

Fade to White SCOTT SAUL REVISITS JONESTOWN

One of the most striking aspects of the Jonestown tragedy—more than nine hundred people dead in a remote Guyanese agricultural settlement, many by their own hands, many not—is captured on a banner that stretched across the pavilion where the community took its meals and staged the suicide rehearsals known as White Nights: “All That Believed Were Together and Had All Things in Common.”

What’s startling is not the emphasis on apostolic togetherness, itself lifted from Acts 2:44, but the tense of the banner’s verbs. Even before the mass murder/suicide on November 18, 1978, the members of the Peoples Temple had begun to think of their lives in the past tense—had begun, in journalist Shiva Naipaul’s words, to “write their obituaries.” The Temple’s most committed members had the sense that they were living out of time, that their experiment in interracial utopianism cut the world too close to the bone and was doomed to perish. “Jim Jones and this movement were born too soon,” wrote an anonymous Temple member on the day of death. “The world was not ready to let us live.” Many religious groups, thus scorned, might turn to the afterlife for a sense of redemption, but the Peoples Temple, which, under Jones’s direction, rejected faith in a “sky-god” in favor of faith in a people’s revolution, turned to history. “Let all the story of this People[s] Temple be told. *Let all the books be opened*”: So wrote the anonymous Temple member, who was probably also responsible for compiling oral histories of Jonestown’s residents. Jim Jones’s last recorded words, from the final White Night, likewise took the form of an argument with historians to come, as if he wished to force anyone sifting through the archives to consider his intent: “We didn’t commit suicide. We committed an act of revolutionary suicide protesting the conditions of an inhumane world.”

Both Jones and his followers had reason to be defensive about how they would be remembered. In Jonestown’s immediate aftermath, few wished to grant the dead the most basic dignities, much less a sympathetic hearing. The Guyanese government let the bodies rot in the tropical sun for days, then denied the US government’s request to have them buried in Guyana. Stuck with the bodies, the US government airlifted them to Dover Air Force Base but refused the request of the bereaved families for thorough autopsies, commonly arranged in cases of violent death. The bodies remained homeless for

an indecent interval. When cemeteries in San Mateo and Marin counties offered to bury the four hundred bodies that remained unidentified—they had decomposed beyond recognition in Guyana—local residents protested, fearing the stigma of having the bodies in their neighborhood. Only after considerable wrangling were the bodies deposited in a mass grave in Oakland’s Evergreen Cemetery.

In the popular imagination, meanwhile, “Jonestown” quickly became shorthand for a Gothic drama of spiritual abasement, with Jones cast as a sunglasses-wearing Svengali and Temple members depicted as drones so brainwashed, so drained of free will, as



Top: Jim Jones with Mr. Muggs, Redwood Valley, CA, 1973. Bottom: John McAdams, one of several actors to portray Jim Jones in *The People’s Temple* at the Berkeley Repertory Theatre, 2005.

to be barely human. The Peoples Temple was characterized as a cult and lumped together with the Hare Krishna sect and the Unification Church, despite the vast differences between the demographics and ideologies of the sects. (The largest group by far at Jonestown—over two-thirds—were African Americans, many born in the South,

who were attracted by the Temple’s fusion of radical social critique and evangelical ritual.) Journalistic accounts likewise tended to play up the most sensational aspects of the Peoples Temple: the sexual swapping of the Temple’s inner circle, the removal of children from the care of their parents, the humiliation of congregants who had strayed from the Temple’s teachings, and, not least, the fraudulent faith healings by Jim Jones himself. By the 1980s, the phrase “drinking the Kool-Aid” became an easy-to-hand way to signify group think, to mock anyone who’d become mechanically obedient to job, church, or political party.

Armistead Maupin’s *Further Tales of the City* (1982), the third installment in his series of lighthearted San Francisco-based melodramas, gives a good indication of how pop culture absorbed Jonestown—by demonizing the figure of Jim Jones and, simultaneously, trying hard to laugh him off. In Maupin’s fictional universe, Jones was alive and well and camped out in a shack in Golden Gate Park, disguised by plastic surgery and passing himself off as a garden-variety drifter. Maupin lent the drifter an absurd air of charisma: He’s introduced as a figure who charms all the animals—dogs, chipmunks, raccoons—that cross his path, and he soon seduces a celebrity-socialite who happens upon his shack. Then the absurdity takes an eerie turn:

order has been restored, the happy ending procured—and all by putting Jim Jones out of sight, where he belongs.

