

Slavery of Faith: The Untold Story of the Peoples Temple from the Eyes of a Thirteen Year Old, Her Escape from Jonestown at 21 and Life 30 Years Later. By Leslie Wagner-Wilson. iUniverse, Inc., 2008. xi + 205 pages. \$17.95 paper.

Jonestown Survivor: An Insider's Look. By Laura Johnston Kohl. iUniverse, Inc., 2010. xii + 185 pages. \$16.95 paper.

Jonestown needs no introduction so large does it loom in the American consciousness as a symbol of evil religion and destructive belief. On 18 November 1978 at a jungle community in the South American country of Guyana, followers of the Reverend Jim Jones drank fruit punch poisoned with cyanide, forcing reluctant fellow members of the Peoples Temple to do so. The 918 deaths, which include the assassination of a United States Congressman and members of his party, constitute one of the most important religious events of the twentieth century.

For Americans, the suicides and murders immediately became a psychic and moral problem that continues to permeate our culture. Jonestown summons many emotions, from fascination to horror, but more often than not, Americans apprehend the Peoples Temple

through ridicule and shallow anticult psychology. Popular interpretations of the Peoples Temple portray members as victims of large-scale brainwashing who made the fatal mistake of “drinking the Kool-Aid.” Most Americans thus never learn that nearly one hundred members of Peoples Temple who were living in Guyana on that day survived. Stigma, grief, and wariness kept most survivors from speaking out.

With the passage of time, Peoples Temple survivors have created networks of fellowship, commemoration, and historic preservation. A few, like Leslie Wagner-Wilson and Laura Johnston Kohl, have written books about their experiences. Their two memoirs, Wagner-Wilson’s *Slavery of Faith: The Untold Story of the Peoples Temple*, and Kohl’s *Jonestown Survivor: An Insider’s Look*, offer complementary perspectives that illustrate the very different subjective experiences of the members. Both books are remarkable testimonies to the authors’ commitment to life in the face of tragedy.

Both women write about their personal lives with dignity and humbling honesty. As children, both Kohl and Wagner-Wilson faced the trauma of divorce in their natal families. Despite this similarity, the circumstances under which each writer became part of the Peoples Temple differed. Kohl’s divorce at a young age was followed by a series of abusive relationships and substance use. She attended a service at the Peoples Temple church a few days after moving from Connecticut to San Francisco. For her, the group brought a sense of order to a life out of control and a network of friends who became a surrogate family. Wagner-Wilson was brought into the Peoples Temple as a young teenager when her mother became involved. Unlike Kohl, who welcomed the structured lifestyle of the community, Wagner-Wilson rebelled against its strict demands through sexual promiscuity and abuse of alcohol.

The accounts also present very different opinions about racial dynamics in the Peoples Temple. Kohl, who is white, remembers the Peoples Temple as a vibrant social experiment that expressed the best impulses of the civil rights movement. She marveled at how the community was intentionally integrated at the most basic levels, such as seating patterns in lunchrooms and cars. Although she grew up in an interracial family with a white stepfather, Wagner-Wilson is African American. She asserts that despite the rhetoric of color-blindness, the environment of the Peoples Temple was not free of quietly held prejudices that led to preferential treatment and inequality. Wagner-Wilson also points out the irony that Jim Jones, who claimed he identified as black, usually chose white women as sexual partners.

Kohl and Wagner-Wilson moved to Guyana under different circumstances. Kohl went early, and first was stationed in Georgetown, Guyana’s capital, where she coordinated food purchases for the remote community. Wagner-Wilson traveled to Jonestown to be reunited with

her son and husband. Barely eighteen when Jakari was born, Wagner-Wilson surrendered guardianship to another Temple member who took the baby to Guyana. For a short time it appeared that in Jonestown Wagner-Wilson and her husband might create a functional marriage, but boredom and isolation led each one to have extramarital affairs.

Wagner-Wilson and Kohl present remarkably different perceptions on issues like workload, accommodations, and the adequacy of food. Their experiences also were shaped by their different places in the Peoples Temple hierarchy. Wagner-Wilson is a sharp critic of the disparities in treatment within the Peoples Temple, especially in Jonestown. For her, problems like inadequate food and enduring discrimination in work assignments belied the group's promises of socialism and racial justice. Free time held few activities beyond volleyball or listening to cassette tapes; members broke up the boredom with casual sex. Wagner-Wilson recalls that discipline was enforced through beatings, coerced boxing matches, and extreme public humiliation. She presents the dark side of practices in the community, such as the possibility that female members were encouraged to pursue sexual liaisons with Guyanese officials. Much of her material has been corroborated in other Jonestown accounts.

