosophy, and poetry, focusing presenting his idea of revolutionary suicide. The idea as Newton presents it is that there are two types of suicide, revolutionary or reactionary¹³⁹. The reactionary suicide is a death that is chosen out of despair about one’s circumstances, an act which Newton saw as extremely present in the black community. He understood this both in the fast suicides

¹³⁴ Jonestown 42, 63

¹³⁵ RYMUR 55

¹³⁶ RYMUR 51-52

¹³⁷ Jonestown 42, 62 Letter appears to be dated September 3rd, 1978 Jonestown 11, 1

¹³⁸ Chidester, *Salvation and Suicide*, 130

¹³⁹ Newton, *Revolutionary suicide*, 4

that would be typically associated with the term, as well as the slow suicide of drugs or alcohol. The Revolutionary Suicide was when an individual went against overwhelming odds because “it is better to oppose the forces that would drive me to self-murder than to endure them. Although I risk the likelihood of death, there is the possibility, if not the probability, of changing intolerable conditions.”¹⁴⁰ In essence, Newton’s concept of revolutionary suicide argues that it is better to face almost certain death to attempt to change an unfair world than it is to perish under an unfair, oppressive regime.

This is not an idea without precedent. Going back historically to the 1800s during the era of slavery, the idea of black suicide was seen sometimes as an escape from the horrible conditions of slavery. Additionally, it was sometimes seen an act of rebellion against the whole enterprise of slavery, where killing yourself was destroying the means of production, an act of suicide turned into industrial sabotage. Going back this far extends beyond the scope of this project, but interested readers should consider looking at Richard Bell’s *Slave Suicide, Abolition, and the problem of resistance* or Terri L. Snyder’s *The Power to Die: Slavery and Suicide in British North America*¹⁴¹.

One of the defectors from the People’s Temple presents the concept saying that with revolutionary suicide “you can go down in history, saying you chose your way to go, and it is your commitment to refuse capitalism and in support of socialism.”¹⁴² Jones presented it as a way for the temple to “leave an indelible mark on history... in death, they could achieve new life. A bunch of common people and a preacher named Jones could take their place among the great nations of history, the heroes of Russian and Chinese revolutions, the martyrs of the American civil rights movement, the Jews at Masada.”¹⁴³ The people’s temple believed that engaging in this mass suicide would “expose this

¹⁴⁰ Newton, *Revolutionary suicide*, 5

¹⁴¹ Thank you to Dr. Austin-Smith for bringing this connection to my attention.

¹⁴² Reitman, *Raven*, 566

¹⁴³ Reitman, *Raven*, 294

racist and fascist society.”¹⁴⁴ The question of whether or not Jones’s use of the term was a fair appropriation of Newton’s concept is hotly debated, and will be discussed further in chapter 2. In general, the mass suicide was not perceived as being a revolutionary act, and Jones and his followers were not generally perceived as revolutionaries either in their time nor in the current era.

White Nights

Jones begins experimenting with the first mock suicide among his inner circle in 1976¹⁴⁵ and the rehearsals with the community at large start in 1977.¹⁴⁶ The Jonestown community spoke openly about the possibility of revolutionary suicide, and would discuss the option favorably. Individuals would indicate that they were ready to die for socialism¹⁴⁷, and there is a recording from April or May of 1978 of different members of the Jonestown community expressing their reasons for wanting to commit suicide.¹⁴⁸ These reasons generally reflected dissatisfaction with the current state of the United States, especially in terms of race relations. One particularly explicit example came from an individual who said

"I refuse to see my child in a school filled with police and reading books that he will never understand and things that will never do him any good. I refuse to watch children take *pills* every day at twelve o’clock noon, just to settle them down. I refuse to smell the stench of a goddamned ghetto. I refuse to live in this type of society one more day.”¹⁴⁹

This example specifically speaks to the issues that have been highlighted already in the black community in the United States at this time – poor schooling, no job opportunities, poor housing, and an unjust and apathetic government.

The mock suicide drills would come at varying times, often announced by Jones as being the result of some external prompting like US government interference. These drills would be very real to

¹⁴⁴ Reitman, *Raven*, 541

¹⁴⁵ Chidester, *Salvation and Suicide*, 131

¹⁴⁶ Chidester, *Salvation and Suicide*, 132

¹⁴⁷ Jonestown 123, 120

¹⁴⁸ Q245

¹⁴⁹ Q245

the community, who would be told that they were going to drink poison and die¹⁵⁰. As a result of these drills, members of the church would become increasingly focused on the idea of death, with members of the congregation saying “When I imagine my death it’s not far away. Revolutionary suicide or fighting in Jonestown”¹⁵¹ or “I am ready to die for socialism.”¹⁵² Some were so much in favor of the idea of revolutionary suicide that they were disappointed not to die after a white night.¹⁵³ These white nights were given authenticity by support from prominent members of the Black Panthers movement, including Huey P Newton who radioed in to say “I want the Guyanese government to know that you're not to be messed around with. Keep strong and we're pulling for you.”¹⁵⁴ Angela Davis similarly communicated with the Peoples Temple in Guyana several times, including expressing solidarity with the movement saying “When you are attacked, it is because of your progressive stand, and we feel that it is directly an attack against us as well.”¹⁵⁵

These white nights fed into and reinforced the narrative that Jonestown was being harassed by the US government. Revolutionary suicide was seen as a preferable alternative when “blood bath is a certain reality – I voted to die now and will not have the responsibility of seeing our children go through the hell of battle or hear their screams.”¹⁵⁶ Life at Jonestown grew increasingly erratic, with their perfect socialist paradise having issues arising from both practical problems with supplies, and tensions rising in the camp from Jones’s decision making which became less rational. The workloads grew immensely, often with individuals overworked and given only a few hours of sleep. Overall the atmosphere at the camp was that death was imminent and inevitable, with the US government

¹⁵⁰ Reitman, *Raven*, 391

¹⁵¹ Jonestown 123, 103

¹⁵² Jonestown 123, 120

¹⁵³ “Dad - I'd like to express my feeling toward our decision last night. Frankly, I was very disappointed we decided to live.” Jonestown 123, 94

¹⁵⁴ Reitman, *Raven*, 370

¹⁵⁵ Angela Davis, “Statement of Angela Davis(Text)”, *Alternative Considerations of Jonestown & Peoples Temple*, September 10 1977m http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=19027

¹⁵⁶ Jonestown 193, 94

unwilling to leave them alone. The ideology of Jonestown became that “we first concern ourselves about our revolutionary purpose, and then secondarily our survival.”¹⁵⁷

November 18, 1978

Because of increasing pressure in the United States being put on the government to investigate allegations of mistreatment of individuals at Jonestown, Congressman Leo Ryan agrees to go down to investigate in person. Ryan arrives on November 17th, 1978, with a group of concerned relatives of Jonestown members and several members of the press¹⁵⁸. Initial reactions are positive and Ryan has a positive appraisal of the community, however a number of members of the Jonestown settlement pass Ryan or members of the press notes indicating that they would like to leave, suggesting things are not as they seem. Tension begins to build, and on the afternoon of November 18th a resident of Jonestown threatens Congressman Ryan with a knife. Shortly after this he, those who travelled with him, and a small number of Jonestown residents who wanted to leave to quickly depart¹⁵⁹. While on the airstrip waiting for their plane, several members of the Jonestown community arrive and open fire on the outsiders and defectors. Five people are killed, including Ryan, and eleven are wounded¹⁶⁰.

Back at the Jonestown camp, Jones calls for the final white night, this time with actual poison. Given the nature of the event, there are a few ambiguities about what actually happened during the mass suicide. There is a recording of parts of the event, but it does cut in and out, and there are some aspects of the event which are not directly mentioned in the tape, such as the presence of armed guards¹⁶¹. A discussion does take place about possible alternatives to the suicide which Jones engages with, though he treats as non-viable¹⁶². The atmosphere is tense, but the recording includes several

¹⁵⁷ Q588

¹⁵⁸ Smith, *The Devil in Mr. Jones*, 108

¹⁵⁹ Smith, *The Devil in Mr. Jones*, 108

¹⁶⁰ Smith, *The Devil in Mr. Jones*, 108

¹⁶¹ Reitman, *Raven*, 562

¹⁶² Q 042

items that suggest willingness among some amount of the participants – there are applause breaks and cheering for Jones, as well as people thanking him, making statements like “this is nothing to cry about. This is something we should all rejoice about” and “I’d just like to thank dad for giving us life and death.”¹⁶³ While Jones is very strongly pushing for the suicide, he engages with dissenters and asks for quiet from those who try to speak over them so that their opinions can be heard. A vat of Grape Flavor-Aid was laced with cyanide, and members of the congregation either drank themselves or were injected.¹⁶⁴ Children are given the poison first, and at the same time all of the animals on site are killed. Jones repeats again and again the need for revolutionary suicide as protest. The final words on the recording are Jones saying “We didn’t commit suicide. We committed an act of Revolutionary Suicide protesting the conditions of an inhumane world.”¹⁶⁵

An important caveat to all of this – it’s difficult to gauge sincerity. Given the number of allegations of peer pressure and threats, there is no doubt that some individuals were making these statements under duress. There was also a movement within the People’s Temple in Guyana to oust Jones as leader because he was seen as too eccentric or extreme.¹⁶⁶ At the same time, given the length of time that these discussions were ongoing, and that only the most devout followers of Jones went to Guyana from California, it’s also true that there were certainly individuals who were totally on board with Jones’s approach. On the actual day of the mass suicide there were doubtless both voluntary and involuntary deaths – at the very least it’s clear that the children were unable to consent, and there were

¹⁶³ Q 042

¹⁶⁴ Reitman, *Raven*, 559 The question of how many individuals were injected with poison is somewhat controversial. The pathologist initially on site in Guyana was a Dr. Mootoo, who initially testified that the only individuals with external injuries were Jones and his assistant (Annie Moore) who were shot. A later news source claimed a Guyanese source said that over 70 examined bodies had injection marks. Dr Mootoo later indicated that he had seen some inoculation marks that he had not disclosed due to their likely being for a mercy killing those suffering severe convulsions as a result of the cyanide. Needless to say, this has been fruitful ground for conspiracy theorists.

¹⁶⁵ Q042

¹⁶⁶ Reitman, *Raven*, 454

individuals who fled the final white night who suggested that the amount of murders was extremely high.¹⁶⁷ I would argue that the long timeline of discussion of revolutionary suicide, and the substantial number of individuals speaking about it on tape, suggests that there would have been a significant amount of the adult population who would be more willing to commit revolutionary suicide than some others have suggested.

The indicated impetus for the mass suicide is that Jonestown would not be left alone, and that the US government had repeatedly meddled in their affairs. This was a point that has been emphasized a number of times to the US government, like the petition that had been sent to the state department indicating that they were armed and a visit would be seen as a provocation, as well as a community letter that was sent emphasizing how much had been sacrificed to build the community, which ended with “Do you think that, having come so far and made so many sacrifices, we are going to sit idly by and allow a sleazy, politically-motivated frame-up carried out by individuals on a personal vendetta, take all or even part of what we have worked for away from us?”¹⁶⁸ The sentiment among the Jonestown community was that they were constantly being harassed by the US government, and that after the death of congressman Ryan, there was no longer the possibility of them being left alone. The impetus for mass suicide came “because they believed their community that they had built was under siege by the United States Government”¹⁶⁹ and because “they were not allowed to live in peace. They died

¹⁶⁷ Tim Carter, who fled the white night, suggests that the murder rate is approximately 90 percent, though he arrives at this figure through biased means, arguing that Jones was a liar, and those who believed his lies were murdered. His account is given in “Murder or Suicide: What I saw” accessible at http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=31976. A variety of short essays offering different perspective is available at http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=31981. This is one of the enduring questions of Jonestown, and a wide variety of responses are available from a number of scholars.

¹⁶⁸ Jonestown 11, 1

¹⁶⁹ Jonestown 42, 44

because they did not want to be left with no choice but to come back to live in the rat infested ghettos of America.”¹⁷⁰

Jones’s understanding of how the US government functioned made the mass suicide his inevitable conclusion as soon as there were defectors from Jonestown. Jones perceived the arrival of Congressman Ryan and his entourage as being just the latest in a seemingly interminable string of impositions and harassment. Jones believed that the US government was harassing them and looking for a way to discredit and destroy Jonestown because having such a high profile group of socialists leave the US and stand openly in opposition to their values was deeply shameful for them. This is what had happened when the Black Panther movement stepped in to take care of community health and education, which led to the US government dismantling that group. Jones saw that having a group of defectors would give the US government an excuse to destroy the community that was made. Once the defectors left the community and gave their account of Jonestown to the media or the government, they would have been able to use this to justify dismantling the community, either peaceably or not. The rhetoric in the suicide tape speaks to this – if the government had been able to present Jonestown as an unsafe environment with a large number of children, they would have had cause to come in and dismantle what would have been portrayed as an unsafe environment.

Jones believed that at this point it was impossible for them to continue to live a life free from harassment, and so he pushed for a revolutionary suicide. Jones had been pushing the ideology of revolutionary suicide openly for over a year at this point, and had made the case to his congregation that “The people in San Francisco will not be idle over this. They’ll not take our death in vain, you know.”¹⁷¹ Jones set up the suicide as being something that would be a spark that would ignite the flames of revolution, saying that they would go down in history, and speaking to the US government

¹⁷⁰ Jonestown 42, 45-46

¹⁷¹ Reitman, *Raven*, 557

saying that “they’ll pay for this.”¹⁷² Jones presented their deaths as being something that would be a jumping off point for revolution back home, something that would inspire the US black community into revolution.

November 19, 1978

One of the few survivors of Jonestown who was on site at the time of the mass suicide was Odell Rhodes, who survived the mass suicide by hiding for several hours under a building. He was the one who notified the authorities in the nearest major city, Port Kaituma, late in the evening of November 18th¹⁷³. The first troops on US soil began to be mobilized on the morning of November 19th, but would not arrive until the 20th. The first to approach the site were Guyanese military, but their approach was slowed by both a rain that had gone through the night on the 18th, as well as safety concerns about the possibility of armed survivors who were expecting a confrontation¹⁷⁴. Initial responders from the US were coming in blind – reports of the number of dead were much under later confirmed totals¹⁷⁵ and it was unclear if there were survivors, so US troops coming in brought potential antidotes to consumed poisons. They were also unclear how many survivors there would be or what condition they would be in, but expected a number of survivors on site. Because of the remoteness of the Jonestown location, they were unable to take military aircraft to the nearest landing strip, and had to be flown in with their supplies in a stripped down Guyanese commercial plane.¹⁷⁶

By the time that US troops were able to reach the bodies, they were in a sorry state. They had been left where they had fallen, and at the point they arrive “the bodies had been lying in the sweltering

¹⁷² Q042

¹⁷³ Jeff Brailey, *Ghosts of November: Memoirs of an Outsider Who Witnessed the Carnage at Jonestown*, Manuscript hosted by Alternative Considerations of Jonestown & Peoples Temple, http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=62750, 2006, Chapter 2

¹⁷⁴ Chris Knight-Griffin, “The US Military in Guyana: The Untold Story”, *Alternative Considerations of Jonestown & Peoples Temple*, 2016, http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=30369

¹⁷⁵ Estimates at this time would be 400-500 but continue to climb, a recurring theme.

¹⁷⁶ Brailey, *Ghosts of November*, Chapter 2

tropical heat for three days...the temperature during the day on Sunday had been nearly 100 degrees Fahrenheit [37.5 Celsius]. Despite the rain, the thermostat was hovering at over 90 [32] on the third day."¹⁷⁷ The bodies at this point are terribly bloated and unrecognizable. A number had created handmade bracelets, apparently with identifying information on them, but at this point they were often embedded in the decaying skin and illegible.¹⁷⁸ All of the animals on site were killed, including Jones's pet chimpanzee, Mr. Muggs.¹⁷⁹ Identification of the bodies was not able to begin in earnest until November 21st, after the site has been set up for the military transport helicopters to arrive on the Jonestown soccer fields. A few of the Jonestown survivors, including Odell Rhodes, returned to the site to attempt to provide names to the US specialists on site. This task was complicated by the survivors being in shock, often only knowing first names or nicknames, and decay already setting in¹⁸⁰.

By November 22nd, four days after the suicide, identification was becoming near impossible. The heat and moisture had made decay advance rapidly. Despite there being some bracelets and some individuals identified by survivors, this was the minority, and few in Jonestown had wallets or any identification on them¹⁸¹. Decay and cyanide effects made all skin colors uniform, so it was not possible to tell white from black. Additionally, while clothing had name tags sewn in them, the sharing of clothes meant that "many of the dead wore clothing with three or four different names, none of which actually were their own."¹⁸² Bodies were given what identification they could, then bagged and transported on the same flatbed trailer that had been used to take the assassins to shoot Ryan's entourage to the soccer field. From there, they were loaded onto helicopters to be taken to the Timheri airport, where they would be loaded into aluminum coffins for transport back to Dover air force base in Delaware¹⁸³.

¹⁷⁷ Brailey, *Ghosts of November*, Chapter 5

¹⁷⁸ Brailey, *Ghosts of November*, Chapter 5

¹⁷⁹ Brailey, *Ghosts of November*, Chapter 5

¹⁸⁰ Brailey, *Ghosts of November*, Chapter 7

¹⁸¹ Brailey, *Ghosts of November*, Chapter 8

¹⁸² Brailey, *Ghosts of November*, Chapter 8

¹⁸³ Brailey, *Ghosts of November*, Chapter 8

Progress was slow, and the initial estimates of 40 bodies, based on the number of passports, was much below final numbers. This uncertainty was further emphasized by bodies being layered on top of each other in ditches, causing initial estimates to be much lower. The final body – the 913th – left the Jonestown site for the airport on November 23rd, 1978. Apparently as a joke on the mortuary affair specialists in Dover, the GREGG soldiers in Guyana put Jones’s pet chimpanzee, Mr. Muggs, in one of the body bags and shipped it back to dover as well¹⁸⁴. Attempts to identify bodies before being shipped to Dover were hindered by decay so advanced that it was no longer possible to even determine gender, so by November 24th a situation report indicated “No additional attempts are being made to identify bodies in Guyana.”¹⁸⁵ Despite best efforts by specialists in dover, in the end 234 bodies remained unidentified¹⁸⁶.

