

Representations of Jonestown in the Arts

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Almost thirty years have elapsed since the murders-suicides of close to a thousand people occurred in the jungle community of Jonestown, Guyana. It may seem like ancient history, but as a cultural reference and subject of ongoing artistic inquiry, Jonestown and its residents are very much alive. A notebook inscribed on the last day calmly describes the scene of mass death. Richard Tropp, the presumptive author and eyewitness, had attempted to write a book about Peoples Temple, the religious organization which founded the communal experiment in Guyana. He never finished it. But his words on the last day have found their way into a number of places.

It will take more than small minds, reporters' minds, to fathom these events. Something must come of this. Beyond all the circumstances surrounding the immediate event, someone can perhaps find the symbolic, the eternal in this moment—the meaning of a people, a struggle.¹

Many have found meaning in the statement made by Richard Tropp shortly before he himself died in Jonestown, Guyana on 18 November 1978. A documentary produced by award-winning filmmaker Stanley Nelson concludes with Tropp's words.² An article by novelist Annie Dawid begins with them,³ as does a collection of primary source documents called *Dear People: Remembering Jonestown*, compiled by Denice Stephenson.⁴ Many have attempted to find the symbolic and the eternal in the events of Jonestown, where more than 900 men, women and children perished in an apparent mass murder-suicide. Still others have used the tragedy as a point of departure to create something new, invoking images of Jonestown and its leader Jim Jones as a type of shorthand that allows readers and viewers to fill in the blanks.

The account of the deaths in Jonestown remains elliptical, despite dozens of books, hundreds of articles, and thousands of documents available. The reason is that a number of questions remain, ranging from the mundane to the existential. Who was Jim Jones and was he always crazy? Was there a conspiracy to murder people in Jonestown? How could people kill their own children? Why did people go? Why did people stay? Artists working in a variety of media—poetry, drama, literature, music, the fine arts—have developed an assortment of responses—from the comic to the bathetic, and from the subtle to the grotesque—to these and other questions. These responses exert a centrifugal pull on discourse about Jonestown—to use Mikhail Bakhtin's critical language—undermining official accounts and public narratives that limit dialogue about the deeper meaning of Jonestown.

In this paper I compare Bakhtin's concept of *centripetal* forces, as evidenced in official or popular narratives about Jonestown, with his corresponding concept of *centrifugal* forces, as evidenced in a variety of artistic depictions of events almost thirty years past. The pull of competing voices (or "heteroglossia") against the centripetal urge to retain, restrain, or constrain divergent explications about "what happened" creates an ongoing dialogue, Bakhtin's key critical theme. It is not entirely incongruous to apply Bakhtin's term "carnival" to the dialogue over the tragedy in Jonestown given the fact that the multiplicity of voices attempting to interpret

Jonestown through the arts—as opposed to historical narratives—does seem carnivalesque at times. Specific examples of graphic representations, music, popular literature, and literary works, including drama and poetry, demonstrate the centrifugal energy of imagination as it pulls against the centripetal force of “history.” Words, sounds, and images can be likened to a carnival, where competing sights, thrills, and activities clamor for attention, and demand that the participant choose how a response.

Mikhail Bakhtin’s Dialogic Imagination

In an important essay titled “Discourse in the Novel,” the twentieth-century Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin observes that certain social groups evolve as “forces that serve to unify and centralize the verbal-ideological world.”⁵ These groups employ a hegemonic language that tries to overcome the plurality of voices—that exist in literature in particular—by valuing unity over diversity. He says these forces are “generative,” for they struggle to create a “stable nucleus of an officially recognized literary language,” and he calls them “centripetal forces,” for they strive for ideological and linguistic unity.⁶ This unity is merely a monologue, however, which fails to grasp the dialogical nature of the novel, and all art for that matter. It is “discourse that seeks to discipline a conversation by imposing one voice on all the contributors [which] yields not dialogue but monologue.”⁷ Meaning does not emerge from a vacuum, but from a context; and context implies dialogue. Moreover, “dialogism cannot be resolved; it has no teleology. It is unfinalizable and open ended.”⁸ Bakhtin chafes at the closure required by monologism, because it leads to enslavement by canonizing ideological systems.⁹

We can see centripetal forces at work in standard news reports of Peoples Temple and Jonestown, as well as in apostate accounts that focus on negative aspects of life in the movement.

First, there are literally thousands of documents held by various U.S. government agencies, such as the Department of State, the Department of Defense, the CIA, the FBI, the U.S. Congress, and many others.¹⁰ These archives consist of the raw materials from which the story of Jonestown and Peoples Temple has been constructed by historians. Second, the news media also generated reports in the aftermath of the assassination of U.S. Congressman Leo J. Ryan on 18 November 1978. Since reporters were also killed, the media became part of the story. The media framing of events dominated public understanding of Jonestown and Peoples Temple for almost three decades, and continues to guide analyses to this day. Finally, and until the last five years, Peoples Temple apostates served as the primary sources of information for most explanations of the Temple and Jonestown. The people who were sympathetic to the aims and goals of Peoples Temple, and who found life in Jonestown to be fulfilling and rewarding, had died, and so their voices went unheard.

The monologic story as guided by centripetal forces generally goes as follows:

A charismatic, but deranged, prophet named Jim Jones founded an inter-racial church in Indianapolis in the 1950s, challenging both segregation and capitalism with a social gospel that called for racial equality and just distribution of wealth among group members. The group, called Peoples Temple, moved to California following Jones’ prediction of nuclear holocaust—undoubtedly based upon *Esquire* Magazine’s 1965 listing of the top nine safest places in case of a nuclear attack. The group grew under an aggressive proselytizing program, and expanded to San Francisco and Los Angeles. Although free services such as housing, legal aid, meals, healthcare, and social service advocacy were provided to members and non-members alike,

church members also conducted abusive practices within an inner leadership cadre called the Planning Commission. In addition, healings were faked in order to draw in more members.