Now, some twenty-five years after the tragedy, the Peoples Temple is finally getting the historical reappraisal that its members yearned for. It would be a severe overstatement to say that they’ve been vindicated, but at least the archive they left has been brought into the public eye, with its perplexities intact. This past spring, building upon several years of research and interviews with survivors, the head writer for the documentary-theater team behind *The Laramie Project*, Leigh Fondakowski, premiered *The People’s Temple*, an affecting account of the rise and disintegration of the church, one that holds the Temple’s beauty and horror in taut relation. And, in tandem with the play’s premiere at the Berkeley Repertory Theatre, in the very area where the Peoples Temple had been based, Denise Stephenson of the California Historical Society has brought out *Dear People: Remembering Jonestown* (Heyday Books), a well-edited collection of sermons, fliers, photos, personal letters, and testimonials that vividly records the lives and struggles of the people of Jonestown. Both the play and *Dear People* give new force to the basic questions that have shadowed Jonestown from the start: How did the Temple manage to inspire such a strong commitment in its followers? And who was responsible for the deaths there?

The appeal of the Peoples Temple was as complicated as the mix of souls drawn to the church. Dick Tropp, Jonestown’s official scribe, characterized church members as “the people who never fit into the slots,” then launched into a catalogue of their identities:

Former church ministers, attorneys, nobodies, aimless college students, secretaries, pushers, prostitutes, labor organizers, social workers, Peace Corps veterans; people who searched and found, were lost, got sidetracked, stuck; jailbirds, salesmen, machinists, designers, card sharks, professors, ditch-diggers, railroaders, artists, jet pilots; accountants, scientists, domestics, draftsmen and actors; high school sports champions, exotic dancers, half-educated, miseducated, uneducated; health-food nuts and junk food addicts. . . . part of the vast underclass that looks at “progress” over a great unbridgeable chasm.

Originally conceived as part of a recitation for several voices, Tropp’s catalogue was designed for dramatic effect, and there’s some Allen Ginsberg-like humor in how it evokes, in a great jumble, the class struggles of the ’30s (“labor organizers,” “railroaders”), the postwar explosion of white- and pink-collar workers (“attorneys,” “secretaries,” “salesmen”), the campus-based

politics of the '60s New Left ("aimless college students," "professors"), and the hard-bitten terrain of the black ghetto ("pushers," "prostitutes," "the vast underclass").

Yet Tropp was right, sociologically speaking, to suggest that there were many roads leading to Jonestown. Jones founded his ministry in Indianapolis in 1955, where his Pentecostal-style healing services and message of interracial love drew a largely white and working-class following. In 1966, he moved his church to a more remote location, in Northern California's Redwood Valley, where it began to attract more educated, middle-class worshippers. (Tropp himself joined the Redwood Valley church after studying literature and philosophy with Norman Brown and Hayden White, and Indian classical music with Ali Akbar Khan.) In Indianapolis and Redwood Valley, the Peoples Temple took on its basic coloration as a utopian community dedicated to interracial fellowship, but the church did not expand by leaps and bounds until Jones opened the San Francisco Peoples Temple in the historically black Fillmore neighborhood, itself destabilized by the failure of urban renewal projects. Jones's messages of working-class uplift—"Labor is the thing that makes the world go"; "the real radical is one who is engaged in a determined struggle to break out of the vicious cycle of violence that is a part of our everyday life"—suddenly found a new resonance. Church membership mushroomed from several hundred to several thousand.