Proposals for Disposals

The US government realized very early that the ultimate disposition of the bodies was going to be a complicated process. Initial reaction from the US government was to try to get the bodies buried in Guyana. During the time that Jonestown was occupied before the mass suicide, eight members had died and were buried on site.¹⁸⁷ A proposal was made to check with the Guyanese authorities then have one of the survivors verify where the graveyard was and bury them on the grounds of Jonestown.¹⁸⁸ Guyanese authorities are less than thrilled about this proposal and stonewalled immediately, saying that they are not able to bury any bodies without death certificates, and that the Guyanese government was

¹⁸⁴ Brailey, *Ghosts of November*, Chapter 8. This same book includes several other colorful accounts, including giving an account of a soldier hitting a disrespectful photographer with a corpse in a body bag.

¹⁸⁵ Knight-Griffin, *The US Military in Guyana*

¹⁸⁶ Rebecca Moore, “Last Rights” originally in *In Defence of Peoples Temple – And Other Essays* (Lewiston NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1988), hosted at http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=16585

¹⁸⁷ “Who Died in Jonestown Before 18 November 1978?”, *Alternative Considerations of Jonestown & Peoples Temple*, December 30, 2015, http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=37986

¹⁸⁸ Department of State Embassy Report, November 20, 1978, <http://web.archive.org/web/19991105155749/http://www.icehouse.net/zodiac/sitrep/sitrep9.html>

unable to handle such a large project. Another proposal was floated to cremate the bodies and scatter the ashes at sea after a “very compassionate Ceremony.”¹⁸⁹ Guyanese officials advised that there was nowhere in the country with the resources to perform such a task, even in Georgetown. Very shortly after this official channels made it clear that “the Guyanese Government desires all individuals, including bodies, to be removed as soon as possible.”¹⁹⁰ The official position was that this is an American problem, and the Guyanese government wanted nothing to do with any aspect of the process.

Guyana at this time has a requirement for autopsies to be performed in all cases of “unnatural death,”¹⁹¹ an obligation which was lifted to speed the process of removing the bodies. Initially the US government does not want to perform autopsies, and does not relent to do so until mid December. No blood or urine samples are taken before the embalming procedure, muddying results. At the time of autopsy “post mortem decomposition is advanced. Maggots are present,”¹⁹² the decay being so pronounced that “you can’t tell black from white... you can’t tell facial features at all.”¹⁹³ Some of the corpses have been covered with lime or fuel oil, as an attempt to deal with insects in the jungle.¹⁹⁴ The autopsy results were extremely limited, with the decay so severe that the manner of death is listed as “undetermined.”¹⁹⁵

Initial government documents paint a bleak picture of handling the bodies, this being a problem far beyond scope that they had dealt with before.¹⁹⁶ They noted that “there is no specific statutory authority enabling the U. S. Government to dispose of those bodies nor are there any funds for this

¹⁸⁹ David Chidester, “Rituals of Exclusion and the Jonestown Dead”, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Volume 56 issue 4, November 1988, 687

¹⁹⁰ Jonestown 6, 150

¹⁹¹ Moore, Last Rights

¹⁹² Jonestown 45, 11

¹⁹³ Chidester, *Rituals of Exclusion*, 684

¹⁹⁴ Brailey, *Ghosts of November*, chapter 6

¹⁹⁵ Moore, Last Rights

¹⁹⁶ Dover was chosen because it had somewhat recently been a site that had processed an airplane crash as well as handling a large number of Vietnam dead. The advanced decay and large number of individuals who had died on the same day, however, made it a much bigger problem than they were equipped for.

purpose.”¹⁹⁷ Initial proposals for burial are concerned about the practicality of such efforts, and proposals are considered for burial “in a variety of states either in a mass group or small burial groups.”¹⁹⁸ The alternative consideration was cremation, which was favored as the more economical option because “the cremation association has offered to cremate at cost,”¹⁹⁹ bringing the per body cost to around 240\$ as opposed to the 1000-1500\$ estimate for burial. Additionally, this would avoid some of the issues of finding an appropriate site for a mass grave. The government did express concerns about “adverse public reaction since many of the bodies would be children.”²⁰⁰ Bodies are slowly being claimed by the families, but it’s clear that between the unidentified bodies, and those who had families who were unwilling or unable to claim them, that a significant number of unclaimed corpses will need to be dealt with.

Legal proceedings between the US government and the Peoples Temple on a variety of issues including attempts to recoup costs of transporting and disposing of the bodies lead to the California Superior Court in January forming the Guyana Emergency Committee, a group comprised of “religious officials from the San Francisco Council of Churches, Archdiocese of the Roman Catholic Church, and Board of Rabbis.”²⁰¹ This groups was “charged with the task of drawing up a plan of disposition of the Jonestown dead.”²⁰² The committee comes to the conclusion that burial is the appropriate response over cremation, citing concerns that the black community at this time did not typically support cremation²⁰³. Despite coming to this conclusion, difficulties in finding a site that will accept the bodies means that going is slow, and the bodies are held in the dover AFB until may 1979. There is one

¹⁹⁷ Jonestown 20, 231

¹⁹⁸ Jonestown 20, 231

¹⁹⁹ Jonestown 20, 231

²⁰⁰ Jonestown 20, 231

²⁰¹ Chidester, *Rituals of Exclusion*, 692

²⁰² Chidester, *Rituals of Exclusion*, 692

²⁰³ Notice of Hearing of ERC Plan, *Emergency Response Committee*, filing made to the Attorney General of the State of California, February 16, 1979, accessed at <http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/07-10-erc.pdf>

exception to this however, with “the inexplicable cremation of the body of Jim Jones on Tuesday, 21 December, 1978.”²⁰⁴ Jones’s body was taken across state lines from Delaware to Clarksboro, New Jersey, where it was cremated “without ceremony”²⁰⁵ and eventually scattered over the Atlantic Ocean by request of his remaining family. It’s not clear who requested this cremation be done²⁰⁶. No marker is ever placed anywhere for Jim Jones²⁰⁷.

Finding a home

Because Guyana was unwilling or unable to handle the processing and disposal of the bodies, their final destination would have to be the United States. While several states are proposed early in the process,²⁰⁸ once they were in the Dover air force base, most of the immediate concern by the public and elected officials was that the burial would take place in Delaware. When Dover air force base was chosen, Governor John Bushnell only agreed on condition that “there will be no mass burial in Delaware of unidentified bodies.”²⁰⁹ General sentiment is openly hostile. Delaware state officials publically stated that they will not even consider burial there due to an absence of death certificates,²¹⁰ a similar tactic to what was used by the Guyanese government. Delaware officials also initially would not release the bodies out of concern that they would end up buried in Delaware.²¹¹ The rhetoric used, focusing on cults and contagion, will be examined further in later chapters. The only exception was from “State

²⁰⁴ Chidester, *Rituals of Exclusion*, 691

²⁰⁵ Chidester, *Rituals of Exclusion*, 691

²⁰⁶ There are news reports which indicate that the family requested it, as well as accounts that the decision was made without their input

²⁰⁷ “What Happened to the Bodies from Jonestown?”, *Alternative Considerations of Jonestown & Peoples Temple*, October 22, 2013, http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=35360

²⁰⁸ Jonestown 20, 231

²⁰⁹ Department of State, Situation Report, November 30, 1978, <http://web.archive.org/web/19991105000914/http://www.icehouse.net/zodiac/sitrep/sitrep26.html>

²¹⁰ Chidester, *Rituals of Exclusion*, 686

²¹¹ Chidester, *Rituals of Exclusion*, 686

Senator W. Lee Littleton [who] offered to bury 30 to 40 Peoples Temple children in his backyard so he could 'watch their bodies rise on judgement day'.²¹²

Handling of those bodies who were identified and had family members who were willing to claim them was fairly painless. Government officials are very keen to get rid of the bodies, and the Guyana Emergency Relief Committee set aside \$540 for anyone who claimed the body of a loved one, which was chosen as the average amount to transport, purchase a grave plot, inter the body, and establish a marker²¹³. Letters are mailed out to known next of kin where they could choose to 'bury in decent fashion' on their own terms, or to have the bodies cremated and ashes scattered or returned to them, or, if the letter was ignored, they would be in the mass grave²¹⁴. This last category of the dead was the most problematic, and was the focus of most of the controversy and concern.

Attention was instead focused on California, which was the base of operations for most Peoples Temple activities, as well as the state from which the majority of Jonestown residents were born and thus would have the closest family ties,²¹⁵ though the cultural conditions described before show why there were a large number of individuals who emigrated from the south to California before eventually going to Guyana. Mr. Fabian, the funeral director who was appointed by the Guyana Emergency Committee, struggled to find a home, despite negotiations with a number of cemeteries. One location in maroon county walked away during negotiations citing concerns that the location would turn into a cult shrine²¹⁶. Another location that was being scouted was defaced with spraypaint to say "No Jonestown Here."²¹⁷ The graveyard that eventually agreed in late April 1979 to take the bodies was

²¹² Moore, Last Rights

²¹³ "Peoples Temple", ABC News, January 5th, 1979, Accessed through <http://abcnewsvideosource.com/> Bodies who were claimed before this decision had the costs reimbursed.

²¹⁴ Peoples Temple, ABC News January 5th, 1979

²¹⁵ Moore, Demographics of Black Religious Culture, 63 puts this figure at 374

²¹⁶ Peoples Temple, ABC News January 5th, 1979

²¹⁷ Peoples Temple, ABC News January 5th, 1979. The idea of vandalizing a sacred space not because it was not sacred, but because it was too sacred, is one of the most interesting ideas to come out of this project.

Evergreen Cemetery in Oakland, a predominantly black area just outside of San Francisco. Oakland was the birthplace of the Black Panther movement, and the same cemetery would eventually be the burial location of Huey P Newton when he died in 1989.

Initial Stone

Having established a cemetery that will take the bodies, bodies are transferred by truck May 1979 “in shipments of fifty at a time, in three day intervals, careful not to form a caravan across the continental United States.”²¹⁸ This was done out of concern that a caravan of death would attract “‘weirdos’, ‘kooks’, and ‘cult worshippers’.”²¹⁹ The bodies which were unidentified, or which were identified but unclaimed, are buried May 11, 1979. The total interned there are 408 of the 913 Peoples Temple members who died in Jonestown. 234 of those are unidentified, and 174 are identified but unclaimed.²²⁰ No marker is laid that includes the names of the victims. The initial stone laid by the Guyana Emergency Relief Committee says in its entirety “In memory of the victims of the Jonestown Tragedy Nov 18, 1978 Jonestown, Guyana Guyana emergency relief committee.”

Concerns that the site would be a focus of cult attention are unfounded. The site draws very little attention, either from the public at large, fringe religious or political groups, or even surviving Peoples Temple members. The following November, a memorial service is held directed by Jynona Norwood, a preacher who lost 27 family members in Jonestown.²²¹ This tradition would continue each

²¹⁸ Chidester, *Rituals of Exclusion*, 694. Estimates were taken by the Government for a variety of transport methods, including rail and competing trucking companies. The final decision was to go with United Transport, at a cost of approximately \$55,000. Deregulation of trucking in the 1970s meant that the average price for transport in 1980s was around 1\$ a mile. The distance from Delaware to California is about 2900 miles, and with 50 bodies a truck and 378 transported this would take, presumably, eight trucks, which would put sticker price at somewhere around \$23,000. A back of the envelope calculation thus puts the cost of transporting corpses as roughly double the cost of transporting standard dry goods.

²¹⁹ Chidester, *Rituals of Exclusion*, 695

²²⁰ Number is contentious. Elsewhere, the alternative considerations of Jonestown site lists 409 34364. Chidester lists 378 Chidester, *Rituals of Exclusion*, 695

²²¹ Ex Parte application for temporary restraining order against the Guyana Tribute Foundation, Filed by Jynona Norwood, May 12, 2011, hosted at <http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Norwood1c.pdf>

November until present, giving a memorial service that focused on the innocence of the children who died, and calling Jones manipulative, evil, and Hitleresque²²².

Media Coverage

Immediate media coverage of Jonestown in general focused on “the pornography of Jonestown.”²²³ Accounts are dominated by “The language of fraud and insanity.”²²⁴ There was very little attempt to explain why these individuals would have chosen to kill themselves. Focus is placed on the number of bodies, especially during the November 20-28 period where there was continuous revision of the numbers. Daytime television featured members of the Peoples Temple who had left, or grieving family members, and focused entirely on sensationalizing events. Former Peoples Temple treasurer Mike Cartmel appeared on Good Morning America and alleged that the Peoples Temple took in \$50,000 a week.²²⁵ Reports come forward of fringe Peoples Temple members still in the United States under direction to kill prominent members of the government.²²⁶ Jones is alleged to have a lookalike, and there are reports he may have escaped the mass suicide²²⁷. No focus is given to the actual mission of the Peoples Temple or its socialist programs. Instead, the language is all about fraud, violence, and sexual abuse. This will be examined in some greater detail in chapter three. Suffice to say for now, Jones’s theory that their deaths would kick off a black rights revolution failed to come to pass, and the media focus was entirely on discrediting the movement and promoting their own brand of sensational, rather than explanatory news..

The Second Stone

²²² The FBI account of this in 50, 120 describes the proceedings as a “candlelit vigil for children”

²²³ Smith, *The Devil in Mr. Jones*, 109

²²⁴ Smith, *The Devil in Mr. Jones*, 109

²²⁵ Jonestown 5, 133

²²⁶ Jonestown 6, 147

²²⁷ Jonestown 2, 18

Reverend Jynona Norwood leads a ceremony in the morning of November 18th from 1979 until present, which as of the time of writing is 2016. Very early on, at least as early as 1981 and possibly earlier,²²⁸ Dr. Norwood fundraises for a memorial. Her proposed project was “A 36 foot stone wall, like the Vietnam Veterans Memorial.”²²⁹ Despite all her fundraising efforts, no memorial is ever established, and many details about the memorial are never disclosed. As time passes, a rift begins to grow between Rev. Norwood and some of the other survivors and relations of those who died. They are unhappy with the type of rhetoric that she uses at the memorial, saying that it is increasingly “outreach services for her church,”²³⁰ as well as expressing concerns about her use of funds that are raised. Her services have “bitterness and hostility”²³¹ that a number of people disagree with. Her focus is primarily on demonizing Jones and presenting him as being a murderer who had manipulated members of his congregation.

This group begins having services on the afternoon of November 18th, in order to avoid conflict with Norwood and those who go to her ceremony. While Rev. Norwood has been planning a memorial for years, nothing has materialized, and there is a popular sentiment that something should mark the mass grave more than what was put up, which does not even have the names of the buried. In the summer of 2010, some of those who attend the afternoon service found the Jonestown memorial fund. They solicit donations in early 2011, soliciting donations from former members, family of members, scholars and artists who drew inspiration from the Jonestown events.²³² The memorial is four granite stones, inset in the ground, with the names of all those who died in Guyana on November 18th listed in

²²⁸ Fielding M. McGeehee III, “The Campaign for the New Jonestown Memorial: A Brief History”, *Alternative Considerations of Jonestown and Peoples Temple*, January 2nd, 2016, http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=34364

²²⁹ Tim Reiterman, “New Jonestown Memorial Going Forward”, *Associated Press*, November 19, 2010, http://www.boston.com/news/nation/articles/2010/11/19/apnewsbreak_new_jonestown_memorial_going_forward/

²³⁰ Michael Cartmell, “Letter from Michael Cartmell”, *Alternative Considerations of Jonestown and Peoples Temple*, December 9th, 2013, http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=29339

²³¹ Kathryn Barbour, “Letter from Kathryn Barbour”, *Alternative Considerations of Jonestown and Peoples Temple*, December 9th, 2013, http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=29333

²³² McGehee, *Campaign for the New Jonestown Memorial*

alphabetical order. Funding goals are met quickly, and the memorial stone is installed in May 2011, with its unveiling on May 9th, 2011. The next day Dr. Norwood files suit against Evergreen Cemetery and the Jonestown memorial fund. She demands the removal of the memorial that was installed, or at least the removal of Jones's name from the monument, citing that she had an existing contract to install a memorial that was being violated.²³³ Judges rule in favor of leaving the memorial as is, and Rev. Norwood continues to appeal this decision into early 2015, at which point it seems all avenues of legal contest have been exhausted. The design of this monument, as well as the controversy that surrounded it, will be examined in greater detail in chapter four.

²³³ Complaint for Damages, Declaratory Relief and Injunctive Relief against Evergreen Cemetery, Jynona Norwood, May 10, 2011, <http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Norwood1.pdf>

Chapter Two – Classification

David Chidester's Argument

Jonathan Z Smith's "The Devil in Mr Jones", written in 1982, criticizes academics in religious studies for ignoring Jonestown.¹ Early responses to the events disassociated Peoples Temple from religion, instead calling them crazy. The intervening years have opened up space for academics who wanted to work on the Peoples Temple, and many have done work looking at Peoples Temple theology, demographics, and similar concerns. For most researchers, the story ends on November 18th, 1978. While popular media dealt with the "pornography of Jonestown"² and was happy to report on the grisly details of the handling of bodies, academia was much more tepid. Only a handful of peer reviewed sources focus on this topic. "The Nature of a Traumatic Stressor: Handling Dead Bodies" written in 1990 briefly mentions interviewing those who worked on the Jonestown site and the impact on those individuals. "The Stigmatized Deaths at Jonestown: Finding a locus for grief" from 2011 focuses on how survivors were stigmatized after the events of Jonestown and were unable to publically mourn, and how the SDSU Alternative Considerations of Jonestown projects, as well as online memorials, have worked to resolve that issue. Finally, Chidester's article, "Rituals of exclusion and the Jonestown dead" from 1988 focuses specifically on the handling of the bodies as well as the issues that arose from popular and government reaction. While Chidester's article is a valuable resource, the methodological tools that he used for his assessment focus on ritual, where a broader analysis of societal response could be done by examining the discourse around the bodies, to understand how they were responded to by different groups. In addition, the passage of years has allowed for more resources to be made available, such as

¹ Jonathan Z Smith, "The Devil in Mr. Jones" in *Imagining Religion*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), 109

² Smith, *The Devil in Mr. Jones*, 109

material released from FOIA requests, as well as the construction of the new Jonestown memorial which was laid in 2011.