Concern about the safety of African Americans in the U.S. led the group to establish a community in the Northwest District of Guyana. An Afro-Guyanese government saw advantages to settling a group of 1,000 Americans in a territory disputed by Venezuela. In Guyana, the workers at the Peoples Temple Agricultural Project cleared hundreds of acres of jungle to create a community, which came to be called Jonestown. Negative publicity about the Temple in San Francisco, however, forced a rapid mass migration to the project before it could handle the influx of newcomers. As a result, housing was crowded, food was scarce, and efforts to control dissidents increased.

In November 1978, California Congressman Ryan visited the isolated jungle community accompanied by journalists and relatives of Peoples Temple members. On 18 November 1978, sixteen residents of Jonestown asked to join Ryan and his party as they left. While they waited to board two small aircraft, a few young men who had followed the party from Jonestown began firing upon them, killing Ryan, three newsmen, and one defector. A dozen others were wounded, some quite seriously.

Back in Jonestown, more than 900 residents gathered in the central pavilion, where Jones told them what had happened and exhorted them to drink a cyanide-laced fruit punch. A tape recording of the incident reveals that the few residents who protested, were shouted down by the majority.¹¹ Eyewitness accounts are conflicting, with some saying that people were coerced into taking poison, and others saying that people willingly drank the mixture. By the end of the day, 918 Americans in Guyana were dead: 909 in Jonestown; five on the airstrip; and four in the Temple's residence in Georgetown, the capital of Guyana.

Although scholarly analyses of the theology and sociology of Peoples Temple have challenged this basic story,¹² and recent dramatic and cinematic creations have also contested this narrative, it seems to remain firmly fixed in the public's mind.

Pulling against these official narratives, or rather, co-existing alongside the centripetal compulsion, are centrifugal forces that decentralize, destabilize, and disunify. These forces are the artistic representations of Jonestown, or to use Bakhtin's language, artistic "dialogues," which undermine established opinion. "Indeed," he writes,

any concrete discourse... finds the object at which it was directed already as it were overlain with qualifications, open to dispute, charged with value, already enveloped in an obscuring mist—or, on the contrary, by the "light" of alien words that have already been spoken about it. It is entangled, shot through with shared thoughts, points of view, alien value judgments and accents.¹³

Thus any attempt to speak about Jonestown, for example, already faces a "tension-filled environment of alien words, value judgments and accents." The extremely controversial nature of Jonestown is far from neutral, despite attempts to tame it by a variety of different interests. Most, though not all, artistic interpretations of the events exert a centrifugal resistance against all efforts to "explain Jonestown," or even to find meaning in it. "For Bakhtin there can never be a first and last word; this is why every word is only one in a chain of utterances stretching back to the beginning of history and forward to its end."¹⁴

Bakhtin finds centrifugal currents of "heteroglossia" in what he calls the "low genres," that is, not just in accepted high culture, but in street songs, fairs, anecdotes, sayings, and the

activities of clowns.¹⁵ We can discover Jonestown represented in this kind of low culture in works ranging from T-shirts and “sampled” music, to trashy novels and Kool-Aid graphics. But we can also come across heteroglossia in high art as well, in works which depart from the traditional re-telling of the story. Anna Wisniewski’s drama about how a young, gay survivor of Jonestown attempts to deal with the tragedy in the aftermath of losing his family is a good example of one such departure, as is Fred D’Aguiar’s book-length poem *Bill of Rights*, which tells the story of Jonestown from a Guyanese perspective.¹⁶ Neither gay nor Guyanese voices are currently part of the public narrative about Jonestown.

In short, artistic representations of the events in Jonestown are dialogical, and exist within an historical context that is by no means exhausted by the “facts” as they have been explicated by historians, the media, or apostates. Conspiracy theories, for instance, challenge the unified story and undermine any and all attempts at achieving “closure” on Jonestown, although in their own way they attempt to provide resolution to the insoluble dilemmas of murder, suicide, loyalty, and rebellion.¹⁷ The events themselves are so enormous that they resist confinement. “The present, in its so-called ‘wholeness’ (although it is, of course, never whole) is in essence and in principle inconclusive; by its very nature it demands continuation, it moves into the future, and the more actively and consciously it moves into the future the more tangible and indispensable its inconclusiveness becomes.”¹⁸ Bakhtin’s theory of the dialogical nature of literature—and its inevitable inconclusiveness—applies well to the ways artists are treating Jonestown and Peoples Temple. A number of examples demonstrate this.

Dialogue About Jonestown

Although we can consider representations of Jonestown in a number of ways, I am going to concentrate on just three. The first approach looks at the difference between representations which use “Jonestown” as an object to signify a range of meanings, and those which take Peoples Temple and Jonestown as a subject for further investigation. The second method studies Jonestown iconography—not just in images, but also in the various cultural references that have been loosed from their origins in the violent deaths of men, women, and children. The final way of thinking about representations is to examine the contrast between high art and low comedy, a distinction which Bakhtin suggests, but does not put into quite those words. High art takes itself seriously and wants others, especially critics, to take it seriously as well. Low comedy takes itself less seriously, and may have broader appeal, especially commercial appeal. Clearly these are overlapping approaches, with one work perhaps objectifying Jonestown in a low form, or another utilizing the iconography to make a serious, rather than frivolous or trivial, statement about the mass deaths. Nevertheless, these categories can be useful.

Jonestown as Object or Subject

We can find a number of examples of Jonestown treated as an object. Many works use the Jonestown narrative—by which I mean images, figures, and tropes as well as texts—or evoke the events, in order to make a point about something else. It is an object in its own right which has multiple meaning. The word “Jonestown” might be used, for instance, to suggest death, chicanery, or oppression in a completely different context. Or it might simply be exploited for shock value. The Brian Jonestown Massacre, a rock band vaguely reminiscent of 1960s British groups, includes Jonestown in its name as an attention-getting device, much as the Dead

Kennedys or Jello Biafra selected their names. The musical group Jonestown also uses the name to connote a variety of meanings. Its songs, which oscillate between rap and mushy R&B, do not address Jonestown directly, but the themes of oppression might. In these ways Jonestown is evoked but is not the focus of the artists' goal.