One of the great virtues of *Dear People* is that it includes testimonials from this last group, marginal to many previous accounts of Jonestown, especially the elderly men and women who were searching for alternatives to the mainstream black church and, most of all, for a place they could call home. Unlike many other '70s experiments in communalism, the Peoples Temple welcomed the elderly and even made a fair profit from the administration of a network of nursing homes. In *Dear People* we hear the voice of ninety-nine-year-old Amanda Poindexter, whose parents had been slaves in Halifax County, Virginia, decrying conventional churches as "full of liars, thieves and hypocrites"; the voice of Henry Mercer, a veteran of the Garveyite movement of the 1920s, the Unemployed movement of the 1930s, and the union movement throughout his adult life, describing how he was blinded by tear gas at a 1968 rally; and the voice of David Betts Jackson, who emigrated to Jonestown at age eighty-six and declared that "I been fooling around the United States for a hundred years and it didn't do a thing for me. . . . I was just laying down last night in my bed, looking up in the roof and I say, 'Free at last, free at last.'"

Although these testimonials are hardly the last word on Jonestown, they do convey a major source of the Temple's magnetism: as a refuge for those blacks disenfranchised, on the one hand, with the quietism of many Bay Area churches and, on the other, with the violent theatrics of the Black Power movement. Unlikely as it may seem, the Peoples Temple seemed to many like the best successor to the legacy of Martin Luther King Jr. and his harnessing of the black church to a radically egalitarian political cause. The Temple fed the hungry, clothed the poor, organized the unorganized. At a rubber-chicken dinner in Jones's honor in 1976, then-state assemblyman

Willie Brown Jr. called him a "combination of Martin King, Angela Davis, Albert Einstein, and Chairman Mao." Could there be a better illustration of the many prayers Jones seemed to answer, the irreconcilable fantasies he spoke to? The same year, the *Los Angeles Times* went so far as to name him "Humanitarian of the Year."

The play *The People's Temple* weaves in some of the same testimonials included in *Dear People*, but it is also able, through the resources unique to live theater, to suggest the power of the spectacle that the Peoples Temple delivered to its congregants. The play opens in the sterile space of the archive, where actors in white gloves rummage silently if purposefully through stacks of boxes, inspecting old tape reels and magazines. Gradually, with the ceremoniousness of ritual, they take on the identities located in the boxes: An actor finds a powder-blue cardigan and puts it on; most of the others find choir robes and vest themselves. Then, in a gesture that brings the archive very quickly to life, an older black actress begins to line out the

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gospel number "He's Able"—"There is one, one who knows the road"—and the rest of the ensemble booms with flawless harmony, filling up the silence. In short order, the ensemble has managed to transform itself into a congregation, whose blend of voices extends the promise of a beloved community. We in the audience have a sense that irony lurks somewhere in the wings—this community, we suspect, can't be as beautiful as it sounds, and we notice that one actor merely holds his robe while another sings detachedly—but *The People's Temple* works hard to collapse our sense of distance. To measure what was lost at Jonestown, the play seems to suggest, we need first to listen to the beauty of its music.

By framing the action of the play with songs taken largely from a 1973 gospel album recorded by the Peoples Temple Choir, the play draws out how culturally black the Peoples Temple aimed to be. Blackness was the Temple's central sign of oppression and virtue, of disenfranchisement and soulfulness, and it fell upon anyone who had the courage or misfortune to stand outside the American dream. In one sermon, Jones separated blackness from race and defined it as "a disposition" "to act against evil" and "do good." In another he declared, "I'm a nigger until everybody is free. Till everybody that's treated niggardly is free. I am a nigger. I don't care if you're an Italian nigger, or you're Jewish or an Indian, the only people that are getting anything in this country are the people that got the money, baby."

Yet blackness was not just the subject of Jones's sermonizing; it was the medium itself. "The leadership of the Peoples Temple movement, while predominantly white, emulated Black Church culture in style and form," wrote the editors of *Peoples Temple and Black Religion in America*, and the book's contributors developed the point convincingly. The language of Exodus that Jones employed (the journey of his "Ark" from Indianapolis to the Bay Area and then to Guyana) drew upon black self-understandings of the passage from Babylon to the Promised Land. His millennial dreams and messianism were familiar to those raised on the assurances of Marcus Garvey, Elijah Muhammad, and Father Divine. And his sense that the Temple's antagonists were implacably driven to destroy the church resonated with those who grew up in the Jim Crow South and deeply distrusted institutions of power.