Chidester argues that “generally, Americans came to terms with the event by dismissing the people of Jonestown as not sane, not Christian, and not American...these strategic denials were enacted in the ritual exclusion of the Jonestown dead.”³ Chidester focuses this argument on the fear of contagion, which he suggests are the contamination of ground, social space, and a spiritual blight.⁴ While this argument succeeded in Dover where the bodies initially landed, they finally found a home in California.⁵ This response is due to the way that the Jonestown bodies so profoundly disrupted the symbolic order of America, because of their rejection of Christianity and embracing of socialism.⁶

Jean-Francois Bayart and Bruce Lincoln

While Chidester’s use of ritual to as a lens is fruitful, there are a few issues with his analysis. Firstly, Chidester argues the bodies are seen as contaminating to Americans, when there were dissenting groups who saw the bodies differently. Secondly, this account does not engage with the shift of opinion that happened, when for a number of groups the Peoples Temple was previously praiseworthy, before the rather brisk turn of opinion. Thirdly, his analysis presents the burial of the bodies in California as a ritual of inclusion, while I argue that it is an act of obliteration. To present an analysis that seeks to address these concerns, an alternative framework that uses sociological and anthropological tools from Bayart and Lincoln will be used. Lincoln’s social constructivist framework will provide a way to explain how the Peoples Temple mass suicide as an attempt to reshape society, rather than just a reaction to it.

³ David Chidester, “Rituals of Exclusion and the Jonestown Dead”, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Volume 56 issue 4, November 1988, 700

⁴ Chidester, *Rituals of Exclusion*, 687-688

⁵ Chidester, *Rituals of Exclusion*, 693-696

⁶ Chidester, *Rituals of Exclusion*, 696

Bayart's antiessentialism brings nuance to discussions of identity, and show how identity has no stable essence, and is in flux with social intent and context.

Bayart's *The Illusion of Cultural Identity* says of identity that "there is no such thing as identity, only operational acts of identification."⁷ There is no eternal concept of identity for an individual or group, rather they are identified each time, rather than having a set existence. Further, "an individual act of identification is always contextual, multiple, and relative,"⁸ which in the context of Jonestown means beyond Chidester's American/un-American divide, we can look at other identities. The relevant ones to be discussed for the Peoples Temple will be Black/nonblack, in particular as relating to the black rights movement, Christian/Unchristian, which Chidester presents as under the 'American' identity, and American/ un-American, which will be examined in a narrower context than Chidester uses.

Bayart's approach allows us to see how the Peoples Temple and the bodies are perceived differently before and after the mass suicide. This is most pronounced in the transition that happens between the identities of black/nonblack, Christian/non-Christian and American/un-American. This clarifies how some of the responses to the Peoples Temple, showing the shift in opinion from those who formerly supported the organization. This shift is often framed as a loss of authenticity. While in California the Peoples Temple were considered Christian, after the suicide they were a cult. In California they were considered black rights activists, after the suicide they were not. This happens because "authenticity is not established by the immanent properties of the phenomenon or object under consideration. It results from the perspective, full of desire and judgements, that is brought to bear on the past, in the eminently contemporary context in which one is situated."⁹ After the mass suicide, the context had changed so drastically that former allies had no interest in being affiliated with the Peoples

⁷ Jean-Francois Bayart, *The Illusion Of Cultural Identity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 92

⁸ Bayart, *The Illusion of Cultural Identity*, 92

⁹ Bayart, *The Illusion of Cultural Identity*, 78

Temple. Even though they were held in high esteem in California, the final acts of the Peoples Temple were so repugnant to their former associates that they washed their hands of any relations to the group. This mass suicide was so dramatic that more than just the transition from living to dead, they went from insider to outsider for many of these communities. Previously they had been champions of civil rights, good Christians, and upstanding citizens. After the mass suicide, they were lunatics, brain-dead zombies, or kooks. While Jones had intended for their deaths to make them martyrs to some communities, especially the Black Rights community, instead they were made anathema.

Lincoln's *Discourse and the Construction of Society* also provides a theoretical framework for understanding how societies are held together by myth, ritual, and classification. Societal change comes about "not when groups or individuals use 'knowledge' to challenge ideological mystification, but rather when they employ thought and discourse."¹⁰ He argues that classifications by group are not just a way to organize data, but also how society is constructed.¹¹ Challenging classifications therefore allows individuals to deconstruct elements of society and reshape it. Lincoln argues that whether or not an attempt to reshape society through this change of classification depends on three things. First, if the discourse can be widely heard. Secondly, if the discourse is persuasive – based on factors like logical coherence, performance etc. and finally if the discourse can evoke the sentiments required for new social forms to be constructed.¹² These social formations are determined based on feelings of similarity and difference, which Lincoln refers to as affinity and estrangement, which is a catch-all term for all of the feelings generally under those umbrellas – belonging or alienation, closeness and separation etc.¹³

¹⁰ Bruce Lincoln, *Discourse and the Construction of Society: Comparative Studies of Myth, Ritual, and Classification* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 7

¹¹ Lincoln, *Discourse and the Construction of Society*, 7-8

¹² Lincoln, *Discourse and the Construction of Society*, 8

¹³ Lincoln, *Discourse and the Construction of Society*, 9

Society is not monolithic, but is formed of a wide variety of diverse and conflicted subgroups. These subgroups carry with them from their formation tensions between affinity and estrangement, the forces that bind them together and force them apart. They are “only imperfectly and precariously bound together by the officially sanctioned sentiments of affinity that coexist with, and partially mask, the disintegrative and most often illicit sentiments of estrangement.”¹⁴ Tensions about what constitutes membership of any group is contested, and liable to change. Recalling Bayart, these are not eternal identities, but are identities that are evoked any time an act of identification is called for. These tensions came to the fore in the context of the Peoples Temple with how other groups considered their movement a part of them or not differently before and after the mass suicide. In particular, all of the subtlety of the People’s Temple was lost. While before, though it was under Jones’s leadership, the Peoples Temple had dissenting views and varying motives. After Jones’s death, all motives are reduced to those of Jones, and he is presented being manipulative and insane. The member of the People’s Temple lose all agency.

Lincoln presents narratives that construct these social groups as falling into four possible categories. The first are fables, which make no truth claims and are presented as fiction.¹⁵ The second category is legends, which are those stories which make truth claims but the general audience does not find credible.¹⁶ The third category is History, being those stories which make truth claims and have credibility.¹⁷ The final category is Myth, which Lincoln says is the “small class of stories that possess both credibility and authority.”¹⁸ Authority, in this context, Lincoln presents as not being simply true but having “the status of paradigmatic truth,”¹⁹ so in addition to being true it conveys important information

¹⁴ Lincoln, *Discourse and the Construction of Society*, 10

¹⁵ Lincoln, *Discourse and the Construction of Society*, 24

¹⁶ Lincoln, *Discourse and the Construction of Society*, 24-25

¹⁷ Lincoln, *Discourse and the Construction of Society*, 24-25

¹⁸ Lincoln, *Discourse and the Construction of Society*, 24

¹⁹ Lincoln, *Discourse and the Construction of Society*, 24

which allows the construction of social groups. Examples are things like “charters, models, templates...revolutionary slogans and ancestral invocations”²⁰ which present ideas groups can construct identity around.

Lincoln presents several ways in which those trying to make social or political change can use myth: contesting the validity of an existing myth to reduce it to history or legend, to take history, legend, or tale and elevate it to myth to give it more authority, or to reinterpret an existing myth in a new way.²¹ Because of the authority of myth, changing what myths are in public discourse and have authority allows the mythmaker to reshape societal values. These acts of mythmaking are for long-term changes and are in contrast to the use of force which Lincoln argues is a short term solution.²² The continuous use of force by a ruling class results in individuals being variously emboldened, intimidated, depressed or enraged, and results in secession, rebellion, or revolution.²³

Jones Reimagined

Given this theoretical framework, we can present a reading of the Jonestown mass suicide as mythmaking. The Peoples Temple was a socialist church with a focus on ideas of racial equality. Black rights movements around this time had usually attempted to make change by having groups go into areas that they saw as the most troubled. The Black Panthers instituted their patrols in areas that had the most police brutality, they introduced free breakfast programs in areas with the most poverty etc. While these movements had some success in changing the understanding of blackness in these communities, coming from a minority position and entering the into public discourse in this way meant that they were under a great deal of criticism. Additionally, this method of organization was fairly

²⁰ Lincoln, *Discourse and the Construction of Society*, 24-25

²¹ Lincoln, *Discourse and the Construction of Society*, 25

²² Lincoln, *Discourse and the Construction of Society*, 4

²³ Lincoln, *Discourse and the Construction of Society*, 4

diffuse and had a more general community effort, instead of concentrating on individuals. The engagement was also with the question of race in America – or at least race in California – in a general sense, without unity of message even among leaders of these movements, which led to the fairly rapid fragmentation of the Black Panther party.

Jones used different tactics, and focused on starting with a small, dedicated community and slowly expanding. By having a core membership of devoted believers who accepted his message, and slowly accruing members and only allowing full membership after a vetting period, the development of the group was much more controlled. In addition, because Jones was securely at the head of the organization, and because he chose to distribute power and authority only to those who he trusted and believed his message, a much more unified myth of blackness in America was presented, as well as reinforcing the authority in that community of Jones as mythmaker.

Despite his message of socialism and black identity opposing dominant discourse, he was able to operate openly in society for a long time because of the way he constructed his movement. First, while the Peoples Temple engaged in the same communities as the Black Panthers with the same programs – feeding, clothing, and housing the poor, health care, drug counselling etc. – they did so under the guise of Christian charity work. When the Black Panthers engaged in these activities it was in open hostility to the government, because they presented this as them stepping in to make up for the failures of government. The Peoples Temple presented it as Christian charity work, which gave them validity as a religious group while not undermining the government by using the American church/state divide. While the Black Panthers wanted to install their own alternative government, the People's Temple was able to fly under the radar by acting as a church, avoiding state criticism. Additionally, Jones and many of his followers were actively involved in local politics. This made them appear as pro-cultural, as well as giving them sway to have people look the other way when they committed transgressions. By using

their identity tactically, they were able to pursue the same ends as the Black Panthers publically but without being subject to the same criticism.

The impetus for Jones and core temple members to leave in 1977 came as a result of an exposé in *New West Magazine*, and the criticisms of Jones that were presented focused on him being deviant from American norms. He is accused of undermining democracy by manipulating voters,²⁴ undermining capitalism by being a socialist,²⁵ and contesting conventional understandings of race by supporting radicals like Newton and Davis.²⁶ When Jones and many of his most dedicated followers left for Guyana, Jones believes that there are still many who believe in the myth of race that he is presenting, and his value as a mythmaker. This would be Peoples Temple members who did not go to Guyana, as well as sympathetic individuals who had engaged with the church, most notably prominent members of the Black Rights community like Huey P Newton and Angela Davis.

Daily life and social values on the Jonestown site reflected the myths Jones had constructed in his sermons and works. The underpinnings of the messages he preached was of racial, gender, and economic equality on a scale far beyond what was seen in the US at this time. The society that was made under his guidance was, at least in theory, based on these ideals. While how successfully this was realized is debated,²⁷ it's clear that the society that was made based on Jones's message looked very different from what life looked like on US soil. When the assassination of congressman Ryan heralds the end of the Jonestown community, the rhetoric that is used to justify the mass suicide deals extensively with the impossibility of reconciling their way of life with a return to the United States.

²⁴ Marshall Kilduff and Phil Tracy, "Inside Peoples Temple," *New West Magazine* August 1, 1977, available at <http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/newWestart.pdf>, 30

²⁵ Kilduff and Tracy, *Inside Peoples Temple*, 31

²⁶ Kilduff and Tracy, *Inside Peoples Temple*, 31

²⁷ There are starving, but hey, they were all equally starving. Well except Jones.

In this analysis, Jones attempts to use this mass suicide as mythmaking to extend beyond the Jonestown community, by declaring it an act of revolutionary suicide. The intent behind declaring it a revolutionary suicide is to reinterpret the historical fact of the mass death as being a result of force at the hands of the US government. Jones equated the suicides to being murdered by the government. If this had succeeded, the myth would have been that since the government was using force unfairly to kill black citizens, the reasonable reaction to such unjustified displays of force would have been a revolution.

Jones's attempts fail. The idea of revolutionary suicide clashed so much with anyone outside the People's Temple community that this interpretation never saw the light of day. The groups that had previously been affiliated with Jones and who had openly supported the Peoples Temple even just a few weeks before the mass suicide immediately disavow Jones and his community. Jones's attempt at mythmaking to give the historical claims of the suicide the authority of a myth instead backfires. Rather than being given authority and pushed to myth, instead the revolutionary suicide is fable. The revolutionary suicide is not understood in those terms, instead it is understood as an act of madness or oppression. Not only does this attempt not generate authority as was intended, it removes the truth claims from the events.

All groups that had previously expressed solidarity with the Peoples Temple abandon them in light of this new information. While Jones attempts to use their deaths as a jumping off point for revolutionary action, the bodies are largely abandoned. Some bodies are claimed, slowly and by individual family members, none of which have large memorial services. The numerous unclaimed bodies are treated as a problem, repeatedly pushed to the margins. Attempts to find a location for burial take months because no community was willing to call the Jonestown dead their own, despite many groups previously expressing solidarity. The government initially attempts to abandon the bodies

in Guyana. When they are forced to take the bodies, they are pushed out to California, which by popular opinion “seemed to be roughly equivalent to sending them outside the United States.”²⁸

Chidester argues that their eventual burial is an attempt at “restoration of the San Francisco community,”²⁹ albeit one that has little success.³⁰ This interpretation is strained, because this burial is not actually a ritual of inclusion. While the ostensible goal of the Guyana Emergency Committee is reintegration into the community, this is not what is actually done. The bodies are not buried anywhere near their church locations, instead going to the Oakland neighborhood, which at this time had extremely high levels of violence and drug use. The burial took place in Evergreen cemetery, with the internment hidden in a back corner blocked off by trees. The marker that is initially placed does not include the names of those who are buried there. The Jonestown dead are not brought back into the community; they are annihilated.

Clearly none of the groups that had previously associated with Jones and the temple had any interest in claiming their dead. Looking at how different groups interacted with the Peoples Temple before and after the mass suicide, we can see some of the different ways that understanding of identity changed.

Black/nonblack

Jones had good reason to think that the Black Rights movement would take up their cause after their deaths. Early efforts by the Peoples Temple to increase membership focused on the same topics that motivated the Black Panther movement, as well as doing preaching and community outreach in the same neighborhoods that they were active in. Before the Peoples Temple established its own newspaper, it experienced much support, positive editorials, and statements of upcoming events in *The*

²⁸ Chidester, *Rituals of Exclusion*, 690

²⁹ Chidester, *Rituals of Exclusion*, 694

³⁰ Chidester, *Rituals of Exclusion*, 695

Sun Reporter, which was at that time the largest Black newspaper in the Bay area.³¹ Even though by 1978 the Black Panther movement is largely disbanded, some of its most important figures were still closely associated with the Peoples Temple.

Angela Davis was “one of the temple’s darlings.”³² Peoples Temple members were sent to rallies and protests during the ‘Free Angela’³³ era of 1971-1972 while she was on trial, and after her release she began attending Peoples Temple services on occasion. Later, she routinely had visits with Jones and his inner circle in Jones’s apartment. This relationship continued even into Guyana when she radioed in several times, with confirmed radio communication happening as late as September 1978.³⁴ This was during a period of heightened tension where Temple members thought that the Guyanese government might potentially be staging an attacking on the Jonestown site.

The language that Davis uses during this communication presents solidarity between the Peoples Temple and the Black rights movement, she addresses the group as “my friend Jim Jones and all my sisters and brothers from the Peoples Temple.”³⁵ She reinforces this solidarity by saying “I can personally speak for the National Alliance Against Racism and Political Oppression in cities throughout the country...we are deeply obligated to you for what you have done... to further the fight against racism.”³⁶ In response to the perceived threats that they are facing, Davis shows solidarity saying “when you are attacked, it is because of your progressive stand, and we feel it is directly an attack on us as well.”³⁷ While by this time the Black Panther movement is largely dissolved, Davis is one of the loudest

³¹ Mary R Sawyer, “The Church in Peoples Temple,” in *Peoples Temple and Black Religion in America*, eds. Rebecca Moore, Anthony B. Pinn,, and Mary R. Sawyer (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 181

³² Tim Reiterman, *Raven* (New York, New York: E. P. Dutton Inc., 1982), 281

³³ With purchase of Angela of equal or greater value

³⁴ And possibly later, but this is the latest verifiable date, mentioned in Reitman, Raven, 370. full transcript available at http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=19027

³⁵ Angela Davis, *Statement of Angela Davis (Text): Statement of Angela Davis to Jim Jones over Radio Phone-Patch Saturday, September 10th, 1977*, Accessed at http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=19027

³⁶ Statement of Angela Davis to Jim Jones September 10th, 1977

³⁷ Statement of Angela Davis to Jim Jones September 10th, 1977

voices of the radical left in the United States, for both the black rights movement and socialist causes. Her expression of solidarity would have been considered one of the most valuable endorsements of black identity possible at that time.

Jones's relationship with Huey P Newton is a bit more complicated. Newton's parents had visited the temple³⁸ – though it's not clear how active of members they were. Newton also had a cousin, Stanley Clayton, who was an active member who was devoted enough to go to Guyana³⁹ and was one of the few survivors of the final mass suicide. Jones travelled to Cuba to see Newton in January 1977⁴⁰ while he was hiding away from criminal charges pending in California. Unlike Jones's relationship with Davis which was entirely positive, Jones runs hot and cold on Newton. He mocks Newton as only wanting to return to the US because he missed the bars,⁴¹ but at the same time calls the Black Panther movement praiseworthy.⁴² In general, Jones's critique seems to be that Newton has constructed a philosophy that he thinks is vitally important, but that the man himself does not live up to it.

The mass suicide that occurred in Guyana was justified using Newton's concept of Revolutionary Suicide – to die facing overwhelming odds rather than taking your own life in reaction to despair. This call for mass suicide was meant to prompt a revolution back in the United States, or at least in California. On the suicide tape, Jones explicitly says that "The people in San Francisco will not – not be idle over there."⁴³ This attempt to do the mythmaking act of their deaths being a case of US government interference and racism was not without precedent. Black Rights protests, which Jones thought would

³⁸ Reiterman, *Raven*, 284

³⁹ Q635 is a sermon focused on Jones talking down to Clayton, criticizing him for not being more active in the black panthers, not treating his girlfriend right etc.