This contrasts with works that attempt to deal specifically with Jonestown or its fallout, such as suicide, guilt, or shame. Pat Parker's poem "Jonestown" and Washington S. McCuistian's poem "A Jonestown for Worms" both deal with a number of ramifications of the event. Parker's poem closely examines Peoples Temple and Jonestown, and the reasons for what transpired, noting that the roots of the tragedy lay in America's racism and indifference.¹⁹ "They were murdered/by shopkeepers/who didn't care," she writes, "They were murdered/by church people/who didn't care," and so on, listing all of the little murders that allow her to conclude that "they went to Jonestown dead." McCuistian's poem could be read as either a statement of the arbitrariness of the natural order, or a commentary about America's response to the Jonestown tragedy, or to tragedy in general.

I am walking with David down the sidewalk.
In our path are crisp, shriveled worms a foot or two away from the grass.
It is a Jonestown for worms.
It is a veritable orgy of bloodletting without, of course, all the blood.²⁰

McCuistian says they "feel like clucking at them in a silent, pitiful way," until they notice that "it is a fine day, a good day, really, and not too hot." Certainly the impact of Jonestown, at times, has been as inchoate and meaningless as a bunch of dried worms on the sidewalk.

Because the very word "Jonestown" evokes multiple impressions within those who were alive and conscious in 1978, it is not always clear what meaning is intended. Even those who were born long afterwards have a sense that Jonestown was something strange, mysterious, or evil. Yet some works manage to undermine this meaning, or to interrogate it at a deeper level. Winston Jarrett and the Righteous Flames, for example, have a reggae song titled "Jonestown" which initially leads the listener to believe Jarrett is singing about Jonestown when he says "No one remember/No one remember/Jonestown."²¹ But the reggae singer is actually describing his hometown, Jonestown, a poor ghetto in the slums of Kingston, Jamaica.

These examples show how Jonestown could instantly evoke some sort of signification. But its import depends upon whether the word—and all that lies behind the word—is used as an object for a variety of purposes, or as a subject of investigation in its own right.

Jonestown in Iconography

A second way to think about how artists treat Jonestown and Peoples Temple is to classify the iconography of Jonestown. That is, to look at how Jim Jones, the "White Night" suicide drills, or other images and narratives that dominate public memory of the events, are depicted in various media. The primary icons for Jonestown are the vat of poison—and related to that, a pitcher of Kool-Aid²²—dead bodies, and Jim Jones.

Kool-Aid has entered American popular culture and language, with the expression "drinking the Kool-Aid" having multiple meanings. When I analyzed these meanings several years ago, evidence was somewhat difficult to find.²³ These days, however, Google Alerts report daily incidents of people saying they drank the Kool-Aid, either to indicate whole-hearted support for something, or mindless capitulation. George W. Bush supporters, for example, are depicted as

drinking Kool-Aid. Touré, a writer for *Rolling Stone*, *The Village Voice*, and other magazines, titled a collection of his essays *Never Drank the Kool-Aid*.²⁴ Touré explains the origin of the expression and says that it means “buying into what someone else tells you.” When a friend of his began working for rapper Puff-Daddy and started spouting Puff’s philosophies, Touré accused him of drinking the Kool-Aid. He says that:

We’ve called this collection *Never Drank the Kool-Aid* to suggest that I never bought into the philosophy of the rappers, singers, and celebrities I wrote about. I wasn’t there to help extend their brands and the story they were selling.²⁵

This is a clear example of using a cultural reference to Jonestown apart from the reality of Jonestown.

We might find a form of low art that concentrates on Kool-Aid for shock value, such as the cartoon by Brian Fugett in which an evil neighbor lures some children into drinking Kool-Aid: “Using a pristine set of Harry Potter novels as bait, Mr. Cooper convinces the neighbor’s kids to re-enact the Jonestown massacre with him.”²⁶ Another might be a form of high art that is attempting to reach a critical audience with some sort of message of importance, using the same Kool-Aid image. Caroline Epp’s “Remember?” series includes the smiling pitcher of Kool-Aid as one of several common images that instantly take us back in history, with the caption “Remember Jonestown.” It is part of a series of images: an envelope is captioned “Remember Anthrax?”; a cigar is captioned “Remember Monica?” An image of a refrigerator asks “Remember Dahmer,” reminding us of serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer’s habit of saving parts of his victims for later enjoyment. A Nike tennis shoe is noted with “Remember Heaven’s Gate,” since the trademark shoe was found on all of the victims’ feet. The artist writes that “what interests me is that in our soon forgotten, yet intense, media frenzies, the perverse nature of certain situations becomes identified with simple household objects. The objects, usually scarcely noticed, take on a meaning that is corrupted by the scandal.”²⁷

A second icon, and one that is linked to poisoned Kool-Aid, is the picture of bodies lying on the ground. The enormity of the loss can be seen quite clearly in the sheer horror of the body count. It is no wonder that the image of corpses excited the minds of conspiracy theorists, graphic artists, and fine artists. On the twentieth anniversary (“sans 7 months”) a street theater group of urban guerillas named Ten-Fat-Tigers “again did a [sic] honorary re-enactment to the brave souls who took their lives in the name of freedom and socialism.”²⁸ They had done a re-enactment the year before, as well as performances of a “Clown Lynch Mob” (1998), “Human Vivisection” (1997), and a “Crucifixion Re-enactment” (1996).

Laura Baird’s 12-by-12 foot tapestry, “Jonestown Carpet,” presents the iconic aerial shot of bodies surrounding the Jonestown Pavilion, but with her own interpretive additions. Baird was struck by David Hume Kennerly’s aerial photo of the bodies for *Time Magazine*, and initially chose that as an object of analysis rather than Jonestown per se. The death of her sister in 1980 strengthened her resolve to actually go forward with the project which would take ten years to complete (although she says she deliberately left one portion unfinished, to signify that it will never be finished). Baird writes that

it seemed utterly inadequate to participate in and perpetuate the various concurrent discourses on the shortcomings of photography and issues of representation. While such theoretical matters were hard to avoid in art practice in the 1980s, it seemed to me they could not measure up to the task of explaining the unforgettable qualities of those aerial photographs of the Jonestown dead.²⁹

The project seemed to take on a life of its own, according to Baird, as the more she studied the photograph, the clearer particular aspects of it became, such as a banana leaf, or arms entwined around others. “In this way the subject I chose in 1981, the aerial photograph, seemed to transcend itself and become something else.” As Cliff Eyland notes, the tapestry is both “a memorial to the victims of mass killing,” an “obsessive labor,” and a “ten-year-long meditation on the deaths” of 900 people.³⁰ And yet, according to Baird, it did not begin as such, and instead was simply an object, the means to reflect upon the topic of representations, of photography, and of meaning.