Jones laid such a claim to black spirituality that his church prospered even as he inveighed against organized religion ("slop-house religion," he dubbed it, the feeding

the Peoples Temple had shifted the bulk of its operations a continent away. Alarmed by atrocity tales coming from Guyana, the Concerned Relatives convinced Congressman Leo Ryan to spearhead a fact-finding investigation of the agricultural settlement.

The investigation went awry within twenty-four hours of Ryan's arrival at Jonestown. Several Jonestown families took the opportunity to defect, though Jones pleaded for them to remain at least until the end of the congressman's visit. A Temple member, and former husband of a Concerned Relative, assaulted Ryan with a knife, screaming "Congressman Ryan—you motherfucker!" Ryan's party attempted to leave Jonestown via a plane on the Kaituma airstrip but was attacked by members of Jonestown's security detail, acting perhaps under the orders of Jones himself. Five of Ryan's party, including Ryan himself, died on the airstrip. Meanwhile, back in the pavilion, Jones was leading his congregation through a final White Night, arguing that there was "no way we can survive" and making his case for "revolutionary suicide." Children were administered the poisoned Fla-Vor-Aid first. We do not know what happened in the last hours of Jonestown, but it left, all told, 913 more dead in the settlement.

The case for the prosecution could rest here and would surely carry the day. But what if we're interested less in the issue of criminal culpability and more in the issue of moral responsibility, which can take on several shades of gray? Over the last twenty years, a scholarly consensus has been building, partly informed by the disastrous federal standoff with the Branch Davidians in Waco, Texas, partly now informed by September 11 and its aftermath, that sees the Peoples Temple and the Concerned Relatives as locked in an escalating battle of wills, one that fueled the paranoia of each side. The two groups, by this account, were paired up in a *danse macabre*. For the Concerned Relatives, it seemed like they could mobilize every resource available (the media, Congress, the US Customs Service, the Social Security Administration, the IRS, the FCC) and Jones would merely retreat further into the jungle, taking his "family" with him. For Jones and many Temple members, it seemed like they would be hounded to their dying day by their nemesis organization; they could even immigrate to a far-flung country—a time-honored strategy of dissenting religious movements—and still find no sanctuary.

In his *Journey to Nowhere* (1980), the Trinidad-born journalist Shiva Naipaul laid out this argument first and in its most gripping and astringent form. Where others concentrated the blame for Jonestown on the person of Jim Jones, Naipaul cast a withering eye on a whole network of forces: on the ruling party in Guyana, Forbes Burnham's People's National Congress, that had offered refuge to the Peoples Temple ("a black-supremacist party of the worst kind, a projection into public life of savage instincts and gangster ideology"); on the American government that drove blacks to desperate measures ("America has adopted an unspoken policy of containment and neglect, leavened by welfare and summary street executions by the police"); and, less convincingly, on the politics of self-transformation ("The self is a swamp. Once you become trapped in its quicksand there is little likelihood that you

of pigs at the trough) and called the Bible a "dead letter." Instead of prophesizing salvation in the afterlife, he promised a socialist utopia in this life and encouraged his followers to build it plank by plank. His church would be culturally black but doctrinally Marxist, keyed both to the arrival in the '70s of soul power and to critiques of capitalism as a world system. So Jonestown residents were encouraged both to throw away their Bibles and to sing gospel music with joy in their hearts. Likewise they were asked to distrust media reportage critical of the Temple and instead to watch a set of films that seem to have been specially selected for the lessons they taught about societal corruption and the death drive of capitalism. Stories of political conspiracy and human apocalypse such as *The Parallax View*, *Planet of the Apes*, *Catch-22*, *Chinatown*, and Costa-Gavras's *Z* were shipped to Guyana and screened in Jonestown's pavilion.

The question of who was responsible for the deaths at Jonestown may seem like an open-and-shut case. A skeletal account of the events leading up to November 18, 1978, clearly indicts Jones and his lieutenants. In 1977, a group of ex-Temple members formed the Concerned Relatives and Citizens Committee and organized a campaign of lawsuits, government appeals, and media attention to reclaim those relatives living under the Temple's communal arrangements, some of whom were children. Jones panicked; by the end of 1977

will ever reemerge"). As part of this take-no-prisoners approach, Naipaul was equally severe toward the Concerned Relatives and the members of the Peoples Temple. The former had goaded Jonestown to self-extinction; the latter had become enthralled with its role as victim of a monstrous conspiracy and had played it to the hilt. Each group began to live out the other's nightmares—coconspirators in the end.