⁴⁰ ...maybe. Reiterman, *Raven*, 284 puts the meeting as January 1977. An interview with Newton recorded in Naipaul, *Journey to Nowhere*, 285 says that this occurred "at some point in 1976 (or thereabouts – he is vague about the date)". Records from the FBI for Cuba are entirely illegible beyond some word fragments. The section is available in Jonestown 151 245-249, and the entirety of 152.

⁴¹ Reiterman, *Raven*, 285

⁴² Numerous instances, for example Q635 transcript available http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=27507

⁴³ Jonestown 'Death Tape' Q042 transcript available through the Jonestown Institute at http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=29079

lead to the revolution he wanted, were often closely linked to US government interference and the deaths of prominent Black Rights leaders. The riots discussed in chapter one in the Kerner and McCone commissions⁴⁴ both stem from outbreaks that are primarily seen as a result of unjust use of white government authority. Similarly, outbreaks of activism also occurred following the violent deaths of prominent black rights leaders – Nonviolent mass mobilization after Malcolm X in 1965, Rioting after Martin Luther King in 1968, mobilization of legal action around the deaths of prominent black panthers Fred Hampton⁴⁵ and Mark Clark in 1969. One Black Panther death that serves to clarify what Jones expected from the mass suicide was that of George Jackson, in 1971. While the reaction to this death was much smaller than those previously mentioned, Newton writes a chapter on it in his book *Revolutionary Suicide* which presented how the Black community would respond to a revolutionary death. While many scholars have looked at Newton's concept of Revolutionary Suicide specifically, the rest of Newton's body of work is rarely examined in context of Jonestown.

George Jackson died in prison in 1971, killing five prison guards and prisoners and wounding three more⁴⁶ trying to escape before being shot in the prison courtyard. Newton calls his death revolutionary not reactionary,⁴⁷ being cut down facing against impossible odds. Jackson's funeral brought out Black Rights activists in droves, ready for action. Newton describes the scene as tense, saying "we had received many threats the previous week... stating that the funeral would not be held, and if it were, there would be cause for more funerals for black panthers. We were ready for anything. The comrades were angry about the threats, and they were righteously angry about the continued

⁴⁴ As well as the 1992 Rodney King riots

⁴⁵ Lawsuits were ongoing until 1982, but this era marked the Black Rights movement becoming more closely involved with FOIA requests and lawsuits against US Government organizations, a trend that carries on to this day.

⁴⁶ Huey P. Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide* (New York, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973), 310. Allegedly he did so with a handgun smuggled in in his afro.

⁴⁷ Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*, 311

oppression of the poor and black people who live in this land.”⁴⁸ The death had brought out escalating reactions from both Black Panthers and the establishment.

This was not rhetoric and idle threats, at the funeral “inside the church walls were ringed with Black Panthers carrying shotguns. George had said that he wanted no flowers at his funeral, only shotguns... any person who entered that sanctuary with the purpose of starting some madness would know that e did not stand a chance of going very far.”⁴⁹ The death of Jackson had provided something to rally around, and established a staging ground for armed conflict. The funeral transpires without violence, but it’s clear from how the Panthers react that revolutionary deaths of members can set off violent reactions to oppose what they see as unjust power structures. Newton also emphasizes how the death of Jackson will influence future generations, talking about how his ideas will manifest in the next generation, and his spirit was immortal.⁵⁰ Because he “died in a significant way, his death will be very heavy... even those who support them [the oppressor] now will not support them in the future... we’ll change their minds or else in the peoples name we’ll have to wipe them out thoroughly, wholly, absolutely, and completely.”⁵¹

This reaction is what Jones was going for, and based on his close relationship with eminent Black Rights leaders, is what members of the Peoples Temple expected to happen. While Jones did express some concern that they might initially be perceived as crazy, he was convinced that “it’s going to go down in history as a great act.”⁵² This has, as of yet, failed to come to pass. The black community immediately disavowed the idea that the Peoples Temple was a Black Church, saying that it was a cult and that “hundreds of black men, women, and children had been led to their deaths by the chicanery of

⁴⁸ Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*, 309

⁴⁹ Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*, 309

⁵⁰ Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*, 310

⁵¹ Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*, 311

⁵² Reiterman, *Raven*, 405

a white man.”⁵³ And that “notwithstanding that the majority of members were black Jonestown had nothing to do with black religion.”⁵⁴ While some spoke about how Jones had been active in developing the black community, for others Jones became “the symbol of white racism,”⁵⁵ an example of yet another time a white man had gone mad with power and the black community had suffered. The black community as a whole did not embrace those who had died. Memorial services were sparsely attended, without shotguns.

Angela Davis, while continuing to speak on the same issues that had inspired the Peoples Temple, makes no official statement, and releases no writings about the Peoples Temple, either supporting or condemning them. Huey Newton, however, gives an interview⁵⁶ in 1979 to Shiva Naipaul for his book *Journey to Nowhere*. The interview focuses on Newton’s concept of Revolutionary Suicide, and attempts to get Newton’s view of if what happened in Jonestown was a reasonable representation of this. This question gets a great deal of play in writing on Jonestown, and opinions vary.⁵⁷ Newton says that Jones did not understand, and that “I don’t think my meaning ever properly got through to Jim Jones...he took the idea and used it in his own way, in a way I didn’t intend at all.”⁵⁸ He says that the panthers had never supported the Peoples Temple in any way other than moral support,⁵⁹ and even that he only admits begrudgingly.

But this interview gives more context that shows just how much the black rights movement had changed between the 60s and 1978. He talks about how the current state of affairs represented “only a

⁵³ Sawyer, *The Church in Peoples Temple*, 186

⁵⁴ Sawyer, *The Church in Peoples Temple*, 186

⁵⁵ Sawyer, *The Church in Peoples Temple*, 187

⁵⁶ So far as I am aware, the only one on the subject

⁵⁷ For example Reiterman in Raven disagrees with this as fair, Naipaul considers it a reasonable derivation, the alternative considerations of Jonestown FAQ calls it a perversion, Harris and Neuman tentatively agree...

⁵⁸ Shiva Naipaul, *Journey to Nowhere* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981), 287-288

⁵⁹ Naipaul, *Journey to Nowhere*, 285

shadow of the enthusiasm that existed in the sixties.”⁶⁰ He also discusses all the tactics used by the government to imprison, inconvenience and kill those who were active in the movement, including his own tax evasion suit.⁶¹ Newton has lost much of his revolutionary fire. The same man who wrote the book *To die for the People*, in which he describes taking shotguns to the airport and being willing to kill anyone in there who interfered with him, says that the lesson he learned from the Peoples Temple is that “we have to be more careful about the sorts of people and organizations we get involved with in the future... I suppose we’ll have to move more slowly.”⁶² And in terms of what they were fighting for he said “I don’t believe in utopias... I...I think that distribution should be more even. I am not a separatist. I am not a racist...”⁶³

This speaks to how much the black rights movement had changed between the 60s and 70s. The revolutionary fervor that led to marching in the streets was gone. Those activists who remained focused on gaining legitimate political power through civic elections, but an overall sense that the battle simple could not be won was pervasive. If Jones had led the Peoples Temple to mass suicide in 1968 instead of 1978 it might have been different, but by 1978, the kind of armed revolutionary that Jones was attempting to appeal to simply did not exist anymore. Jones was attempting to engage in mythmaking for a community which was no longer around to hear his message.

Christian/nonchristian

⁶⁰ Naipaul, *Journey to Nowhere*, 280

⁶¹ Naipaul, *Journey to Nowhere*, 280. This tax evasion suit is eventually dropped when Newton disbands the last program that the Black Panthers were operating, the free breakfast program. The release of more COINTELPRO documentation years later show the full extent of how heavily the government was working against these groups. Newton’s story in these declining years clearly illustrates the interference of the US government in the Black Rights movement, and interested parties can look at the FBI Archives on Huey P Newton, which are publically available as a result of FOIA requests.

⁶² Naipaul, *Journey to Nowhere*, 289

⁶³ Naipaul, *Journey to Nowhere*, 289

The Peoples Temple was considered Christian for years without controversy and “throughout its entire history, Peoples Temple was commonly understood to be a Christian organization. Certainly in San Francisco, it was regarded as church.”⁶⁴ While there was some consideration as to whether it would be considered a black church or not, until at least the mid 1970s calling the Peoples Temple a church was banal. In 1974 the Sacramento Bee called the Peoples Temple “Probably the largest protestant congregation in Northern California.”⁶⁵ J Alfred Smith, who was a pastor in the bay area in the same era as Jones describes Jones as “speaking with the thunder of the historical prophetic line of the black church.”⁶⁶ A letter from US Senator Hubert M Humphry says that “the work of Reverend Jones and his congregation is testimony to the positive and truly Christian approach to dealing with the myriad problems confronting our society today.”⁶⁷ While many of the Peoples Temple programs had socialist overtones they were presented in the context of Christian charity. Because of this the organization enjoyed popular support as a Christian organization from local peers, as well as larger government entities. Lieutenant Governor of California Dymally spoke about it saying “This is what church ought to be about: community and a concern for social justice. Peoples Temple... is a real church.”⁶⁸

Because the acts of the mass suicide were so contradictory to dominant Christian values, the Peoples Temple had to be understood differently by those who has previously called them Christian. To handle this problem, the Peoples Temple was politicized and de-religionized, it was branded a cult. Cult discourse grew out of the anticult movement of the late 60s and 70s. This was a movement that focused on ‘brainwashing’, often linked with communism.⁶⁹ This produced the idea of the ‘cult personality’ that came to prominence in the late 1970s, to present members of these movements as not

⁶⁴ Sawyer, *The Church in Peoples Temple*, 167

⁶⁵ Smith, *The Devil in Mr. Jones*, 107

⁶⁶ J. Alfred Smith, “Breaking the Silence,” in *Peoples Temple and Black Religion in America*, eds. Rebecca Moore, Anthony B. Pinn,, and Mary R. Sawyer (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 142

⁶⁷ Jonestown, 247, 66

⁶⁸ Sawyer, *The Church in Peoples Temple*, 168.

⁶⁹ David Chidester, *Salvation and Suicide* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 29

being in full possession of their faculties.⁷⁰ The use of the term 'cult' allowed for psychological distancing, and supporting an idea of cult madness as 'other' from reasonable, rational people.⁷¹

Members of the Peoples Temple are depicted as mindless zombies and are dehumanized, as though they had their agency as individuals taken away.

Usage of the term cult allowed people to "segregate these uncivil phenomena from religion."⁷² Groups being called cult was general a "stigmatic label for countercultural religious groups"⁷³ which could be used to strip these movements of legitimacy. For the Peoples Temple in particular, most efforts to declare them a cult was not after the mass suicide but by "Active opponents organized as the Concerned Relatives."⁷⁴ Being declared a cult stripped the Peoples Temple of the protection it had enjoyed earlier that meant their social activities were seen as Christian charity. Having lost their authenticity, their charity was perceived as unwholesome communist activities, much like Black Panther charity had been.

Defining the Peoples Temple as a cult also impacted black churches in the area who had been the Peoples Temple's closest allies. There was concern that "members of the public would equate Peoples Temple with the Black Church, and that if black churches were seen as cults they might lose their tax-exempt status."⁷⁵ This sentiment would have made life much harder for those black churches who were closest to the Peoples Temple, who were the poor, socially active churches who very rarely had much money. Even if groups did identify with Peoples Temple, the mass suicide made that a very

⁷⁰ Chidester, *Salvation and Suicide*, 30 Much of the focus on the Peoples Temple as a cult came from critics of the Peoples Temple from a group known as The Concerned Relatives, made of former members and families of members of the church. They did much of the work to lobby politicians to investigate the Peoples Temple, and introduced the idea of the Peoples Temple as a cult.

⁷¹ Chidester, *Salvation and Suicide*, 28

⁷² Smith, *The Devil in Mr. Jones*, 110

⁷³ John R. Hall, "The Apocalypse at Jonestown" in *Apocalypse Observed: Religious Movements and Violence in North America, Europe, and Japan* (London: Routledge, 2000), 45

⁷⁴ Hall, *The Apocalypse at Jonestown*, 46

⁷⁵ Sawyer, *The Church in Peoples Temple*, 186

risky stance for both public perception as well as possibly financially. It's difficult to tell what sentiment was like on the ground, but the enormous cost of affiliating with the Peoples Temple meant that no black churches in the area stepped forward to claim the Peoples Temple dead. The cost of identifying with the movement became much too high, and had very little value.

One important side effect of the Peoples Temple being considered a cult rather than real religion was that Peoples Temple tradition on how their bodies were handled was not considered. Decisions on how the bodies get handled are made by the Guyana Emergency Committee, composed of members from "the San Francisco council of churches, Archdiocese of the Roman Catholic Church, and Board of Rabbis"⁷⁶ and the memorial ritual services performed by protestant, Catholic, and Jewish clergy.⁷⁷ While they did not have an established plan for the bodies from the mass suicide,⁷⁸ the Peoples Temple had performed many funerals. From this there were many potential responses to understand what those individuals would have wanted – Peoples Temple members who had not died in Guyana like Michael Prokes, Church leaders who had worked closely with the community while in California, examples taken from the Peoples Temple's extensive resources. Instead, by being declared a cult their idea of proper religious practice was illegitimate, and the interfaith committee that was formed to represent 'real' religion stepped in to make decisions that represented their best interests. By going to this non-denominational committee, the Peoples Temple was placed in the category of non-religious, so their funerary practices were able to be ignored. Their identity as religious was eliminated, their actual religious beliefs were made inconsequential. The decision for burial instead of cremation was justified on the basis of "traditional preference for earth burial among the black religious community."⁷⁹ The Jonestown dead lost their identity as Christian, and because the community that they had most likely

⁷⁶ David Chidester, "Rituals of Exclusion and the Jonestown Dead", *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Volume 56 issue 4, November 1988, 692

⁷⁷ Chidester, *Rituals of Exclusion*, 695

⁷⁸ If they did and I have managed to look at this for years and miss it, I will be absolutely furious with myself

⁷⁹ Chidester, *Rituals of Exclusion*, 693

believed would speak for them would not, this part of their identity was ignored as well. They were so dehumanized that the actual ritual of the funeral no longer mattered, just the disposal of the bodies.

This was not the only Christian response. Another common response from outside the black community was to present Jim Jones as either literally or figuratively influenced by the devil. Shortly after the mass suicides, pastor Billy Graham, an evangelical pastor who Jones despised,⁸⁰ wrote a response designed to affirm a traditional Christian identity. This response is structured in a way to appeal to Christians of varying levels of devotion.

Graham is unequivocal in calling the Peoples Temple unchristian, saying “one may speak of the Jones situation of that of a cult, but it would be a sad mistake to identify it in any way with Christianity.”⁸¹ While he acknowledges that Jones had a “religious background”, his church had “no relationship to the views and teachings of any legitimate form of historic Christianity.”⁸² This rooting in the idea of a historic Christianity is a push towards a more conservative religion, and an effort to delegitimize those churches that were more socially active. He also speaks to the perils of “such tremendous spiritual experimentation,” and how “in that search for god it is all too easy to blunder into the arms of Satan instead.”⁸³ The message here is that these new, socially active churches were spiritually dangerous, and that to be a true Christian, one should return to more traditional Christian denominations.⁸⁴ This attempt at constructing Christian identity is an attempt to reclaim to their ranks some progressive members who may have ‘lost their way’ in being affiliated with more liberal or politically active churches or groups.

⁸⁰ Recording Q1019 for example,

⁸¹ Billy Graham, “On Satan and Jonestown,” *New York Times*, December 5th, 1978. Accessed online at <https://www.nytimes.com/books/97/07/06/reviews/graham-singapore.html>

⁸² Billy Graham, *On Satan and Jonestown*

⁸³ Billy Graham, *On Satan and Jonestown*

⁸⁴ There is also probably a racial element here.

For more conservative Christians who were looking for an explanation of these events, this same account gives a fire and brimstone explanation of how Satan is at work.⁸⁵ Graham explains Jones saying that “the bible is full of warnings about false prophets and false messiahs. These satanically inspired people have appeared in almost every generation of history.”⁸⁶ This gives precedent and scriptural explanation for what happened. Graham’s line about blundering into the arms of Satan is interpreted metaphorically for the more liberal, and literally for the more conservative. He also lists various crimes and deceptions that Jones committed, as well as saying that Satan is at work in the hearts of millions of people. This message to his followers is an attempt to present an image of the outside world as dangerous – Satan is out there, and these acts have happened throughout history and will happen again. A strong Christian identity, under the guidance of Graham, is presented as the only way to be sure to stay safe.

Not only were Jones’s attempts at mythmaking unsuccessful to a Christian audience, which is not entirely surprising given the nature of his message, the Peoples Temple lost its identity as a religious movement. The church community revoked the status of Christian from the Peoples Temple, and instead labelled them a cult. The handling of the bodies then passed from being a religious task to a political one, where decisions were made by a government committee, rather than their known religious beliefs. Because they were declared a cult, this meant that the beliefs of the Peoples Temple moved from historical fact to fable. Because they were seen as lunatics or brainwashed, there was no need to engage with the ideas of the Peoples Temple, and their claims lost all truth value. The mass suicide became a meaningless tragedy, and the attempt to perform mythmaking by revolutionary suicide instead found itself as a fable. By having members declared cultists and brainwashed or insane, not only

⁸⁵ Fair play to Graham, this response really does a solid job at playing to two pretty different crowds in a way that alienates neither.

⁸⁶ Billy Graham, *On Satan and Jonestown*

did the idea of revolutionary suicide lose credibility an authority, they lost access to being considered a truth claim. If those who had committed mass suicide were not mentally sound, then those who had died could not truthfully claim it was an act of revolutionary suicide, instead they had died for something that nobody believed – a fable.

American/un-American

Prior to Guyana, Jones is seen as a patriotic American. Jones receives a number of humanitarian awards, as well as taking on official civic roles like being chairman of the San Francisco housing authority.⁸⁷ He also becomes involved in politics, including backing San Francisco mayor and vice presidential candidate Walter Mondale. This leads to him meeting, and apparently quite impressing, first lady Rosalynn Carter.⁸⁸ Jones receives correspondence from a number of important political figures, including staff assistant to the president Noble M Melencamp, Senator Hubert M Humphrey, and first lady Rosalynn Carter,⁸⁹ all of which praise Jones or his ministry. He also wins a number of prestigious awards like humanitarian of the year,⁹⁰ which bolter his role as a pillar of the community.