Jim Jones, the charismatic and enigmatic leader of Peoples Temple, is another icon that continues to intrigue artists on many levels: psychological, theological, pathological, homicidal. An Associated Press photograph has been reconceptualized in numerous ways, appearing on book jackets, promotional posters, album covers, paintings on black velvet, even a T-shirt. These representations capitalize on public memories of Jones, in much the same way that images of Adolf Hitler or John Lennon create a thought world with only a glimpse of a moustache, or a hint of gold-rimmed glasses. Jones’ sunglasses lend an aura of menace and mystery, and also make him instantly recognizable.

Most of these examples of iconography do come from the visual arts, with the exception of the Kool-Aid expression. But the fact that writers or playwrights have capitalized on Jim Jones, or on the bodies—as has occurred in various re-enactments of the deaths³¹—should not rule out considering iconography more broadly than just images.

Jonestown in High Art and Low Comedy

Bakhtin discusses the idea of low art in his study of *Rabelais and His World*.³² We can distinguish between high art and low comedy when we consider various treatments of Jonestown. There are a number of trashy novels that capitalize on the sensationalistic aspects of Jonestown: sex, murder, drugs, suicide, mind control, and so on. On the other hand there are novels like Wilson Harris’ *Jonestown*, or Fraser Sutherland’s book-length poem *Jonestown*, which critics would consider good literature. We can make the same distinction between the simple yet powerful line drawings by San Francisco artist JoeSam, and the velvet paintings of Jim Jones by Jack Malebranche.

While Baird’s tapestry magnifies the horror of the bodies by blowing a snapshot into the size of a room, Frank Zappa’s symphonic piece “Jonestown,” written within six years of the event, amplifies the horror in a different way. There is a percussive sound throughout that evokes the idea of someone repeatedly hitting a galvanized tub, reminding listeners of the vat of poison. The music is eerie, spectral, and reminiscent of the deaths. Zappa is never really easy to listen to, and “Jonestown” is as disturbing as anything he has written. It probably would be considered high art in the sense that music critics would take him and his work seriously.

Diego Harmon’s “sampling” of a tape made in Jonestown—“Rev. Jim Jones (Lords of the Primates)” —features Jones talking, saying over and over “you figure that out if you want to,” and “I got all things in store.” Harmon, who says he is influenced by German kraftwerk and the History Channel, interprets Jones’ message as being one of challenging us to think, or not to think. He believes that Jones had a back-up escape route he intended to use. “I am also intrigued by what he meant in referring to reptiles and lords of the primates. Did he have secret government knowledge of people, places or things, and—because of this—reacted towards

people the way he did?”³³ This piece might be considered low comedy: even though it grasps horrifying snatches of sound, there is something oddly humorous about the whole piece. Given “Diego Music Creations” as a whole, as they appear on his website, the humor seems intentional. A sampling includes: “Ronald Reagan (Space Alien Threat)”; “The Driver Shot Kennedy”; and, “Adolph Hitler (New Life Form).”³⁴

Ken Risling’s song “Jonestown: The Unanswered Question” probably falls somewhere between Zappa and Harmon on the culture continuum. In a kind of folksy, singer-songwriter tune, he addresses Jonestown directly by posing several questions to his friend, Annie Moore, who died there.

I don’t believe it for one minute
 (Is it true? Is it true?)
 It was him not you that did it
 (Could it be? Could it be?)
 Underneath the starry skies
 I ask again, then I realize
 I won’t be hearing back again from you.³⁵

Risling concludes with a question worthy of Dick Tropp’s hope expressed at the outset of this paper: “There’s really just one question, now, that lingers on my lips:/Had I walked that final mile inside your shoes/Would I do the same damn thing if I were you?” That is indeed the question, or at least one of them: what would any of us have done had we been part of the movement and were committed to the bitter, very bitter, end.

Jonestown appears in both analytic and exploitative venues. Numerous potboilers have attempted to take advantage of what Gar Wilson’s novel calls *Terror in Guyana*, with the cover caption reading: “Hitler’s legacy is alive in South America.”³⁶ Nick Carter’s *Retreat for Death* is “a race against time as Nick tries to prevent another Jonestown massacre.”³⁷ *Cult Sunday*, by William D. Rodgers, “begins with church bells and ends in terror.”³⁸ Most mysterious of the novels with popular appeal is Harold Robbins’ book *Dreams Die First*.³⁹ The book, with a publication date of 1977, describes a suicide cult. Granted, the 1970s saw the rise of so-called cults with the expansion of Unification Church, Scientology, and the Hare Krishnas, so perhaps Robbins was merely opportunistic rather than prescient. Nevertheless, the book sounds an eerie note, or would have if it weren’t so poorly written.

One writer who crosses the border between low comedy and high art is Armistead Maupin, whose novels about San Francisco include a Temple member who dies in Jonestown. In *Further Tales of the City*, however, it turns out that she escaped from Jonestown with her two children.⁴⁰ Her friends in San Francisco think she’s dead, but she returns in secret to live with her mother. She reports that Jim Jones is alive, and that it was his double who died in Jonestown. *The San Francisco Chronicle* initially serialized Maupin’s stories, which feature familiar landmarks and significant characters for Bay Area residents. *Further Tales of the City* displays a sense of poetic justice when an elderly black housekeeper shoots and kills Jim Jones, and then buries him in the backyard of a wealthy woman, the mother of the woman who escaped. Maupin does not address the deeper questions of Jonestown, however, nor the San Francisco community’s response to the events. But he does weave Jonestown into the fabric of his stories, which is a natural thing to do considering his subject (San Francisco) and his audience (San Franciscans). Indeed, it would take a deliberately willful act to write Jonestown out of any depiction of San Francisco in the late

1970s and 1980s. Maupin's tales show how deeply embedded Jonestown is within San Francisco culture.