Wagner-Wilson's husband, Joe Wilson, was a strongly loyal Peoples Temple member; it is believed he was one of the gunmen at the airstrip in Port Kaituma where Congressman Leo Ryan and four others were killed. Leslie Wagner-Wilson, though, was a member of the rank-and-file, subject to the regular workload and discipline in Jonestown. In contrast, Kohl was on Peoples Temple's "Planning Commission," a leadership position with close personal contact with Jones, and her responsibilities imparted a sense of personal accomplishment. For Kohl, life in Jonestown included a lot of boisterous fun, whenever Jones was not present. She stresses that the community was more about the members than their infamous leader. Even so, the expectations and surveillance at Jonestown were so strict that it was easy to be accused of disloyalty or disobedience, as both authors were. While Kohl was able to recover her standing, Wagner-Wilson's skepticism about community life marked her as a potential troublemaker in need of surveillance and control. Because she attempted to escape, she was placed on a punishment work-detail.

Together, the accounts illustrate the very different subjective experiences of the members. Critical to the context of the final tragic event at Jonestown is the fact that Peoples Temple included both committed members and those wishing desperately to escape. The accounts of Kohl and Wagner-Wilson both refute assumptions of brainwashing. Rather, they demonstrate how difficult it was for the members who had misgivings to voice them, let alone leave the community. Members were encouraged to turn each other in for disloyalty, and thus feared voicing their own doubts.

I should state that one of the writers, Kohl, is a personal friend. Knowing her has changed my perspective on the Jonestown tragedy in many ways. I have come to think of the final event as a mass panic, which virtually no one within the community had the power to resist. Indeed, the memoirs show that Kohl and Wagner-Wilson each survived mostly by luck because they were not at Jonestown on the day of the murders-suicides. As part of a public-relations plan, ahead of Ryan's visit, Jones rotated staff in Georgetown with members from Jonestown. This was done to ensure that the most effective representatives would be able to respond to questions from the American media, who were largely based in the capital. Kohl was part of this team—saved in no small measure by her own faith in the vision of the Peoples Temple. Although Wagner-Wilson thought about leaving the community for several months, and her father was one of the Concerned Relatives, her escape also was serendipitous. On the morning of 18 November 1978, eleven people left Jonestown under the pretext of going on a picnic. Foreseeing trouble with the unfolding of Ryan's visit, they walked nearly thirty miles through the jungle before catching a train to the nearest town. For much of that walk, Wagner-Wilson carried her son in a sling on her back; Jakari Wilson became the youngest Jonestown survivor.

The books converge in their depictions of events following the murders-suicides. The survivors were interrogated by American and Guyanese officials, who were desperately searching for those responsible. When finally allowed to return to the United States, they had to reconstruct lives in a country they believed they had left behind for good. Wagner-Wilson lost many immediate family members, including her husband, mother, and two siblings and their spouses. On her return to the United States, her grief was expressed and exacerbated by substance abuse, homelessness, and domestic violence. Kohl was mostly spared such heartbreaking experiences by joining the San Francisco-based Synanon experiment, a successful drug rehabilitation program that became a controversial intentional community. As with Jonestown, her experiences in Synanon challenge popular conceptions. Kohl discovered a warm social environment where she was able to take several jobs, continue her education, and meet her future husband. As Synanon disbanded, the couple began paperwork for adopting their son Raoul. Over time, Kohl became a Quaker, which she sees as a continuation of her life-long quest for peace, human equality, and social justice.

For Kohl as well as Wagner-Wilson, however, the emotional damage inflicted by Jonestown was worsened by the felt pressure to conceal her past. In the background stand sentiments that anyone who has suffered an exceptional loss will recognize. The women make similar decisions to go public, understanding the telling of their stories as part of their healing journeys. Indeed, both Kohl and Wilson have become seasoned public commentators. A sense of deep affection for members of the

Peoples Temple family resonates through both books, but in each memoir, much is left unsaid. The narratives shift between thick description and succinct summary of major life events. The latter are told dispassionately, in a way that conveys the authors' startling realism forged by tragedy.

Jonestown represents the edge of human experience: a situation to which the natural frailties of our species—a social animal—make us particularly vulnerable. It is disconcerting to think of the victims of Jonestown as regular people, because it implies that we also could fall into the same trap. Portraying Peoples Temple as psychologically distorted reassures us that what took place in Guyana could not happen here. The memoirs are most significant, therefore, in their communication of the normality of the people in Peoples Temple.

In terms of the psychic impact of its devastation, Jonestown was a holocaust for both the Peoples Temple survivors and the American people. Understanding it is a moral challenge for our nation, and these accounts bring essential voices to our collective search. Still, as Jonathan Z. Smith noted, “closure” on Jonestown is neither possible nor desirable. For both readers and the survivors themselves, our efforts to understand bring us to the edge of an abyss that cannot be bridged. Each book ends with a published list of victims and survivors. Kohl and Wagner-Wilson ask readers to read and remember the names. After such an exercise, little more can be said.