Popular support begins to wane before Peoples Temple goes to Guyana. This is in response to a variety of acts deemed un-American. A number of crimes against the state are alleged, as well as manipulation of individuals in a way that interfered with democratic process. Accusations of cult activity carry with them the stigma of communism, which in the context of the cold war was considered extremely un-American. Fleeing the country only increases suspicion and hostility on this front. The

⁸⁷ Smith, *The Devil in Mr. Jones*, 106-107

⁸⁸ David Conn, *Jonestown: The Cult that Never Went Away*, October 2014, accessed at http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=61463

⁸⁹ Various letters are in *Jonestown*, 247. The three mentioned are at pages 66, 67 and 49 but other examples abound

⁹⁰ Smith, *The Devil in Mr. Jones*, 106

events of November 18th are especially aberrant from American identity. Not only are innocent children killed, he is also responsible for the cold blooded murder of a democratically elected representative.

At a presidential news conference on November 30th, 1978, a reporter⁹¹ questioned President Carter about the events of Jonestown, asking if he thought “the nature of the cult says anything about America? And secondly, what can the Government do to avoid future Jonestowns?”⁹² Carter’s response opens with him explicitly rejecting the Peoples Temple, saying “Obviously I don’t think that the Jonestown cult was typical in any way of America.”⁹³ Carter’s response then shows the significance of being considered a religion in America. He emphasises how it is unconstitutional to issue laws based on religious belief unless those groups are violating federal law, but then explains how information on brainwashing in the Peoples Temple was not known, so it could not be adequately responded to. The conclusion that Carter comes to is that “I don’t think we ought to have an overreaction because of the Jonestown tragedy by injecting government into trying to control people’s religious beliefs. And I believe that we also don’t need to deplore on a nationwide basis the fact that the Jonestown cult, so-called, was typical of America, because it’s not.”⁹⁴ Carter’s statement explicitly puts Jones and his church as outsiders to America, despite the fact that under a year ago Jones had been at an event with his wife and vice president. The context had shifted, and members of the Peoples Temple were now anomalous, and could no longer identified as American.

The mass suicide, and the events leading up to it, had stripped Jones of all his allies. While these various groups had all at one point or another considered Jones a valid and even praiseworthy member, these groups all changed how they perceived the Peoples Temple, and stopped identifying with them.

⁹¹ Who I would send a bushel of roses if I could find his name, unfortunately the names of the reporters are not recorded.

⁹² Jimmy Carter, The President’s News Conference, November 30, 1978, archived at <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=30222>

⁹³ Jimmy Carter, The President’s News Conference

⁹⁴ Jimmy Carter, The President’s News Conference

Jones's attempt at mythmaking through a final grand act failed, because those who he thought would identify with him and follow through on his act of mythmaking had instead abandoned him. While Jones was unsuccessful in his aims, the framework still serves to show how Jones would have thought his actions would have been perceived by those he thought were his allies. In the end, the mythmaking that won out was that the Peoples Temple was a cult, and it was extremely successful. The Peoples Temple were made unaffiliated from all the groups that had previously associated with them – black, Christian, American – to the point that they were dehumanized. They were presented as outsiders to the extent that there was no longer any concern for a funeral, and their bodies were something to be disposed of, rather than taken care of.

Chapter Three – Disgust

Smith's seminal *The Devil in Mr. Jones* describes the media coverage of Jonestown saying that

The press, by and large, featured the pornography of Jonestown – the initial focus on the daily revisions of the body count, the details on the condition of the corpses. Then, as more “background” information became available, space was taken over by lurid details of beatings, sexual humiliations, and public acts of perversion.... Almost no attempt was made to gain any interpretative framework.¹

This is, by and large, an accurate summary of the media coverage. Smith indicates that this is problematic because while the media was supposed to be explaining and contextualizing events, instead the coverage focused on sensationalizing the events. Most of the coverage focused on elements that would elicit the emotion of disgust from the audience. In addition, Smith notes that many news outlets gave disproportionate space to religious leaders,² who would use that space to explain why the Peoples Temple were not Christians, and often suggest that they were actually motivated by the devil. Overall, the news coverage presented those who had died as disgusting, insane, and evil, instead of attempting to present an impartial and explanatory account.

Part of the reason for this is the ease with which humans experience disgust. Disgust as an emotion is a powerful motivator of exclusion, and scholars like Daniel Kelly and Rozin et al. argue that while disgust was originally a response to primarily oral physical dangers like disease and parasites, it was evolutionarily co-opted to be a response to social and moral hazards as well. The Jonestown bodies were centered in a perfect storm of physical and moral hazard, and coverage of the bodies reflected this. The bodies themselves were physically disgusting, not just by being bodies but by being rotten from their being abandoned in the rainforest. Additionally, many accounts of the Peoples Temple that were available from defectors made explicit many moral hazards as well – deviant sexuality, usage of unclean things, and being outsiders to established communities. The physically rotten became the

¹ Jonathan Z Smith, “The Devil in Mr. Jones” in *Imagining Religion* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), 109

² Smith, *The Devil in Mr. Jones*, 110

morally rotten. These accounts all played on innate instincts that were likely not even known to the authors telling the story or the audience demanding more, making the accounts focus on the Peoples Temple dead being disgusting, impure, and eventually, inhuman.

Disgust is not the only emotion at play with the Jonestown dead. Anxiety, fear, anger and a variety of other emotions were at play as well. Disgust was chosen as the focus for several reasons. First, because of the strong biological drive of disgust, it influences and leads to other emotions. While many people are afraid of the Jonestown dead, disgust is a part of that fear. Secondly, the role of disgust as shared signaling of danger is present in many accounts of the Jonestown dead. Depictions of the dead often focus on these elements, and better understanding disgust will give insight into why. Finally, in many ways disgust is the enduring legacy of Jonestown. The image of Jonestown which has survived for most does not deal with black rights or religion, what has survived are images of death, decay, and insanity. Better understanding disgust works to explain why that is what has endured.

Moral confusion

The original, and simplest examples of disgust stem from its evolutionary roots in disease and parasite avoidance. Several different ideas of what basic universal motivators of disgust are, including “feces, vomit, blood, urine, and sexual fluids... equally plausible as universals are corpses and signs of organic decay.”³ Among these, “contact with death and corpses is a particularly potent elicitor of disgust.”⁴ These signals of disgust are presented as being evolutionary adaptations, since all of these things are potential health hazards. This reaction of disgust as a rejection of something as potentially harmful evolved not only in response to tangible physical hazards, but to social ones as well.⁵ Disgust

³ Daniel Kelly, *Yuck! The Nature and Moral Significance of Disgust* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2011), 28

⁴ Paul Rozin, Jonathan Haidt, and Clark R. McCauley, “Disgust” in *Handbook of Emotions, Third Edition*, eds. Michael Lewis, Jeannette M. Haviland-Jones and Lisa Feldman (New York: Guilford Press, 2008), 761

⁵ For a discussion of if this was an adaptation for survival, or an unintended side effect you can see a variety of places included Kelly, chapter 5. The argument contained in this chapter is unaffected by either being the case.

“does not sit easily on either side of the traditional nature-nurture divide,”⁶ being a combination of ‘universal’ disgust – bodies, blood etc. - and learned disgust that comes from a community – gay marriage, socialism etc. New indicators of disgust that are not “innately specified”⁷ are learned either by personal traumatic experience, or by learning from social cues from the community.

The function of disgust is the same in either case. It is designed to “pick up on relevant cues and patterns from the surrounding environment, social or otherwise, and infer from them new contents for the disgust database.”⁸ Once something has been added to the ‘disgust database,’ it is treated the same as all other disgusting things, regardless of source. Thus if someone has an innate disgust with blood and a learned disgust with homosexuality from a community, the experience of either is largely the same, because “regardless of what triggers disgust on any particular occasion... the production of one element of the cluster is regularly accompanied by the production of the others.”⁹ In the case of the Jonestown bodies there were so many overlapping potential triggers of disgust as a category that for any individual it was nearly impossible not to be disgusted. This could come from the bodies themselves, by race, by homosexuality, by socialism, or any of a dozen other characteristics. Because of this a discourse that presented the Peoples Temple as disgusting would have not only been natural for any writer, it also would have had universal appeal.

Encounters with the disgusting perceived to bring contamination. While it “may have been shaped as an adaption for disease avoidance... it operates largely independently of conscious beliefs about disease.”¹⁰ Instead it acts like magical thinking, “once in contact always in contact.”¹¹ This understanding of disgust marks something as tainted by elicitors of disgust in a very broad way, and puts

⁶ Kelly, *Yuck!*, 11

⁷ Kelly, *Yuck!*, 36-37

⁸ Kelly, *Yuck!*, 38

⁹ Kelly, *Yuck!*, 40

¹⁰ Rozin, Haidt and McCauley, *Disgust*, 760

¹¹ Rozin, Haidt and McCauley, *Disgust*, 760

complicated or problematic entities like the Jonestown bodies under the simple banner of “disgusting”. With the expansion of the category of disgust from physical hazards to social hazards, “a mechanism for avoiding harm to the body became a mechanism for avoiding harm to the soul.”¹² These social orders which can be violated are called ‘purity norms’, where “transgressions are cast as crimes against nature or violations of the natural order”¹³ and “transgressors are considered morally tainted, spiritually polluted or unnatural.”¹⁴ The Jonestown bodies, being both universally disgusting by being decaying corpses and morally tainted by many of their controversial values, meant that the strong biological reaction of disgust was a typical response to coverage of Jonestown. Additionally, the way that contamination was seen as tainting the whole of anything it touched, and how physical and moral hazard from disgust were so closely linked meant that the aspects of Jonestown that were seen as positive by some like racial and social equality were tainted by the physical contamination of the corpses, and thus the Peoples Temple as a whole was treated as disgusting. The disgust was such a strong reaction that it overwhelmed any positive aspects. This could be seen as a failure of ‘framing,’ which is “the strategy that keeps potential contamination out of consideration... when we do not think of the people in the kitchen who prepare our food in the restaurant, or the animal that was the source of our meat... the framing solution fails when the source of contamination is too salient.”¹⁵ The extremely high profile nature of the mass suicide meant that it became near impossible to look at the virtues that they had espoused outside the context of a pile of rotting corpses. It had the physical element of the bodies, the cultural and social anxieties from socialist and racial elements, deviant sexuality, and insanity

¹² Rozin, Haidt and McCauley, *Disgust*, 771

¹³ Kelly, *Yuck!*, 145. This specific quote is truncated from a section which claims that these norms are less present in ‘more secular cultures’. It indicates that they are none the less present so I don’t engage with this notion here, but the ‘secular’ is used in this context is fairly problematic.

¹⁴ Kelly, *Yuck!*, 145

¹⁵ Rozin, Haidt and McCauley, *Disgust*, 760-761

(especially focused on Jones). Whether it was intentional or not on the part of the media, information about the events was primarily done through the lens of disgust.

Impure

This idea of disgusting objects retaining this characteristic and passing it along to others is often presented as a dichotomy between the categories of pure and impure, with influential works on this distinction like Douglas's *Purity and Danger*. Actions focused around purity are "designed to keep the soul clean and unpolluted."¹⁶ A failure to keep an individual or object in a state of purity is often easily done, because "it is far easier for something that is pure to become contaminated than it is to purify something that is already contaminated."¹⁷ Purity is fragile, a state that is easily lost which needs to be protected. Contamination can be done in several ways, but "the most common routes are via physical contact, both real and merely perceived, or via a known history of physical contact or close physical proximity."¹⁸ This fear of contagion is an ingrained response, with individuals often experiencing a reaction of fear of contamination from items perceived as disgusting which are demonstrably clean. For example, a sterilized cockroach is still perceived as disgusting and an agent of contagion, even when test subjects are explicitly aware of there being no actual danger,¹⁹ and they are often unable to articulate why. Once an object is classified as disgusting, "it is cognized as having the ability to infect other items with its offensiveness; it can pass on its disgustingness and contaminate otherwise pure and undisgusting entities."²⁰ An object that is perceived to be contaminated is considered dangerous not just because of its own disgustingness, but because of its potential to defile other pure individuals and objects.

¹⁶ Kelly, *Yuck!*, 121

¹⁷ Kelly, *Yuck!*, 20

¹⁸ Kelly, *Yuck!*, 19

¹⁹ Kelly, *Yuck!*, 19

²⁰ Kelly, *Yuck!*, 19

This treatment of something that is explicitly known as being safe as still potentially harmful shows how sensitive contamination sensitivity can be. For an object to be treated as impure “there need not be any perceptible physical residue left by the source entity on the contaminated, receiving entity in order for an agent to find, and continue to consider, the receiving entity disgusting.”²¹ This contamination sensitivity is “part of the disgust response... [where] the properties of offensiveness and contamination potency are projected onto whatever elicits it.”²² Disgust as a reaction to the impure is “the guardian of the sanctity of the soul as well as the purity of the body,”²³ being responsible for both physical harms as well as moral hazards. Those who violate purity norms are seen as “defiling their selves or their very souls,”²⁴ and those who are impure morally are treated the same as those who are physically impure, as a potential source of contagion.

The Jonestown dead were treated as impure and potentially a source of contagion, with initial responses to the dead attempting to leave the dead in Guyana, to avoid bringing the impure back into the United States. The Guyanese government, for their part, sought to force the US government to take responsibility for the same reason. The initial government plans to cremate the bodies and have them buried at sea followed a similar logic, to keep the contaminated entity out of the United States. This continued with the dead being pushed outside as much as possible with each step. Once in the United States, the citizens of Delaware pushed the dead away to the coast in California. Once in California, they were pushed to the community of Oakland, which was segregated from the decision makers in San Francisco. Once a cemetery was found, they were physically placed in a corner, away from visibility, and in a place that would not need to be passed by to reach any of the other graves in the cemetery.

²¹ Kelly, *Yuck!*, 19

²² Kelly, *Yuck!*, 21

²³ Rozin, Haidt and McCauley, *Disgust*, 762

²⁴ Kelly, *Yuck!*, 145

This understanding of the bodies as impure and dangerous is made explicit through several interviews with Dr. Tierkel, a Delaware public health official who was interviewed repeatedly about the bodies. The general citizenry was extremely concerned about the presence of the bodies in Delaware, and Tierkel made a statement that “there was no danger to the workers or local residents of diseases spreading from the bodies... he made an inspection after a complaint from a local woman. But he said her fears had been “based on ignorance” “.²⁵ While the claim is that the fears were based on ignorance, it is reflective of this deeper feeling of disgust from impure objects that are understood to not be actually physically hazardous. The idea of the Jonestown bodies as being especially impure, as a combination of the decay of the bodies and the special moral hazard they represented is reflected in another interview where he indicates “morticians are using chemicals that were described by Dr. Tierkel as “very much stronger than ordinary embalming fluid” “.²⁶ The bodies were considered to be especially dangerous, especially impure, thus requiring additional measures of protection due to their overwhelming impurity. Even then, he indicated “we’re still getting calls about the sanitary conditions... a lot of people just don’t seem to believe the assurance.”²⁷ This shows the extent of contagion sensitivity. Even when explicitly confirmed by authority figures that there is no danger, the fear of contagion still remains despite it being irrational.

This fear of contagion was not limited to concerns about the bodies themselves, but also the handling of anything that had come into contact with the dead. While the bodies were being handled in Dover “the surgical gowns and gloves worn by workers were burned at the end of the day.”²⁸ Rather than deal with any attempt at cleaning or purifying items that had come into contact with the dead,

²⁵ “All Cult Bodies Back in US; Airlift Ends”, Courier Express, November 28, 1978

²⁶ Lawrence K. Altman, “Bodies said to pose no risk to the public”, New York Times A 17, Nov 28, 1978 Chidester, Rituals of exclusion, 686, gives a different account which indicates an interview said they used 10 times the standard amount of embalming chemicals

²⁷ Lawrence K. Altman, “Bodies said to pose no risk to the public”, New York Times A 17, November 28, 1978

²⁸ Lawrence K. Altman, “Bodies said to pose no risk to the public”, New York Times A 17, November 28, 1978

instead the primal destruction of fire is used. Similarly, when the troops who were in Guyana to retrieve the dead were leaving, the final act was that they “burned uniforms, boots, tents, and anything else that might have been contaminated by the decaying bodies.”²⁹ Because the bodies were seen as so profoundly tainted and impure, no attempt was made to salvage any items that had been anywhere near the bodies. Similar concerns were raised once it was known that refrigerated trailers had been leased to hold bodies due to a lack of available storage in Dover AFB. Objections were raised over the fact that “the trailor[sic] trucks are of the type used to haul meat and frozen foods to supermarkets.”³⁰ The concern about residual taint from the bodies here focused on the idea of potential taint passing on to food which would be consumed, the contagion passing from the bodies, to the trailer, to the food, to the individual. Despite the extreme unlikelihood of there actual being any actual taint, the intangible characteristics of impurity meant that the taint of impurity was passed along each stage, despite the lack of actual physical danger³¹.

Shared signal of danger

Part of the reason that media coverage was so focused on disgust is that “the recognition of emotions – appears to be largely automatic and difficult, if not impossible, to completely stop.”³² This is emphasized in disgust by its roots as a signaling mechanism to show danger. Because of these strong evolutionary roots, recognizing disgust “often involves the extra step of becoming disgusted oneself,”³³ going back to its original purpose as a signaling device to avoid harm to the body and the community.

²⁹ “Last Bodies of Mass Suicide Return to US”, LA Times, November 27 1978. They also apparently got outrageously drunk, as described in Brailey, *Ghosts of November*, Chapter 11

³⁰ Lawrence K. Altman, “Bodies said to pose no risk to the public”, New York Times A 17, November 28, 1978

³¹ This is by no means unique to Jonestown. A similar case study exists in James L. Watson’s “Funeral Specialists in Cantonese Society: Pollution, Performance, and Social Hierarchy” which examines how the idea of death pollution or ‘killing airs’ makes those who handle the dead ‘in but not of’ the community because they are tainted by handling bodies.