The three most ambitious representations of Jonestown to date—in addition to Laura Baird's tapestry—are Fraser Sutherland's poem *Jonestown*, Wilson Harris' eponymous novel, and Leigh Fondakowski's drama *The People's Temple*. Sutherland's poem is epic in length, extremely well-researched, and complex in its treatment of the subject. It does not take a position for or against Peoples Temple, its members, or Jim Jones, but rather presents them in all of their ambiguity.

He has taken Himself a body
 His hair is black as a raven
 sayeth Solomon
 He shaves with a razor
 sayeth Isaiah
 He comes as God Socialist!
 You understand the mystery? If
 you don't have a God & you're already
 believing you have to build a society
 to eliminate poverty racism & injustice & war
 He will not bother you. But if
 you're holding onto that sky god
 He'll nose him out to 10 lengths every time!
 What's your sky god ever done?⁴¹

Sutherland has taken bits of audiocassettes, sermons, and Temple theology and mixed them into a compelling tale which is both factual and symbolic.

The People's Temple is a documentary drama by the same group of writers who developed *The Laramie Project* and *The Trials of Oscar Wilde*. Using first-person interviews, tape transcripts, letters, and songs, the playwrights allow many voices from Peoples Temple to emerge, some of which have never been heard before. The effect of the polyphonous production challenges traditional narratives about Peoples Temple and Jonestown, such as the myth of Jones being entirely evil or utterly insane, or the myth of brainwashed followers. "I was a street person, alright," says Tim Carter in the play.

I was a Vietnam vet and I was a hippie who came in off the streets. And when I came back from Vietnam and Kent State happened, I was so angry I was crying because it was those same people that sent me off to war and I went out and bought a hunting knife and I went down to San Francisco City Hall and I wanted the revolution to come down right then. And then all of a sudden, this little voice inside me said, "And accomplish what?" I knew I had to find a spiritual solution ... and I'll only speak for myself, as soon as I walked into the temple, I was home. I knew those people. I had known those people all my life.⁴²

The dialogical nature of art which Bakhtin identifies is apparent internally and externally in *The People's Temple*. Within the play itself we hear apostates, true believers, reporters, family members, critics and those who were left voiceless by their deaths. But outside and across the play the audience also is in conversation with the drama both as it contests what we "know" about Jonestown, and as it affirms the accepted narrative. Michael Bellefontaine described "the audience as participants" in a review of the play which analyzed the reactions of people affiliated with the Temple who watched their own lives and those of their loved ones unfold in a play

about their experiences. Bellefountaine argues that the personal stories survivors were willing to share humanized the Jonestown dead. “It is only through the pain of telling and re-telling these stories that we are able to go beyond the images of the bodies in death and get to the humanity of the people in life.”⁴³ Bellefountaine adds that the play helps contemporary audiences—including the generation born after 1978—to “explore what connections the situation from the period reflects what is happening in modern times. Are we really so different than those who went to Jonestown?” he asks, echoing the question Ken Risling asks in his song about Annie.

The most ambitious, and difficult, treatment of Jonestown is Wilson Harris’ novel *Jonestown* which moves backward and forward between ancestral Caribbean time and Jonestown time.⁴⁴ The story of Francisco Bone is told in flashbacks and flash forwards. In this narrative, Jonestown does indeed represent the eternal and the symbolic, though probably not in the way Dick Tropp imagined. Harris writes a “memory theatre,” that is, the stage upon which memories are enacted. He ties the deaths in Jonestown to the South American culture of Mayan sacrifices, colonialism, and post-colonial oppression. In his introduction he states that all of the characters in the book are “fictional and archetypal.”⁴⁵ Harris states that it is essential create a jigsaw in which “pasts” and “presents” and likely or unlikely “futures” are the pieces that multitudes in the self employ in order to bridge chasms in historical memory.⁴⁶

Memory theatre has no fixtures. One exercises a riddle of proportions as one writes of time and times, in time and times, through time and times, as if blended times are the solid and elusive foundations of holocaustic Jonestown... The lives and limbs of those who have perished need to be weighed as incredible matter-of-fact that defies the limits of realistic discourse. [ellipses in original].⁴⁷

Reviewers have called Harris’ book surreal, metaphysical, metafictional, science fiction, and dream fiction.⁴⁸ Andrew Armstrong uses *Jonestown* to examine historical instances of terror and genocide.⁴⁹ He employs the concept of “palimpsest narratives” to “emphasize the ‘enduring afterlives’ of historical events.”

Harris thus *reads* Jonestown as a repeated slaughter superimposed on other narratives of histories and legends and engages it in a playful intertextuality with these narratives by showing the scaffolding behind the construction of his novel. *Jonestown*’s (meta)fictionality, the playfulness in the writing (the narrative voice) challenge simple readings not only of the novel, but of the historico-mythical narratives around which the novel revolves.

Armstrong calls *Jonestown* “parodic writing,” affirming—though not noting—Bakhtin’s discussion of carnival, and adds that such parody does not deny the essential seriousness of the event. The re-staging of history creates an alternative perspective on the events, allowing us to think of them in different ways.

Harris’ book is not easy to read: it jumps around between story, philosophy, and history. One can say it is, and it is not, about Jonestown. Jonestown serves as its point of departure, its pivot point for exploring a number of important issues: justice, life, death, oppression. Harris creates a character he calls “Carnival Lord Death,” whose “pitiless barter of the numb word, numb lips, numb ears and eyes” mocks justice. “What sort of Justice did Carnival Lord Death administer? He was a just man: as just as any man could be in the Mask of Death. What are the foundations of Justice as the twentieth century draws to a close?”⁵⁰ We cannot read Jim Jones into the character of Carnival Lord Death, or into any of the figures Harris draws. And yet we cannot read Jones apart from that character either. Life and meaning are greater than Jonestown; and yet Jonestown makes up that life and that meaning in a post-colonial context.