Sociologists John Hall and Rebecca Moore have elaborated this argument in more modulated and academic tones. The struggle between the Temple and the Concerned Relatives, Hall points out, "quickly overshadowed daily life in Jonestown, and ironically, it intensified the very conditions—maintenance of a facade, infringement of individual liberties, and discipline—that the Temple's opponents decried." Moore, who lost two sisters at Jonestown, has written incisively of the two forms of violence that dominated the Peoples Temple's final days. From the outside, the Concerned Relatives catalyzed a series of governmental investigations into the Temple, any of which might have imperiled its financial livelihood. The US Customs Service looked into whether the Temple was smuggling contraband; the FCC investigated the Temple's use of amateur radio waves; the Social Security Administration tracked the Social Security checks sent to Jonestown's elderly. Although none of these investigations resulted in formal charges, Temple members were right to feel a noose tightening on their community, and right to feel embattled when they discovered



A flier included in Peoples Temple mail solicitations, 1973.

that Ryan's entourage consisted largely of these sworn enemies of the Temple.

From the inside, the Temple purveyed brutal forms of discipline on the dissident and the faithful alike, anxious to shore up the community's sense of itself. When a young man attempted to escape, he was

shackled in chains for three weeks, then made to chop wood for eighteen hours a day. Other dissidents were intensively sedated in Jonestown's Special Care Unit. Meanwhile all Temple members were asked to participate in rehearsals for a mass suicide, where they drank fruit punch and then pretended to fall down dead. Such rituals of community discipline, Moore writes, alienated some but drew the majority into a closer bond; violence was "the glue which held people together." Thus did the Concerned Relatives go on the attack, and thus did the people of Jonestown turn the logic of repression on themselves, spinning that logic to its fateful conclusion.

Neither the collection *Dear People* nor the play *The People's Temple* engages directly with this argument over moral responsibility, but they seem to reformulate it. Rather than searching for someone to blame, both are driven by the urge to bear witness. Built on a patchwork of testimonials, they get their force by asking us to suspend our sense of judgment, to entertain contrary points of view without delivering a summary verdict on their discrepancies. In *The People's Temple*, the characters themselves model this humility. A tough-as-nails reporter admits that "religion's weird, man . . . I can only tell you what I know";

Jim Jones's son Stephan, who survived Jonestown, calls the Peoples Temple "as tragic as it was wonderful." In an especially effective casting move, the actor playing Stephan—perhaps the production's moral baseline—also plays his father, rendering him as both an addled obsessive and a preacher with a thunderous gift. The play prompts the audience to see the saint in the sinner, and vice versa.

The play's finale is the soul number "Walk a Mile in My Shoes," popularized by Elvis but sung by the Peoples Temple Choir too. On one level, this song is a resentful kiss-off to a mistrustful lover; on another, it's a plea for an elusive recognition of mutuality. The poetry is simple, but the song's mix of hope and wounded righteousness catches with perfect pitch the spirit of the Peoples Temple, as well as the demands that Jonestown places on all who revisit it:

If I could be you, if you could be me, just for an hour,
If we could find a way to get inside each other's minds,
If you could see you through my eyes instead of through your ego,
I think you'd be surprised to see that you were blind.

Walk a mile in my shoes, walk a mile in my shoes,
And before you abuse, criticize and accuse,
walk a mile in my shoes. n

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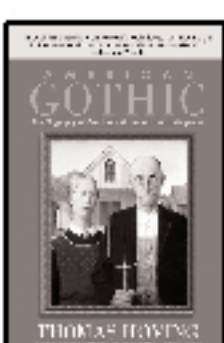
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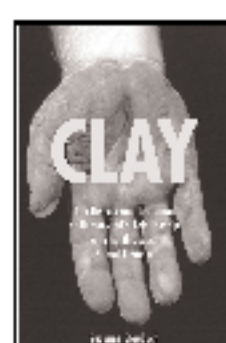
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