³² Kelly, *Yuck!*, 62

³³ Kelly, *Yuck!*, 66

Whether conscious or not, the bodies were seen by those who dealt with them as physically and spiritually dangerous, and this was mirrored in the expressions and writings of media that covered the bodies. This mirroring of disgust, and public displays of disgust, were most apparent in concerns that were raised about accepting the dead into a community. This comes from the origins of disgust not being just “information about the internal state of the individual sender... but information about the surrounding physical environment as well.”³⁴ If individuals did not express disgust, the concern was that outsiders would see that community as not treating the bodies as impure, and accepting their behavior as appropriate.

The bodies were publically opposed every step of the way as a marker to outside communities that they were not accepted by where they were. The Delaware government was very explicit that they would only accept the bodies into the dover air force base on condition that they not be buried in Delaware.³⁵ Initial attempts were made to diffuse the problem of having a mass grave by having internments in multiple locations “to minimize the notoriety.”³⁶ One graveyard that was in discussion to have the bodies buried there pulled out when the county objected out of concerns that it would become a cult shrine.³⁷ Another graveyard was vandalized to read “No Jonestown Here.”³⁸ This was an act of vandalism done not because the space was not sacred, but rather because it was too sacred to be defiled by the disgusting Jonestown dead. Concerns were raised about the burial site becoming “a grisly tourist attraction.”³⁹ The phrasing varied, but the message was always the same. Objections to the bodies coming to a community often focused on those undesirables who would come after, who would see that community as accepting of the deviant behavior. All of these objections to burial in the

³⁴ Kelly, *Yuck!*, 82

³⁵ Chapter one of this thesis, or Chidester, *Rituals of Exclusion*, 686

³⁶ Ellen Hume, “U.S. to Release Bodies of Cult Victims”, *Los Angeles Times*, December 9, 1978

³⁷ “Peoples Temple”, *ABC News*, May 1st, 1979

³⁸ “Peoples Temple”, *ABC News*, May 1st, 1979

³⁹ Ellen Hume, “U.S. to Release Bodies of Cult Victims”, *Los Angeles Times*, December 9, 1978

community emphasized how the bodies would not be accepted because they were deviant, and they did not want others who thought the same way to see their communities as accepting of that type of behavior.

Anxiety about Death

The bodies also evoked concern in communities because of the “strong connection between disgust and fear of death.”⁴⁰ This is especially pronounced in disgust coming from decay, especially odors from decay, which is very closely related to disgust.⁴¹ Death and visible signs of death in the form of ‘envelope violations’, being visible breaks of the outer skin through trauma or decay, “are disgusting because they are uncomfortable reminders of our animal vulnerability.”⁴² Correspondingly, coverage focused on the disgusting state of the bodies not just as a shared symbol of the danger posed by the corpses, but also as an expression of anxiety about death.

Coverage of the corpses often included grisly details, talking about how “in the heat there would probably be some decomposition and probably gases,”⁴³ or how the bodies “have been exposed for more than 72 hours of sun, torrential rains and insects.”⁴⁴ Those who worked with the bodies were similarly asked about gritty details, giving accounts of how the odor of death stayed with them even once they left the building,⁴⁵ and giving sensationalized reports like

“the workers manning the mortuary in shifts found some of the bodies so decomposed that the hands lacked the firmness to make fingerprints. In that case, a worker has to remove the upper layer of skin from each finger, slip it onto his own hands over rubber gloves and make the inked impression”⁴⁶

⁴⁰ Rozin, Haidt and McCauley, *Disgust*, 761

⁴¹ Rozin, Haidt and McCauley, *Disgust*, 761

⁴² Rozin, Haidt and McCauley, *Disgust*, 761

⁴³ “Airlift of Suicide Victims Begins”, Los Angeles Herald Examiner, November 24, 1978

⁴⁴ “U.S. Asked to Remove Bodies”, The Courier Express, November 29, 1978

⁴⁵ Peter H. King, “Inside a Mortuary for Guyana’s Dead”, San Francisco Sunday Examiner, November 26, 1978

⁴⁶ Alice Bonner, “Air Base Mortuary is Already Short of Room”, Washington Post, November 28, 1978

As well as talking about the seemingly impossible scale of the number of bodies, saying “bodies are stashed everywhere, 100 in the refrigeration room of the base mortuary; hundreds more in five refrigeration trailers... still more in an old hangar...”⁴⁷

These accounts emphasize the anxiety raised by the corpses. The disgust and decay emphasized to give the skin-crawling feeling of horror, the accounts depicting the pile of corpses as somehow endless. These accounts play to the animal fear of death, and the ability to overcome it, with statements like “through the insanity of it all, we should at least show the world that the society that created Jim Jones is still civilized enough to bury its own dead.”⁴⁸ But many reports and editorials show the writer struggling to come to terms with the bodies, and the anxiety over death that they represent. They end with long strings of rhetorical questions, or expressions of anxiety: “What does it all mean? That society is becoming more violent?”⁴⁹ “What has come out of Guyana to date is a torrent of questions, but only a trickle of answers. My children, of grade-school age, have been talking among their classmates about the stacks of bodies... as an adult, I now[sic] that is too much to think about for too long.”⁵⁰ The focus on the disgusting nature of the bodies causes an anxiety about death in general, and individual mortality.

Sex and Socialism

The bodies nature as disgusting was also emphasized by depictions of Jones as a sexual deviant. This was partially from commercial interest – as the old adage goes, sex sells, but it also represents another category that has powerful elicitors of disgust⁵¹. Whether a sexual act is deviant or not depends on the cultural context,⁵² but the depiction of Jones as a sexual deviant focused mostly on Jones’s

⁴⁷ Alice Bonner, “Air Base Mortuary is Already Short of Room”, Washington Post, November 28, 1978

⁴⁸ Sidney Jones, “Bringing the Bodies Back Home”, The Tribune, November 28, 1978

⁴⁹ “Deaths that make no sense”, The Oakland Tribune, November 28, 1978

⁵⁰ Colman McCarthy, “A Horror that Defies Explanation”, The Oakland Tribune, November 28, 1978

⁵¹ Kelly, *Yuck!*, 31

⁵² Kelly, *Yuck!*, 121

lasciviousness and allegations of homosexuality (or bisexuality). In the context of the United States in the 1970s, gay rights were hotly contested. San Francisco is starting to be a hub for gay rights, with Harvey Milk's campaign in the late 70s being opposed by politicians on openly homophobic campaigns.⁵³ California in particular is the centre of a number of debates, but at this time homosexuality was still being used to marginalize figures. Accusations were made about Jones alleging that the "real reason for organizing Jonestown was to capture a harem of Janes – of both sexes."⁵⁴ Similarly, Larry Layton, one of the Jonestown survivors and the only person to face charges for the deaths in Jonestown, was depicted in one report as having "Jones took both Carolyn and Karen from him after having the women watch him force Larry to submit to a homosexual act."⁵⁵ Other articles made claims about how Jones manipulated followers by making them perform deviant sexual acts, and sign confessions that they were sexual deviants.⁵⁶

This focus on deviant sexuality evoked disgust for more conservative members of society. But the way this discourse was used also sought to associate homosexuality with the People's Temple, in an attempt to marginalize the then-controversial gay rights movement. The People's Temple was being presented as disgusting, and attempts were made to associate homosexuality with the acts of the People's Temple to further stigmatize homosexuality. Depictions of homosexuality in the People's Temple are always presented as aberrant and manipulative, and homosexual acts are presented as

⁵³ Milk was assassinated on November 27th, 1978, just over a week after the Jonestown mass suicides. Because Jones had made so many allegations of 'angels' staying behind in the United States who would kill prominent political figures, there was some question at the time as to whether Milk's death was somehow linked to the People's Temple. Given Milk's relatively close relationship to the temple this seems exceptionally unlikely, however.

⁵⁴ Preston Wilcox, "Tarzan' Jones used Racism, Sexism", Washington Afro American, December 5, 1978

⁵⁵ Robert Lindsey, "Family Tragedy: Hitler's Germany to Jones' cult", New York Times A1, December 4th, 1978

⁵⁶ "Jones seen as deviate[sic] obsessed with sex", San Juan Star, November 21, 1978

submission, rather than consent. This is similar to the way homosexuality around this time was marginalized by attempts to associate it with pedophilia.⁵⁷

Socialism was depicted as dangerous in a similar way. Disgust is associated with “possessions, utensils, clothing, cars, and rooms used by unknown or undesirable persons.”⁵⁸ Accounts of the Jonestown dead emphasized how many of the difficulties in identifying bodies came from collective ownership, with the shared clothing making names on tags meaningless, or how “most of the bodies had no identification papers because the settlement operated on a barter system “so they don’t carry wallets.”⁵⁹ The reason that they are unidentified in death is socialism – private ownership would have given them names on their clothing, money would have required a wallet with identification. Once again, socialism is being linked to Jonestown in an attempt to marginalize the socialist movements of this era. This is most explicit “in a series of articles written during December 1978, [where] Michael Novak castigated socialism for producing the horror of Jonestown... Jonestown stood as a microcosmic model of the destruction of self-identity, individualism, and freedom within all socialist systems.”⁶⁰ These narratives attempted to use the created image of Jonestown that elicited disgust and the bodies it produced to depict Socialism as tainted in the same way.

Making of outgroups

All of these aspects created an image of the disgusting nature of the Peoples Temple and the Jonestown dead. This disgust allows the Peoples Temple to be seen as outsiders, because “insofar as entities are viewed as immoral are also disgusting, there is no temptation to have traffic with them.”⁶¹ The dead are isolated and excluded, and this feeling of disgust means that the dead are presented as

⁵⁷ An easily found example of these public service announcement is *Boys Beware*, a film from 1961 which showed the danger of homosexuals as child molesters.

⁵⁸ Rozin, Haidt and McCauley, *Disgust*, 762

⁵⁹ “Still the Grim Cargoes of Death are Flown Home”, Los Angeles Times, November 25, 1978

⁶⁰ David Chidester, *Salvation and Suicide* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 164

⁶¹ Rozin, Haidt and McCauley, *Disgust*, 762

outsiders to various groups,⁶² so no community will claim them. In this case, the feelings of disgust manifest “as a distancing from some object, event, or situation, and can be characterized as a rejection.”⁶³ The dead are rejected from the communities, in Guyana where they were formerly accepted, as well as from communities all across the United States who want nothing to do with the corpses. The common understanding of the value system of the Peoples Temple is presented as too distant from standard American values to understand, so no attempt is made to bridge the gap. The dead cannot speak for themselves, and the voices that are most heard speaking about them now emphasize deviant values. Disgust is one of the core motivators of “ethnocentrism, xenophobia, and prejudice,”⁶⁴ and the Jonestown dead have been cast as wholly other. The reaction of disgust that arose is a mixture of the physical concern of decay, as well as moral hazards of race, purity, sexuality and politics. All of these elements combine in ways that individuals wouldn’t fully grasp themselves to emphasize how incredibly different and deviant the Peoples Temple were, so that there would be no interest to reintegrate the dead into the community.

Having voluntarily given up their lives, which would have been perceived as a disgusting act, they would have lost their status as human, and not be required to be accorded the same respect. The decision to commit suicide in the way they did was so deviant and opposed to American values about suicide and murder that they would see “a substantive transgression of this sort not merely as an isolated transgression of a particular norm but also a repudiation of the entire tribe, what it stands for, and the set of values that bind it together.”⁶⁵ In a violation of such scale, “violators can be seen not as mere transgressors but also as threats or impostors of the worst kind. They are thus shunned and

⁶² For more details on the groups, see chapter two

⁶³ Rozin, Haidt and McCauley, *Disgust*, 758

⁶⁴ Kelly, *Yuck!*, 124

⁶⁵ Kelly, *Yuck!*, 125 Chidester makes a similar argument from a different premise in Chidester, *Rituals of Exclusion*, 683, calling them a “serious disruption of the symbolic order of American society”

worthy of disgust.”⁶⁶ This goes back to the way that Jonestown was portrayed as inauthentic by former allies discussed in chapter two. Rather than being real black rights activists, they were abandoned as deceptive and Jones as a racist. Rather than being Christians, they were rebranded as a cult.

The Peoples Temple members having committed suicide further plays into this deviation from proper behavior. Because they are seen as having broken “hygienic rules [which] govern the proper use and maintenance of the human body, and the failure to meet these culturally defined standards places a person below the level of humans.”⁶⁷ Additionally, in cases of deviance like this “an out-group member is disgusting, he or she is often not even cognized as a person”⁶⁸ because of the link between disgust and dehumanization.⁶⁹ In effect, the Jonestown dead were so disgusting that they had lost the status of human, and because of this, the regular concerns for dead bodies did not apply to them⁷⁰. When the bodies were being unloaded on first landing at Dover “after ceremoniously handling a dozen of the body containers, the volunteer crews began treating the remains more like ordinary freight.”⁷¹ The initial act of unloading them one by one gave way to moving them strapped together in groups, and instead of the mortuary van they were hauled “stack[ed] two or three deep on flatbed yellow freight haulers.”⁷² A reporter indicated that “a few volunteers have been overcome, not by emotional reaction to the mass of decaying remains, but by ‘more of a physical revulsion to the smells and sights.’”⁷³ The bodies were no longer human, they were simply objects to be dealt with. There was no longer the emotional connection from dealing with a dead human, rather just the disgust of handling something that is

⁶⁶ Kelly, *Yuck!*, 125

⁶⁷ Rozin, Haidt and McCauley, *Disgust*, 761-762

⁶⁸ Kelly, *Yuck!*, 125

⁶⁹ For a discussion of the science and neuroimaging behind this, see Kelly, *Yuck!*, 123-125

⁷⁰ This is common in many large tragedies, where massive injustices are allowed to happen by presenting the victims as inhuman. The treatment of Jews in World War 2 is an example of this, and this problem of evil is explored in depth in Bernstein’s *Radical Evil*.

⁷¹ Alice Bonner, “Air Base Mortuary is Already Short of Room”, *Washington Post* A4, November 28 1978

⁷² Alice Bonner, “Air Base Mortuary is Already Short of Room”, *Washington Post* A4, November 28 1978

⁷³ Alice Bonner, “Child Corpses Still Stir the Mortuary”, *Washington Post* A4, November 28, 1978

unclean. In seeking information attempting to identify the bodies, officials urged family members to send medical and dental records but that they “shouldn’t come to the mortuary under any circumstances.”⁷⁴ The act of seeing the dead loved one was given no value, only the mechanical act of identification. By the same token, the initial decision not to do any autopsies was done with the justification that “even if evidence of murder was found, we could not prosecute in the United States”⁷⁵ Here again is deference just to the system of law – if nothing can be prosecuted, why bother? There was no concern for understanding what had happened to those who died or giving closure to their families.

Conclusion

The Jonestown dead were seen as disgusting not just because of the physical state of their bodies, but also because of moral transgressions that they were seen as having done. These elements combined shaped public response to one of exclusion, where the Jonestown dead were seen not just as outsiders, but as transgressors against society in a way that meant incorporating them would have been dangerous. Because they were seen as so deviant as to be inhuman, there was little incentive to find them a burial plot. This sentiment of the Jonestown dead as disgusting and unwanted is what made it possible for them to languish for months in an air force base away from family members, and allowed so many to be in a mass grave which didn’t have any of the names of the dead.

⁷⁴ “Relatives Urged to send medical data, San Francisco Examiner”, November 29, 1978

⁷⁵ Lawrence K. Altman, “U.S. Plans to conduct autopsies on cult leader and six followers”, New York Times, November 30, 1978

Chapter Four – Comparing Memorials

This chapter will focus on comparing the Peoples Temple memorial which was erected in 2010 to the Vietnam Veterans memorial wall from 1982. The monuments share physical characteristics, both being lists of names carved in granite, but have more intangible similarities. Both monuments share a similar design because of the tragic and controversial circumstances that are being commemorated. Rather than a traditional monument which honors those who died, the Vietnam war and Jonestown brought about different, often contradictory feelings among various groups. The unique design of these monuments serves to create spaces where many different perspectives can co-exist. After a brief description of the memorials, theoretical material from Foote's *Shadowed Ground* will be used to look at how violent events are most often responded to by communities. Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz's "The Vietnam Veteran's Memorial: Commemorating a difficult past" will show some of the problems with building a memorial for a divisive war, and this will bring forth the commonalities between the Vietnam Wall memorial and the Jonestown memorial that is eventually built. The two monuments have a great deal of similarities, not just in their origin and the way the public perceived them, but also in how the nature of their design allowed for different perspectives to coexist in the same space.

Overview of Vietnam wall memorial

The Vietnam war is difficult to date, because there was no official declaration of war. Various dates are presented as options – The US government takes policy position that it will potentially intervene in Vietnam in 1954, the first troops are in Vietnam in 1955, the first casualties are in 1959. The end of the war comes in 1975, when president Ford says that the war in Vietnam "is finished as far as America is concerned."¹ The war had been long, bloody, and controversial. Public opinion was mixed, especially in light of the declaration of the draft. Many of those who returned thought it was an

¹"When President Ford Declared an End to the War in Vietnam", *Newsweek*, Archival materials from Newsweek, May 5, 1975, accessed at www.newsweek.com/when-president-ford-declared-end-war-vietnam-321235

illegitimate war without clear justification.² Veterans struggled on return, not only from issues concerning readjusting to civilian life, but also dealing with a public unsure about how to handle a significant military loss.³ The first official declaration of a Vietnam War veteran did not happen until 1978,⁴ and instead of having remains of a fallen soldier added to the tomb of the unknown soldier, there was an ambiguously worded plaque installed which did not mention the Vietnam War.⁵

With very little official state recognition, the initiative for a memorial instead came from the public, specifically a veteran named Jan Scruggs. Designing a monument was difficult because they had to complete “a task for which American history furnished no precedent – the task of commemorating a divisive defeat.”⁶ While the monument would pay tribute to those who fought and their “traditional virtues of courage, self-sacrifice and honor,”⁷ at the same time it would be for “past events that are less than glorious and whose memory induces controversy instead of consensus.”⁸ A design competition was held, and the winning design by Maya Lin was “two unadorned black walls, each about 250 feet in length, composed of 70 granite panels increasing in height from several inches at the end of each wall to ten feet where they come together at a 125 degree angle.”⁹ On these walls would be engraved, in chronological order, “the names of every fallen soldier, with no symbolic reference to the cause or country for which they died.”¹⁰ The monument is dedicated on November 11th, 1982, “seven years after the last American died in Vietnam.”¹¹ The monument, while initially subject to criticism, ultimately becomes well loved by the American public.