Several other major works are still to come: Anna Wisniewski's two-act play *Dark Matter* was a finalist in the Eugene O'Neill playwright's competition in 2006. Set at Cornell University in 1982, *Dark Matter* depicts the conflict faced by a young man in graduate school who has told no one he escaped from Jonestown. The dilemma faced by Mundy Gato, who abandoned family members to save his own life, is this: who can he trust, and how much can he share? Wisniewski interviewed numerous Temple members about life in the organization and what it was like to be gay and bisexual in order to better understand Peoples Temple, Jonestown, and day-to-day life in the group, especially for adolescents.

Slain in the Spirit is a blues/gospel opera featuring music by Taj Mahal. The libretto and lyrics are being written by Susan Yankowitz, author of the plays *Phaedra in Delirium* and *Knife in the Heart*. Yankowitz, who has been developing the project for more than a decade, is working with the Lafayette Inspirational Choir—an interracial chorus whose members serve as the Jonestown community, to develop the opera—which focuses on the diverse group of believers who were attracted by the promise of a racially integrated world. The opera tries to understand the failings in our society that endow charismatic leaders like Jones the power they wield over followers. “I am committed to challenging the prevailing reductive view of the Jonestown people as mindless sheep in thrall to an insane megalomaniac,” Yanokwitz writes. “Given our current struggles with religious fanaticism and the gradual erosion of the civil liberties on which this country was founded, we need more than ever to understand the failings in our society and the human needs, unfulfilled to this day, that led to the Jonestown tragedy.”⁵¹

Award-winning author Annie Dawid began working on a novel about Jonestown when she got side-tracked while researching communal groups that existed in the 1960s. A journal she wrote while she was on sabbatical and reading everything she could about Peoples Temple reveals some of her understanding of the subject:

Everything in the world represents some aspect of Jonestown, or so it seems to me. George W. Bush and his fear mongering; the bombers in Iraq and the London Tube; all the animals in *Animal Farm*; the population of Narnia and nearly every children's movie and book which grapple with the meaning of good, the menace of evil.⁵²

Although the journal is far from the novel, her listing of book titles alone evokes the plurality of visions of the event, and the difficulty of coming to terms with it.

Beyond Jonestown; The Secret of Jonestown; Jonestown Massacre; Jonestown and the Manson Family; Jonestown in American Cultural History; Unraveling the Mysteries of Jonestown; Hearing the Voices of Jonestown; The Untold Story of Jonestown; The Jonestown Letters; The Need for a Second Look at Jonestown; A Sympathetic History of Jonestown; The Untold Story of What Happened Before—and Beyond—Jonestown; Jonestown & Other Madness; Remembering Jonestown; Surviving Jonestown; Behind Jonestown; From Babylon to Jonestown...

Dawid has begun writing, but admits she has a long way to go. [Note: Dawid has since completed her manuscript, but has been unable to find a publisher.]

These three works in progress, as well as earlier endeavors, are recovering alternative tropes, images, and narratives that had been lost under the weight of media coverage and the centripetal forces of historiography. The focus has shifted from dead bodies and Jim Jones, to witnesses—living and dead—and to individuals who were committed to the dream of a better life for everyone. The voices of those who died trying to live a life of social justice and racial equality

had been muted, but not lost. Today, survivors are coming forward with their own stories which challenge overarching narratives about Jonestown. Thoughtful accounts, passionate reflections, and inspired observations are replacing images of bodies and Jones and Kool-Aid. It does seem likely that existing iconography will remain in place, however, even though these new interpretations of Jonestown are becoming more and more prevalent, and despite their resonance with contemporary audiences that share the vision of a just society.

I have provided merely a sampling of the better-known works in this brief overview, and have undoubtedly neglected some. I did not mention Henning Mankell's mystery novel *Before the Frost*, which alludes to Jonestown. Nor did I note two additional plays, *Jonestown Express*, by James Reston Jr. and *Jonestown: The Musical* by Brian Silliman and Larry Lee, both of which have seen public performances. I did not refer to the Jonestown Reenactment, which occurred in Spring 1998 in the United Kingdom. Nor did I bring up performance artist Fernando Maneca's one-man show of "Drinking the Kool-Aid" in Spring 2006, in which he uses the metaphor to critique "believing without questioning" in current politics.⁵³ Their absence from analysis is primarily due to lack of space, rather than absence of interest. There are assuredly other representations that have been neglected.

Carnival

At the outset of this paper it might have seemed unimaginable to link the events at Jonestown with Bakhtin's concept of carnival: the cacophony of multiple voices shouting out from greasy curtains hiding sideshow freaks. And it is still unimaginable to link the *events* with carnival. But it should be clear by now how appropriate it is to use the metaphor of carnival to describe the multiplicity of *representations of the events*. Although Bakhtin himself tends to describe carnival as the product of low culture, that is, the types of culture disdained by authorized grant funders or gallery owners, carnival does encompass more than mere parody, satire, and spoof.

Bakhtin turns to Goethe for an understanding of carnival, and identifies several relevant points.⁵⁴ First, carnivals are popular in character; they are initiated by the people in celebration. "It is a festival offered not by some exterior source but by the people to themselves." Because of this self-generated entertainment, the audience is not obligated to any external source for gratitude or respect. "They are given nothing, but they are left alone." There is no official commentary, or in Bakhtin's words "sanctimonious acknowledgement," such as we might find at well-organized parades, or publicly-financed holiday celebrations. "There are no brilliant processions inviting the people to pray and admire. Instead a signal is given to each and every one to play the fool and madman as he pleases," observes Bakhtin. Further, carnival dispenses with hierarchy and formality, and is marked by familiarity and freedom.

The carnivalesque crowd in the marketplace or in the streets is not merely a crowd. It is the people as a whole, but organized *in their own way*, the way of the people. It is outside of and contrary to all existing forms of the coercive socioeconomic and political organization, which is suspended for the time of the festivity.⁵⁵

This kind of free-for-all appears to be counter-intuitive to providing any understanding of Jonestown. The suggestions of festival, comedy, and light-heartedness seem particularly inappropriate. Yet, carnival "is both comic and tragic," in the words of Julia Kristeva, "or rather, it is *serious* in the same sense as is the carnivalesque; through the status of its words, it is

politically and socially disturbing.”⁵⁶ It must be serious in order not to reinforce existing power structures, so that it can truly “become the scene of its *other*.”⁵⁷

Carnival presents a form of resistance to the dominant culture’s form of discourse, exerting a centrifugal strength out and against the status quo. In this respect, it would be particularly apt to describe the various representations of Jonestown as carnivalesque, since dialogism “defines itself by its refusal of all forms of transcendence, all attempts to unify.”⁵⁸ Because what happened in Jonestown was so fantastic, so extreme, it approximates traditional sites of adventure within the genre or category of carnival, e.g. brothels, robbers’ dens, taverns, fairgrounds, and prisons.⁵⁹ Exploitation novels about cults, especially Jonestown, are proof of that. But equally exotic in today’s world is the social experiment that led so many to abandon a materialistic, capitalistic, individualistic existence in favor of a communal lifestyle of self-sacrificing loyalty. Many survivors today speak nostalgically about their experiences, even though they hate Jim Jones and the tragic loss of blood kin and adopted relatives. An entire generation of young people today knows little about communalism, utopianism, or alternative economic choices, however, because the events in Jonestown seemed to discredit choices that rejected the status quo. Thus, the call to community is also the call of the carnival barker who exhorts the spectator to see the strange and fabulous, the weird and bizarre.

Co-extensive with the heteroglossia of carnival, is the centripetal attraction of the event itself. The magnitude of Jonestown, the sheer number of deaths, exerts a centripetal force. Why else would artists return to the subject again and again? People are drawn to exploring many facets of Jonestown: from dissecting the lives of individuals, to searching the meaning of their deaths, to uncovering examples of heroism and cynicism and cowardice. Bakhtin does not explain centripetal force in exactly this way, since what he means to describe is the hegemonic discourse by which society maintains itself and keeps order. Still, it fair to say that Jonestown acts like a magnet, pulling people to itself. In our own research, my husband and I have come to call this force “The Vortex,” by which we refer to the phenomenon of people who are sucked into a life-changing research project or artistic endeavor after casually listening to some audiotapes from Jonestown, or after reading a few books about Peoples Temple.⁶⁰

Carnival is open-ended, with meaning imbued by multiple parties, and with no single voice dominating the conversation. “Bakhtin’s insistence on the unfinishedness of self and world privileges the voice of *everyone*.”⁶¹ He resists completion, teleology, and closure. Writing about the novel, Bakhtin says that polyphony promotes “an indeterminacy, a certain semantic openendedness, a living contact with unfinished, still-evolving contemporary reality (the openended present).”⁶² The same is true of discussions about Jonestown. Instead of artists—as well as historians and public officials—attempting to determine *the* meaning of Jonestown, Bakhtin’s dialogical imagination encourages us to seek multiple meanings. And, more importantly, to let the voices be heard, in all of their Babel of tongues and contradictions. This method does not result in meaningless trivia, or arbitrary conclusions, but rather begins to approach the truth of the matter—or at least a preliminary understanding of it—by a process of triangulation. That is to say, we find our bearings by taking numerous readings from different locations in order to find out where we are when it comes to Jonestown. But artists challenge us to take our bearings all over again, even after we think we have arrived.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Richard Tropp, cited in *Dear People: Remembering Jonestown*, ed. Denice Stephenson (San Francisco and Berkeley: California Historical Society Press and Heyday Books, 2005), xvi.
- ² Stanley Nelson, dir., *Jonestown: The Life and Death of Peoples Temple*, 2006.
- ³ Annie Dawid, "Fathom These Events: Jonestown, A Novel. A Writer's Journal, excerpts," *Alternative Considerations of Jonestown and Peoples Temple* (Summer 2005), <http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/AboutJonestown/JonestownReport/Volume7/artdawid.htm>, accessed 3 March 2006.
- ⁴ Stephenson, xv-xvii.
- ⁵ M. M. Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 270.
- ⁶ Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," 271.
- ⁷ William D. Lindsey, "'The Problem of Great Time': A Bakhtinian Ethics of Discourse," *The Journal of Religion* 73, no. 3 (July 1993): 314.
- ⁸ Robert Young, "Back to Bakhtin," *Cultural Critique* no. 2 (Winter 1985-86): 76.
- ⁹ Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," 271.
- ¹⁰ Although the government of Guyana also possessed a considerable number of documents relating to Jonestown and its connection to members of the PNC government, those documents were lost in a fire in 1979 which destroyed the building housing those records.
- ¹¹ Audiotape Q 042, U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation, available at <http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/AboutJonestown/Tapes/Tapes/DeathTape/death.html>, accessed 26 June 2006.
- ¹² John R. Hall, *Gone from the Promised Land: Jonestown in American Cultural History*, 2d ed. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 1987, 2004); David Chidester, *Salvation and Suicide: Jim Jones, the Peoples Temple, and Jonestown*, rev. ed. (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1988 and 2003).
- ¹³ Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," 276.
- ¹⁴ Lindsey, 317.
- ¹⁵ Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," 273.
- ¹⁶ Fred D'Aguiar, *Bill of Rights* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1998).
- ¹⁷ Rebecca Moore, "Reconstructing Reality: Conspiracy Theories about Jonestown," *Journal of Popular Culture* 36, no. 2 (Fall 2002): 200-20.
- ¹⁸ Bakhtin, "Epic and Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination*, 30.
- ¹⁹ Pat Parker, *Jonestown and Other Madness* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Firebrand Books, 1985).
- ²⁰ Washington S. McCuistian, *A Jonestown for Worms: New Poems* (Louisville, Ky.: Wasteland Press, 2005).
- ²¹ Winston Jarrett, *Jonestown*, 1984.
- ²² Actually, the Jonestown residents drank a poison-laced British knock-off of Kool-Aid called Flavorade. It was grape flavored.
- ²³ See Rebecca Moore, "'Drinking the Kool-Aid': The Cultural Transformation of a Tragedy" *Nova Religio* 7, no. 2 (November 2003): 92-100.
- ²⁴ Touré, *Never Drank the Kool-Aid: Essays* (New York: Picador, 2006).
- ²⁵ Touré, 1.
- ²⁶ Brian Fugett, "Cranial Flatulence," <http://www.wingtv.net/issue7/jonestown.jpg>, accessed 3 August 2006.