² Robin Wagner-Pacifci and Barry Schwartz, “The Vietnam Veterans Memorial: Commemorating a Difficult Past” in *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol 97 no 2 (September 1991), 378

³ Wagner-Pacifci and Schwartz, *The Vietnam Veterans Memorial*, 376

⁴ Wagner-Pacifci and Schwartz, *The Vietnam Veterans Memorial*, 385

⁵ Wagner-Pacifci and Schwartz, *The Vietnam Veterans Memorial*, 385

⁶ Wagner-Pacifci and Schwartz, *The Vietnam Veterans Memorial*, 377

⁷ Wagner-Pacifci and Schwartz, *The Vietnam Veterans Memorial*, 376

⁸ Wagner-Pacifci and Schwartz, *The Vietnam Veterans Memorial*, 376

⁹ Wagner-Pacifci and Schwartz, *The Vietnam Veterans Memorial*, 393

¹⁰ Wagner-Pacifci and Schwartz, *The Vietnam Veterans Memorial*, 400

¹¹ Wagner-Pacifci and Schwartz, *The Vietnam Veterans Memorial*, 378

Overview of Jonestown memorials

The site of the mass grave in the Evergreen cemetery in Oakland has had two memorials built, and one memorial proposed that was never installed. The first memorial installed was placed shortly after the mass suicide, at the time of the mass interment of unidentified and unclaimed bodies. The initial stone was laid in May of 1979¹² and was inscribed “in memory of the victims of the Jonestown Tragedy.” The memorial did not include any names, including those who were buried in the mass grave beneath it. Starting on November 18, 1979, and each year thereafter on the same date, a memorial service is held by Reverend Jynona Norwood¹³. Very early on, perhaps as early as 1979¹⁴, she begins fundraising in an attempt to build a memorial. She fundraises under the name of “Guyana Tribute Foundation”. This organization, however, is mostly her initiatives, and she is usually the only person named in the lawsuits¹⁵. She is also the sole individual in charge of designing her proposed monument.

The monument she proposes is “Seven 7-foot tall slabs of granite standing upright, inscribed with the names of the 917 victims. Jones’ name would not be included.”¹⁶ Her proposal is extremely ambitious, with the marker alone estimated to cost around a hundred thousand dollars, of which she

¹² Fielding M. McGeehee III, “The Campaign for the New Jonestown Memorial: A Brief History”, *Alternative Considerations of Jonestown and Peoples Temple*, January 2nd, 2016, http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=34364

¹³ McGeeHee III, *The Campaign for the New Jonestown Memorial: A Brief History*, As of the time of writing, with the most recent anniversary being in 2015, Ms Norwood has spoken at the memorial site every year.

¹⁴ Norwood herself in an email dated 2009 indicates she has been fundraising 30 years at <http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Norwood5a.pdf> An account from a donor instead gives the start date as early 1980. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/03/us/03bcjonestown.html> A news story gives the year as 1993, but that may represent the date of official registration of the group. <http://www.cnsnews.com/news/article/dispute-over-jonestown-memorial-spills-court>

¹⁵ To avoid confusion with the Guyana Emergency Relief committee and the forthcoming Jonestown Memorial Foundation, the actions of the Guyana Tribute Foundation will mostly be attributed to her and her supporters. Be advised, however, that looking for further resources on Ms Norwood or her activities may be found under the label of Guyana Tribute Foundation rather than just her name.

¹⁶ “Declaration of Ronald Haulman in Opposition to Plaintiff’s Application for Temporary Restraining order” dated May 25, 2011, accessed at <http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Norwood5a.pdf> This depiction is only given after the alternative memorial is installed, and several individuals noted that Ms Norwood was extremely tight lipped before the lawsuit about specifics of the monument’s design. While it’s clear that she did not want Jones’s name on the monument, the claim of 917 names might have been made just in response to the installed monument.

only raises thirty thousand to start her project¹⁷. Materials that come to light during the lawsuit show that Evergreen Cemetery had not approved this design, and had advised her that they thought it was not appropriate for the site, and even if it had been the costs for the required landscaping work would have been over three hundred thousand dollars,¹⁸ ten times more than what she had managed to raise in thirty years.

There is tension between Ms Norwood and some of the survivors of the Peoples Temple. Her annual sermons alienated some others because of their “religious content... and her condemnation of the Peoples Temple.”¹⁹ Her services are often fire and brimstone affairs that accuse Jones of being the devil. Some of these survivors begin having their own gatherings in the afternoon of November 18th, leaving Ms Norwood to the morning. This second group grew frustrated with the slow progress from Ms Norwood on constructing the memorial and decided to form their own initiative, the Jonestown Memorial Foundation. The foundation is started in summer of 2010, and raises funds, designs the monument, and has it installed in just a few months, with installation and landscaping of the site being finished in May 2011.²⁰ The monument is four granite plaques measuring 40” x 64” x 4” and weighing around 1100 pounds²¹ inset in the ground over the mass grave, as well as a small border wall with railing indicating the area of the mass grave.²² The monument is engraved with the names of the 918 individuals who died on November 18th, 1978 – 909 in Jonestown, five on the Port Kaituma airstrip, and four in Georgetown. Peoples Temple members who died before or after this date are not listed, and the

¹⁷ Carolyn Jones, “Jonestown Memorial can go Forward, Judge Rules,” San Francisco Gate, May 12, 2011, accessed at <http://www.sfgate.com/bayarea/article/Jonestown-memorial-can-go-forward-judge-rules-2372061.php>

¹⁸ Dan Schreiber, “Lawsuit Targets Jonestown Cult Leader’s Name on Oakland Massacre Memorial”, San Francisco Examiner, May 13, 2011, accessed at <http://archives.sfexaminer.com/sanfrancisco/lawsuit-targets-jonestown-cult-leaders-name-on-oakland-massacre-memorial/Content?oid=2174880>

¹⁹ Shoshana Walter, “A Memorial Divides Survivors”, New York Times, June 2, 2011, accessed at <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/03/us/03bcjonestown.html>

²⁰ McGeeHee III, *The Campaign for the New Jonestown Memorial: A Brief History*

²¹ Aprox 101cm x 162cm x 10cm, weighing around 500kg. Imperial measures are used in deference to the original design of the monument, despite the objective superiority of SI measurements.

²² McGeeHee III, *The Campaign for the New Jonestown Memorial: A Brief History*

non-Jonestown individuals who died – Leo Ryan and some of the press who accompanied him – are. Names are listed alphabetically with no special distinctions between them, aside from a few common nicknames indicated in quotation marks. Jim Jones is included, listed as James Warren Jones, with no other distinction.

Very shortly after the monument is announced as complete, Ms Norwood files suit against the Jonestown Memorial Foundation and Evergreen Cemetery. Her attempts to sue “revolved around contract issues, [but] the point of opposition most frequently raised was the new monument’s inclusion of the name of Jim Jones.”²³ She alleges that she had a contract in place with Evergreen Cemetery and that was violated by the construction of an alternative memorial on the site. She attempts to get Jim Jones’s name removed from the memorial²⁴ as an alternative means of settling the suit, but the Jonestown Memorial foundation insists that it is a historical piece and that removing any names would be editorializing and go against the message of the monument. Ms Norwood’s initial lawsuit is eventually dismissed in April 2014, but she appeals several times as late as early 2015.²⁵ The Jonestown Memorial Foundation at this point considers her as having exhausted all avenues of legal action, but Ms Norwood continues to solicit donations to build the monument.²⁶

Theoretical Approaches to Monument Building

Foote’s *Shadowed Ground: America’s Landscapes of Violence and Tragedy* is an examination of how sites are treated in response to tragedies, especially those resulting in large numbers of deaths. He

²³ McGeeHee III, *The Campaign for the New Jonestown Memorial: A Brief History*

²⁴ “Lawsuit over Memorial Plaques Dismissed”, *Alternative Considerations of Jonestown & Peoples Temple*, October 20th, 2014, http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=61890

²⁵ McGeeHee III, *The Campaign for the New Jonestown Memorial: A Brief History*

²⁶ Ms Norwood’s website at www.jones-town.org/help.html still not only attempts to raise money to build the wall, but also to provide children scholarships and raise awareness about violence. The exact phrasing used, namely “Your donation will help us continue to raise public awareness on learning and sharing the lessons of Jonestown and violence against our most vulnerable assets, our children” suggests something a bit different, but this is almost certainly just a forgotten comma or two.

identifies four responses, which are “Sanctification, Designation, Rectification, and Obliteration.”²⁷

Foote notes that memorial sites often don’t arise immediately and take time before they are established, and that sites can pass between these categories as the sites or context that produced them takes on a different significance²⁸.

Obliteration is “actively effacing all evidence of a tragedy to cover it up or remove it from view...the site is not returned to use but more commonly removed from use,”²⁹ which is generally a response to “particularly shameful events people would rather forget.”³⁰ This is the initial response to the Jonestown mass grave. The monument initially placed on the grave site did not even indicate the names of those who were buried there. It was sequestered to a back corner of the cemetery, and the limits of the mass internment area were unmarked, giving the appearance of a single grave isolated from all the others. This also represents how the Jonestown site in Guyana is treated, being left to reclamation by the jungle³¹. While there were memorial services conducted by survivors and family members every year, the general public experienced the events of Jonestown as being deeply shameful, and pushed the mass grave as out of sight as possible.

The initial response to the Vietnam War is similar. The complicated relationship between the general public and the conflict led to an uneasy handling of veterans and the dead. Official government response to commemorating the conflict is slow and difficult. No veterans are officially recognized until

²⁷ Kenneth E. Foote, *Shadowed Ground: America’s Landscapes of Violence and Tragedy, Revised and Updated*, (Austin, University of Texas Press, 2003), 6

²⁸ Foote, *Shadowed Ground*, 29

²⁹ Foote, *Shadowed Ground*, 24

³⁰ Foote, *Shadowed Ground*, 7

³¹ Somewhat. There is an initiative in 2008 by a group who plans to restore the Jonestown site as a memorial/tourist attraction, where visitors can sleep in a rebuilt camp. In 2009 a memorial stone is placed on the site and plastic signs are put up indicating where the original buildings were. Visitors in 2011 indicate however that this initiative has gone nowhere, the site is unrestored, and the memorial stone and signs are in disrepair. More discussion on this in the conclusion, but for the sake of simplicity, the site is generally completely abandoned and left to be picked over by scavengers and reclaimed by the jungle.

1978, three years after the conflict is officially ended.³² Rather than having unidentified bodies interred at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier to symbolically join those who had died in conflict for the US, instead “the army recommended that a plaque and display of medals be set apart behind the tomb.”³³ The initial proposed plaque was to read “Let all know that the United States of America pays tribute to the members of the Armed Forces who answered their country’s call.”³⁴ This vague statement does not mention the Vietnam war at all, trying to deal with the shame of the events by getting rid of any reference to it.

Veterans Affairs intercedes to get a more specific plaque instead, which reads “Let all people know that the United States pays tribute to those members of the Armed Forces who served honorably in Southeast Asia during the Vietnam Era.”³⁵ This plaque notably does not use the expression ‘Vietnam War’, because “to name an event is to categorize it morally and provide an identity for its participants.”³⁶ America had an understanding of what it meant to be a war veteran, and accorded respect to veterans of conflicts like World War Two. This plaque presented those who had fought as something different, taking from them the status of being a war veteran or the war dead – these were ‘era veterans’ or ‘era dead’. Society was deeply divided on the Vietnam War and how it should be understood, and so it denied the classification to the Vietnam War that would have given a clear statement about how the dead should be treated.

Designation is the marking of a site in such a way that “denotes something “important” has happened there.”³⁷ This category has little relevance in this fairly narrow analysis. This category is likely what Chidester would have considered the initial Evergreen Cemetery stone, given his more

³² Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz, *The Vietnam Veterans Memorial*, 385

³³ Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz, *The Vietnam Veterans Memorial*, 385

³⁴ Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz, *The Vietnam Veterans Memorial*, 385

³⁵ Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz, *The Vietnam Veterans Memorial*, 385

³⁶ Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz, *The Vietnam Veterans Memorial*, 386

³⁷ Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz, *The Vietnam Veterans Memorial*, 7

sympathetic view of the Jonestown dead as being reintegrated into society. Given the much greater scope of the Vietnam war, a number of similar markers are sprinkled across Vietnam,³⁸ but these markers go far outside the scope of this project.

Rectification “is the process through which a tragedy site is put right and used again.”³⁹ This is again outside the scope of this project. While this will not be analysed here, this happened with some former Peoples Temple churches which were returned to use as churches of different denominations.⁴⁰ The Vietnam War, which lasted decades and impacted millions, is simply much too large to be examined in the context of this project.

Sanctification is for when a site has “lasting positive meaning... A lesson in heroism or perhaps a sacrifice for the community... a memorial or monument is the result.”⁴¹ These are sites that come about in “situations where disaster inspires a sense of communal, collective loss”⁴² which is often bound to a community. The Vietnam Wall and the second Jonestown memorial are examples of this. These examples are unique, however, because of the complicated situations that made them arise. These monuments had to respond to the question of “how is commemoration without consensus, or without pride, possible?”⁴³

For most monuments, “events or individuals selected for commemoration are necessarily heroic or, at very least, untainted.”⁴⁴ Neither the Vietnam war nor the Peoples Temple were perceived in this

³⁸ Including one that was on a US consulate in Vietnam, removed after the US exit, and put on display in a museum whose translated name was the “Exhibition house for US and Puppet Crimes”

³⁹ Foote, *Shadowed Ground*, 21

⁴⁰ “What Happened to the Peoples Temple Church Buildings in the United States” at Jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=65658 lists several of these with photos. It would be an interesting project to look at how much the properties sold for versus how much they were evaluated at in 1978 to try to determine the fiscal value of the stigma.

⁴¹ Foote, *Shadowed Ground*, 6

⁴² Foote, *Shadowed Ground*, 89-90

⁴³ Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz, *The Vietnam Veterans Memorial*, 386

⁴⁴ Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz, *The Vietnam Veterans Memorial*, 379

way. Because the deaths of these individuals were problematic, the memorials that were made had to depart from standard designs. More than just having design similarities, the two monuments arose as independent initiatives because the official response was deemed insufficient. Secondly, the monuments were designed in such a way so as to separate the individuals from the events, in order to limit controversy. Finally, what criticisms were raised against the memorials in both instances focused on the same idea – they were criticized for not having a clear message.

Initial memorial insufficient

The initial memorials for Vietnam and for Jonestown both have ambiguous wording. With Vietnam's plaque ambiguously calling it an era rather than a war, and with the Jonestown plaque referring to the events simply as the Jonestown tragedy, it's clear to see the discomfort from those in official positions. These initial markers are placed while public sentiment is mixed (in the case of Vietnam) or hostile (in the case of Jonestown). The passage of time softens some of this negative perception, however, and "what is accepted as historical truth is often a narrative shaped and reshaped through time to fit the demands of contemporary society."⁴⁵ The immediate government response is tepid because "commemoration cannot occur until there is a past worthy of commemorating."⁴⁶ With the passage of time sentiments can mellow, and it comes to the point where for Vietnam "though individuals are divided on the war, they are no longer divided on the individuals who fought."⁴⁷ A similar scenario happens with the Jonestown Survivors community, though on a much smaller scale. Initial anniversary memorials are sparsely attended, with those individuals who were closest to the church

⁴⁵ Foote, *Shadowed Ground*, 29

⁴⁶ Foote, *Shadowed Ground*, 29

⁴⁷ Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz, *The Vietnam Veterans Memorial*, 386

staying away because it was too painful. After years pass, however, attendance does increase, as does demand for a memorial⁴⁸.

Sanctification becomes possible because there is now “a sense of communal, collective loss.”⁴⁹ On a national level, the Vietnam Veteran is not perceived with the same ambiguity that they were at the end of the war. Enough time has passed that the individuals who died are able to be recognized for the virtues that they showed by dying for their country, rather than simply being seen as synonymous with the still divisive war. Similarly, the horrors of the mass suicide at Jonestown had faded, and people were happy to have a memorial to “a family all together working for equality.”⁵⁰ After some time has passed, the community has developed to a state where they are able to separate the dead individuals from the circumstances that brought them to their deaths, and to commemorate that.

The initial monuments played to different sentiments. These are monuments from and for communities that wanted to distance themselves from a complicated tragedy. Once enough time has passed that the conflict that caused the deaths is less divisive to the community, the dead can be considered on their own merit. Part of this transition is articulated by the initial memorials in both cases being an official government act, while the subsequent memorials arise from independent initiatives.

Independent initiative for memorial

These sanctified memorials arise “often at first on the private initiative of just a few individuals who are convinced of the event’s significance.”⁵¹ In the case of Jonestown there are two independent initiatives; one by Ms Norwood, one by the Jonestown Memorial Foundation. For Vietnam this is Jan

⁴⁸ This is not entirely about memorializing the dead, there are a number of individuals who are pushing for a memorial with the justification that it is terrible that there are so many dead bodies that do not have their names listed.

⁴⁹ Foote, *Shadowed Ground*, 89

⁵⁰ Neva Sly Hargrave, “Letter from Neva Sly Hargrave”, hosted by the Alternative Considerations of Jonestown and Peoples Temple at http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=29350

⁵¹ Foote, *Shadowed Ground*, 11

Scruggs. These are all individuals who were closely related to the events and find the existing memorials insufficient. Scruggs has the revolutionary idea of having a war monument, but “excluding from it any prominent symbol of national honor and glory.”⁵² Because the memorial is independent from the state, it is able to do this. Any monument from the state would honor the dead it names and correspondingly validate the conflict that caused those deaths. In the same way, having no monument would suggest the state thinks the dead are without legitimacy. The minimal monuments that are initially laid by the state function in the same way. The Jonestown marker calls the events the Jonestown a tragedy, but does not even name those who died. The Vietnam plaque avoids saying the word ‘war’ which would give those who died the honored status of war veterans.

This independence from official state authority is what allowed for Scruggs’s “Original framing rule – “Honor the soldier, not the cause.””⁵³ Conflicts of opinion about the Vietnam war are less central during the proposal of the monument than they had been just a few years ago, but they are still present. Taking either a positive or negative stance would alienate a substantial group who disagreed. It also would be using the dead to political ends, which Scruggs did not want to do. In the same way, the Jonestown memorial was presented as “a historical document...without affixing responsibility for the events for the day or including any other differentiation among them.”⁵⁴ While clearly Ms Norwood disagreed with this sentiment, in general the monument seems to have been accepted on these grounds. Both monuments have very little to them beyond the names of the dead, including only the indisputable facts. Presenting only the dead on the memorial makes them the focus. While a traditional monument speaks about the conflict and can often forget the individual, these monuments instead honor the individual without looking at the larger context.