- ²⁷ Caroline Epp, "Remember," <http://www.carolineepp.com/commentary.htm>, accessed 3 August 2006.
- ²⁸ Ten-Fat-Tigers, "Jonestown Reenactment," <http://www.devo.com/tft/jones98.html>, accessed 3 August 2006.
- ²⁹ Laura Baird, "Notes on Jonestown Carpet, 2004," *The Jonestown Report*, <http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/AboutJonestown/JonestownReport/Volume6/artBAIRD.htm>, accessed 29 July 2006.
- ³⁰ Cliff Eyland, "Laura Baird's *Jonestown Carpet*," <http://www.umanitoba.ca/schools/art/content/galleryoneoneone/laurab.html>, accessed 29 July 2006.
- ³¹ In addition to the Ten-Fat-Tigers' reenactment, a "Jonestown Reenactment" was scheduled to occur in London at a public park sometime in 2000. Designed by British performance artist Rod Dickinson, the project had been planned to include a "living history display," with people acting as Jonestown residents and explaining to visitors what their roles were. The production was to conclude with the final white night. So far as I can determine, however, the only part of the reenactment to occur was a presentation of a sermon by Jim Jones performed by actor Graeme Edler. Unfortunately the website www.jonestownreenactment.org is defunct, but some information can be gleaned from http://www.strangeattractor.co.uk/talks_nov.html, accessed 3 August 2006.
- ³² Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Cambridge, Mass.: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1965). I will discuss carnival further in the Conclusion.
- ³³ Diego Harmon, "Music Offers New Interpretation of Jim Jones," *The Jonestown Report*, 7 (2005), <http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/AboutJonestown/JonestownReport/Volume7/artharmon.htm>, accessed 13 July 2006. Harmon's music can also be heard at this link.
- ³⁴ Diego Music Creations, <http://soundclick.com/bands/pageartist.cfm?bandID=265163>, accessed 3 August 2006.
- ³⁵ Ken Risling, *Jonestown: the Unanswered Question* (1995), <http://profile.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=user.viewprofile&friendid=71164487>, accessed 3 August 2006. The song can be heard at this website.
- ³⁶ Gar Wilson, *Terror in Guyana* (New York: Gold Eagle, 1990).
- ³⁷ Nick Carter, *Retreat for Death* (New York, Charter, 1982).
- ³⁸ William D. Rodgers, *Cult Sunday* (Denver: Accent Books, 1979).
- ³⁹ Harold Robbins, *Dream Die First* (New York: Pocket Books, 1977).
- ⁴⁰ Armistead Maupin, *Further Tales of the City* (New York: Perennial, 1982).
- ⁴¹ Fraser Sutherland, *Jonestown* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1996).
- ⁴² Leigh Fondakowski, with Greg Pierotti, Stephen Wanhg and Margo Hall, *The People's Temple* (Minneapolis: The Guthrie Theater, 2005), 40.
- ⁴³ Michael Bellefontaine, "The People's Temple: The Audience as Participants," *The Jonestown Report* 7 (2005), <http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/AboutJonestown/JonestownReport/Volume7/artbellefontaine1.htm>, accessed 13 July 2006.
- ⁴⁴ Wilson Harris, *Jonestown* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996).

- ⁴⁵ Harris, 3.
- ⁴⁶ Harris, 5.
- ⁴⁷ Harris, 82.
- ⁴⁸ Most of these adjectives actually come from the review by Vincent O. Cooper, in *The Caribbean Writer* 12 (1998), at <http://www.thecaribbeanwriter.com/volume12/jonestown.html>, accessed 3 August 2006.
- ⁴⁹ Andrew Armstrong, "Bloody History! Exploring a Capacity for Revision. Restaging History in Wilson Harris's *Jonestown* and Caryl Phillips' *The Nature of Blood*," *Jouvert: A Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 6, no. 3 (Spring 2002), <http://social.chass.ncsu.edu/jouvert/v613/armstr.htm>, accessed 3 August 2006.
- ⁵⁰ Harris, 70.
- ⁵¹ Susan Yankowitz, "Opera and Novel Describe Jonestown Visionary Dream," *The Jonestown Report* vol. 7 (2005), <http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/AboutJonestown/JonestownReport/Volume7/artyanowitz.htm>, accessed 14 March 2006.
- ⁵² Annie Dawid, "Fathom These Events: Jonestown, a Novel. A Writer's Journal, excerpts," *The Jonestown Report*, vol. 7 (2005), <http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/AboutJonestown/JonestownReport/Volume7/artdawid.htm>, accessed 13 July 2006.
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- ⁵⁴ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 246. The information in this paragraph comes from this source.
- ⁵⁵ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 255. Italics in Bakhtin.
- ⁵⁶ Julia Kristeva, "Word, Dialogue, and Novel," in *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. Leon S. Roudiez, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, and Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 82.
- ⁵⁷ Kristeva, 80.
- ⁵⁸ Young, 80. Young appraises various analyses and discussions of carnival and Bakhtin in his useful article.
- ⁵⁹ Kristeva, 82, for the sites of carnival.
- ⁶⁰ We encounter these people via *Alternative Considerations of Jonestown and Peoples Temple*, <http://jonestown.sdsu.edu>, when they write for information. Dramatist Anna Wisniewski captured this image in a photograph available on <http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/AboutJonestown/JonestownReport/Volume7/artwisniewski.htm>.
- ⁶¹ Lindsey, 321.
- ⁶² Bakhtin, *Epic and Novel*, 7.