⁵² Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz, *The Vietnam Veterans Memorial*, 388

⁵³ Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz, *The Vietnam Veterans Memorial*, 389

⁵⁴ McGeeHee III, *The Campaign for the New Jonestown Memorial: A Brief History*

While a traditional memorial is able to take its authority from the state, because these monuments arose independently they were not able to do so. To claim legitimacy, coverage of the monuments focused on the individuals or groups who proposed the memorials. For the Vietnam memorial, “the fact that Scruggs was recognized as a wounded veteran was important.”⁵⁵ The memorial was something put in place by the living for the dead, and because Scruggs was wounded he could “act as a perfect mediator between.”⁵⁶ News stories and interviews with Scruggs focused on how he “carries 11 pieces of grenade in his body,”⁵⁷ giving him the authority to speak for those who died.

For the Jonestown memorial, coverage instead focused on who the proposers knew who had died. Jim Jones Jr. is always identified as Jim Jones’s son, John Cobb has quotes followed with lines like “said John Cobb, who survived the massacre at Jonestown in 1978 but lost 10 family members there.”⁵⁸ An article on Ms Norwood’s opposition to the memorial takes it a step further and doesn’t even use her name, instead opening with “a woman who lost 27 relatives in the 1978 Jonestown tragedy is waging a legal battle...”⁵⁹ Because the dead cannot speak for themselves, in the absence of the authority of the state, the marker for legitimacy used is the suffering of the living.

Individuals without Events

Dealing with a conflict which is understood as a loss requires that the conflict be reinterpreted as being based around heroic values rather than the conflict itself.⁶⁰ The soldiers are cast as “vivid and

⁵⁵ Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz, *The Vietnam Veterans Memorial*, 390

⁵⁶ Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz, *The Vietnam Veterans Memorial*, 390

⁵⁷ Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz, *The Vietnam Veterans Memorial*, 390

⁵⁸ Carolyn Jones, “Jonestown Memorial can go Forward, Judge Rules,” San Francisco Gate, May 12, 2011, accessed at <http://www.sfgate.com/bayarea/article/Jonestown-memorial-can-go-forward-judge-rules-2372061.php>

⁵⁹ “Dispute over Jonestown Memorial in Oakland Spills into Court,” CBS San Francisco, May 12, 2011, accessed at <http://sanfrancisco.cbslocal.com/2011/05/12/dispute-over-jonestown-memorial-in-oakland-spills-into-court/>

⁶⁰ Foote, *Shadowed Ground*, 50. Specifically in the context of the American Civil War, he discusses those making memorials to the conflict as each side “fighting the good fight” even though this required “a certain forgetfulness about the institution of slavery”

inspiring” while the “remarks on the war itself are vague and pointless”⁶¹ While those who supported the war had no problem with a standard monument, presenting the memorial in this way allowed the conflict to be understood as “a misbegotten cause nobly pursued.”⁶² The Vietnam Wall is thus presented as apolitical. It “made no reference to the war, only the men who fought.”⁶³ It is referred to as the Veterans memorial rather than the war memorial to further distance itself. Scuggs references the mute nature of the wall after it has been built saying “the memorial says exactly what we wanted to say about Vietnam – absolutely nothing.”⁶⁴

The Jonestown monument is created with the same intent. At the first Jonestown anniversary after the memorial is installed, Rebecca Moore describes the experience thusly

“We do not come here to separate the just from unjust, the worthy from the unworthy. We leave judgment to the wisdom of God and the mercy of Allah. We leave judgment to the law of karma and the compassion of the Buddha. We leave judgment to the writers of history. That history is being inscribed this very day as we gather to remember and mourn. We probably don’t agree on much outside the gates of Evergreen Cemetery, but we are united in our common loss at this site and at this time.”⁶⁵

The monument is presented as a historical piece. The monument consciously chooses not to assign blame, and lists the dead alphabetically, with no name given any more prominence than any other. Like the Vietnam Veterans memorial, it is bounded by time, only listing those who died on November 18th. This means that included on the list are non-Peoples Temple members Leo Ryan and the reporters. This distances the memorial from questions of who was a true believer in Jones, rather it just remembers them all as people. This is also emphasized by who isn’t included, in the form of Peoples Temple members who died before or after. There are Peoples Temple members who died before November

⁶¹ Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz, *The Vietnam Veterans Memorial*, 380

⁶² Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz, *The Vietnam Veterans Memorial*, 380

⁶³ Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz, *The Vietnam Veterans Memorial*, 391

⁶⁴ Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz, *The Vietnam Veterans Memorial*, 394

⁶⁵ Rebecca Moore speaking at the “Service of dedication,” for the Jonestown memorial, May 29, 2011, accessed at http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=29508

18th, both in the United States and Guyana⁶⁶ who are not listed. There are many members of the Peoples Temple who died after the mass suicide who are not included. Even individuals like Michael Prokes, who committed suicide as an act of solidarity with the Peoples Temple, are not included.

Separating those who died from the events that brought them there means that the memorial can be treated similarly to a natural disaster, something that allows “communities to come to terms with a disaster.”⁶⁷ Natural disasters break up a community, and establishing a memorial with regular services helps “survivors... to renew acquaintances and share experiences.”⁶⁸ Because the conflicts were so hotly contested, surviving members of the Peoples Temple and the Vietnam War were often isolated. Vietnam War veterans were stigmatized and unwanted, and Peoples Temple members would often hide their previous affiliation with the church in subsequent years to avoid being thought of as a freak. The establishment of memorials as a place to remember the individuals without the cause gave a legitimacy to the grief that many had been carrying for years. While the questions around the conflict were not resolved, having a memorial established to the individual gave an outlet that was seen as legitimate to mourn individuals who had spent years being stigmatized.

Criticism of memorials

Criticism of the Vietnam Memorial focused “on details like color, shape, and location, but underlying all specific objections was a disdain for the style itself. Many believed the style violated the

⁶⁶ It’s hard to know how many people died while affiliated with Jones’s congregation throughout his long career across many states. Given that they were buried without conflict, it is outside the scope of this project. They seem generally to have been inoffensive and uninteresting protestant burials. We do know that eight people died on the Jonestown site before the final white night [Jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=35401] and that their grave sites appear to be totally lost to the jungle. While a good example of Foote’s category of Obliteration, a lack of availability of material from Guyana means that there is not much to say beyond that. So far as I know, there have been no attempts to repatriate any of the dead from Guyana, and given how much time has passed, and how degraded the Jonestown site is now, it seems incredibly unlikely that that will change.

⁶⁷ Foote, *Shadowed Ground*, 80

⁶⁸ Foote, *Shadowed Ground*, 80

limits of the war-memorial genre.”⁶⁹ The memorial design’s focus on the soldier without the conflict is groundbreaking. Traditional war memorials would often be tall monoliths, statues of men fighting, and with strong expressions of national identity.⁷⁰ Criticisms of the memorial focused on how much it deviated from this, and the clear, nationalistic message that it gave. The Vietnam Veterans memorial was designed so that “it induces people who think differently to display the same ritual respect toward soldiers.”⁷¹ The way that it was able to do this, however, was to allow for a multiplicity of opinions on the war to coexist in the same space. Those who objected to the memorial objected to this idea. Primarily this came from those who felt that having a memorial that did not convey the standard triumphant message of a war memorial suggested that it was “nonpatriotic and nonheroic.”⁷² In essence, the criticism was that the design philosophy that had led the project, to separate the individuals from the events, was impossible. The act of talking about the Vietnam War veterans without talking about the Vietnam War was to make a statement of shame or disrespect about those who had died.

The Jonestown memorial’s installation was less controversial, though this is likely because of how much time had passed and how much smaller the affected community was. The newspaper coverage focused on the dispute that arose over Jim Jones’s name, though the general impression given is that this was an attempt to sell newspapers more than genuine criticism. The main source of criticism of the Jonestown Memorial came from Ms Norwood and her congregation. Once the memorial was installed she filed suit based on contract disputes, but the concerns that she raised were focused on the disrespect of having Jim Jones listed among the dead on the wall. Ms Norwood publicly decries the wall,

⁶⁹ Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz, *The Vietnam Veterans Memorial*, 395

⁷⁰ Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz, *The Vietnam Veterans Memorial*, 382

⁷¹ Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz, *The Vietnam Veterans Memorial*, 408

⁷² Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz, *The Vietnam Veterans Memorial*, 395

suggesting that those who built the monument still worship Jim Jones, as well as calling him Hitler⁷³, Bin Laden⁷⁴, Charles Manson, Stalin⁷⁵, and comparing him to the Columbine shooters.⁷⁶ Similar to those who criticized the Vietnam monument, Ms Norwood's criticism was that to present the memorial as a historical piece was impossible, and to have Jones's name on the memorial without condemnation was the same as praise. In the letters of opposition that she wrote for the lawsuit, she goes so far as to call the wall the "Jim Jones Honor Wall."⁷⁷

Ms Norwood's own memorial she calls the "cherishing the children healing wall,"⁷⁸ and she refers to her memorial service, at least for the most recent service, as the "Jonestown Children's Memorial & Victims Memorial Service."⁷⁹ Ms Norwood's focus is on the children, who are unambiguously innocent, and Jim Jones is presented as the evil force that murdered them. Her attempts to contest the Jonestown memorial that was placed are based on them presenting an ambiguous memorial that does not condemn Jones as evil. Making this kind of strong assertion opens the door to a number of tough questions that the ambiguous memorial that was installed can avoid. On the spectrum of innocent to guilty, the babies, some only a few months old, would be the most innocent, and Jones the most guilty. Deciding where along that spectrum to place everyone, and at what point to not include people on the memorial is much more complicated. If Jones is guilty for ordering the mass suicide, are the parents who gave the cyanide to their children guilty too? A six year

⁷³ "Dispute over Jonestown Memorial in Oakland Spills into Court," CBS San Francisco, May 12, 2011, accessed at <http://sanfrancisco.cbslocal.com/2011/05/12/dispute-over-jonestown-memorial-in-oakland-spills-into-court/>

⁷⁴ Carolyn Jones, "Jonestown Memorial can go Forward, Judge Rules," San Francisco Gate, May 12, 2011, accessed at <http://www.sfgate.com/bayarea/article/Jonestown-memorial-can-go-forward-judge-rules-2372061.php>

⁷⁵ Carolyn Jones and Matthai Kuruville, "Jonestown Memorial Dedication Allowed to Proceed," San Francisco Gate, May 26, 2011, accessed at <http://www.sfgate.com/bayarea/article/Jonestown-memorial-dedication-allowed-to-proceed-2370476.php>

⁷⁶ "Official Jonestown Memorial Services and Cherish the Children Memorial Wall", October 2012 newsletter, accessed at <http://www.jones-town.org/pdf/JONESTOWN-2012-invite-Dear-Friends-305.pdf>

⁷⁷ "Declaration of Virginia Monte in support of Plaintiff's Motion for Preliminary Injunction", May 25, 2011, hosted at <http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Norwood4b3.pdf>

⁷⁸ "The Wall," *Cherishing the Children/Guyana Tribute Foundation*, jones-town.org/wall.html

⁷⁹ "Jonestown Memorial," *Cherishing the Children/Guyana Tribute Foundation*, jones-town.org

old cannot consent to kill themselves, can a nineteen year old? If the memorial is to those who died under Jones, should those who died on the Jonestown site before the mass suicide be included? How about those who died in the United States before the Jonestown era who were financially supporting his ministry? To install the kind of monument that Ms Norwood would like would require a consensus of opinion on a great deal of facts around the Jonestown event which simply does not exist.

Conclusion

The design of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial allows visitors to come to a memorial for a complicated and contentious event and find a respectful monument. The Jonestown memorial was designed with the same motivation. Distancing the memorial from the conflict allows a monument to be about the individuals, and allow survivors of disparate opinions to come together in the same place to remember. Given enough time, understandings of opinions can shift to the point that a monolithic understanding allows for memorials to contentious events. For the present, though, thirty-odd years out from Vietnam and Jonestown, there is no unified opinion. The monuments that were erected are presented in a way that separates the individuals from the conflict, avoiding questions like just or unjust war, murder or suicide. Instead, these memorials are presented as the bare historical facts – these are the dead, you decide what that means.

Conclusion

This project deals with the problems of memorializing the Jonestown dead. While my work focused on a handful of labels, the Jonestown dead have been labelled many things – victims, suicides, murder, religion, cult, deviants... Deciding what label fits relies on the perspective of the one telling the narrative. This project's focus on the narratives that are told in two eras – the immediate aftermath of 1978 until the early 1980s, and the media coverage of the new memorial in the 2012 until present era – attempts to show what interests are at work in assigning each of these labels. Jonestown is very much of its time, and perceptions of Jonestown were colored by suspicions about socialism and attitudes towards race that are very different from the world of today. The jump from the early 80s to the 2010s also ignores much influence that Jonestown has in the intervening years. Jonestown impacts perceptions of religion in the United States at this time, notably in how fringe religious movements are treated. The perception of them moves from misguided but harmless to potentially dangerous. The impact of Jonestown being labelled deviant and dangerous influences how marginal religious communities are understood even today.

While the Jonestown dead can tell us something about how unwanted bodies are treated in America, it's important to note some key limitations. While it's tempting to say that it took thirty years for America to be willing to accept a Jonestown monument, it's not quite that simple. Ms Norwood started raising funds to build a monument in 1979, and the monument that came up in 2011 did so because of a group who thought that Ms Norwood's plan was unlikely to come to fruition. When it did come up, coverage in the media treated it as a curiosity more than an outrage. Just when it would have been uncontroversial to put up a memorial is impossible to say. Additionally, this memorial also serves as a tombstone to those in the mass grave below, who until that time had no marker. What impact that had on the acceptance of the memorial is similarly impossible to judge.

In a similar way, the sources used on Jonestown are sometimes contradictory. While I have pointed out some of these in the footnotes, there are a few other significant contradictions that show this. While the official account is that only Peoples Temple members died in Jonestown, two other accounts indicate that Guyanese citizens died on November 18, 1978. A reporter named Melody Ermachild doing interviews in Guyana shortly after the mass suicide describes an encounter with a woman who claims her son and three children of a friend were killed in the mass suicide, which was actually a mass murder.¹ Brailey's *Ghosts of November* claims that there were a number of Guyanese who had been killed with a shotgun on site during the mass suicide.² Similarly, among the Jonestown audiotapes is a curiosity in the form of Q875. This is an audiotape that was recorded on November 19th, 1978, apparently while everyone at the Jonestown site was dead. To make this even more curious, some who are familiar with Jones allege that his voice can be heard in the background of the tape.³ All of this to emphasize that while every attempt has been made to give accurate information, there are still a number of unanswered, and at this point likely unanswerable questions about Jonestown.

A perspective that is lacking on this project is that from Guyana, primarily because of issues in obtaining information. To interested parties, there is potentially a project in looking at the response to the Jonestown tragedy in Guyana. There was a small marker put up at some point after the tragedy, but the site was left to be reclaimed by the jungle. An author working on a project related to Jonestown went to the site in 2008 and met a man who claimed to be part of a group who had taken ownership of the Jonestown site to set up some kind of tragedy tourism site.⁴ An account from 2011 discusses how

¹ Melody Ermachild, "Jonestown: Frozen in time" in *Dear People: Remembering Jonestown*, (Berkeley, CA: Heyday Books, 2005, 155-161

² Jeff Brailey, *Ghosts of November: Memoirs of an Outsider Who Witnessed the Carnage at Jonestown*, Manuscript hosted by Alternative Considerations of Jonestown & Peoples Temple, http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=62750, 2006, Chapter Five

³ This is a fairly controversial tape, but a variety of perspectives are available to interested parties here http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=29146

⁴ Julia Scheeres, "A Trip to Jonestown, August 2008", hosted by Alternative Considerations of the Peoples Temple, http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=31444

once again the site was left to be reclaimed by the jungle, but that a new monument had been installed in 2009, and that plastic signs had been put up to indicate the former layout of the Jonestown camp.⁵

Details, however, are hard to come by.

A bit closer to home, a more thorough examination of the Jonestown memorial could be done. While memorial ceremonies happen every year, no examination of them has been done. Additionally, for those wishing to pursue the comparison of the Jonestown memorial to the Peoples Temple memorial further, James Cobb makes reference to taking a rubbing from the stone⁶ similar to how rubbings are taken from the Vietnam veterans memorial. In addition, despite there being a Jonestown memorial in place, Ms Norwood continues to fundraise for her own memorial, and has had one slab made, though at this point it's not clear where they would go.

In a less predictable sense, there are still as of the time of writing ongoing FOIA lawsuits against the US government about Jonestown, mostly requesting access to RYMUR files which are still unreleased. The contents which have been kept hidden for almost forty years at this point, I can't begin to imagine. While the Black Rights movement shunned the Peoples Temple in 1978, contemporary interest in Black Rights and Socialism through movements like Black Lives Matter and the Ferguson protests have brought Huey P Newton and his writing newfound popularity. Something resembling a revival of the Black Panthers movement through the Huey P. Newton Gun Club has once more brought young black men to armed patrols through their community, openly hostile to police forces.⁷ What renewed interest in Huey P. Newton might do to the largely forgotten connection to Jim Jones and the Peoples Temple is presently unknown.

⁵ Girish Gupta, "Amazon Reclaims Site of U.S. Cult Tragedy," *Reuters*, November 22, 2011, accessed at <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-guyana-jonestown-idUSTRE7AL1QF20111122>

⁶ "Service of Dedication, Part one, May 29, 2011", *Alternative Considerations of Jonestown and Peoples Temple*, http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=29508

⁷ Aaron Lake Smith, "The Revolutionary Gun Clubs Patrolling the Black Neighborhoods of Dallas", *Vice*, January 5th, 2015, http://www.vice.com/en_ca/read/huey-does-dallas-0000552-v22n1

It's clear that despite how much research has been done and how far removed we are from Jonestown, there are still unanswered questions, and a continuing relevance to the Peoples Temple. Like the Jonestown memorial, the enduring legacy of the Peoples Temple is ambiguity.

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