

# JONESTOWN IN LITERATURE: CARIBBEAN REFLECTIONS ON A TRAGEDY\*

Rebecca Moore

## *Abstract*

This article examines how several Caribbean writers are using the mass deaths in Jonestown, Guyana in 1978 as elements of their works. Utilising Mikhail Bakhtin's concepts of centripetal and centrifugal forces, and the push-pull dynamic between monologue and dialogue, the article compares Caribbean visions with the central narrative about Jonestown that currently exists. Official accounts about Jonestown focus on the charismatic leader, Jim Jones, and the bizarre nature of the deaths. Caribbean literary representations of Peoples Temple and Jonestown, however, focus on the effects of colonialism, and thus exert a centrifugal influence on monologic discourse about Jonestown. The article concludes that the multiplicity of representations approaches Bakhtin's idea of carnival, in which diverse viewpoints are celebrated outside of mainstream channels.

THIRTY YEARS have elapsed since the murders-suicides of 900 people occurred in the jungle community of Jonestown, Guyana. It may seem like ancient history, but as a cultural reference and subject of ongoing literary 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 organisation that 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.<sup>1</sup>

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

*Literature & Theology* © The Author 2008. Published by Oxford University Press 2008; all rights reserved.  
For Permissions, please email: [journals.permissions@oxfordjournals.org](mailto:journals.permissions@oxfordjournals.org)

concludes with Tropp's words.<sup>2</sup> An article by novelist Annie Dawid begins with them,<sup>3</sup> as does a collection of primary source documents called *Dear People: Remembering Jonestown*, compiled by Denice Stephenson.<sup>4</sup> 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. The reason is that a number of questions remain, ranging from the mundane to the existential. Who was Jim Jones and was he always a madman? Was there a conspiracy to murder people in Jonestown? How could people kill their own children? Why did people go? Why did people stay? Writers working in a variety of genres 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 article 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 selected works from Caribbean writers. 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 literary—as opposed to historical—narratives does seem carnivalesque at times. Specific examples from the Caribbean demonstrate the centrifugal energy of imagination as it pulls against the centripetal force of 'history'. Words and images can be likened to a carnival, where competing sights, thrills, and activities clamor for attention, and demand that the participant choose how to respond.

#### I. 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'.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> 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'.<sup>7</sup> 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'.<sup>8</sup> Bakhtin chafes at the closure required by monologism, because it leads to enslavement by canonizing ideological systems.<sup>9</sup>

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 thousands of documents held by various US government agencies, such as the Department of State, the Department of Defense, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), the US Congress and many others.<sup>10</sup> 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 US 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 has dominated public understanding of Jonestown and Peoples Temple for three decades, and continues to guide analyses to this day. Finally, and until the past 10 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 were silenced. Centripetal forces have pulled the story of Jonestown into a compact narrative that reduces Jonestown to a morality play about the dangers of cults, blind faith and unscrupulous religious con artists. 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* 1962 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 social services such as housing,

legal aid, meals, healthcare, and welfare 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 US 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 Leo Ryan visited the isolated jungle community to investigate conditions there, accompanied by journalists and relatives of Peoples Temple members. On 18 November 1978, fifteen 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 it, 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.<sup>11</sup> 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,<sup>12</sup> and recent dramatic and cinematic creations have also contested this narrative, it seems to remain firmly fixed in the public's mind. Jonestown is all about crazy cultists who drank the Kool-Aid under the coercion of a lunatic.

Pulling against these official narratives, or rather, coexisting alongside the centripetal compulsion, are centrifugal forces that decentralize, destabilize and disunify. These forces are the literary representations of Jonestown, or to use Bakhtin's language, '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.<sup>13</sup>

Any attempt to speak about Jonestown, for example, already faces a 'tension-filled environment of alien words, value judgments and accents'. Despite efforts to tame it, Jonestown retains an extremely controversial nature that is far from neutral. Therefore, the many different representations of the events exert a centrifugal resistance against all efforts to 'explain Jonestown', or to explain it away. '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.'<sup>14</sup>

In short, 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 resistance.<sup>15</sup> 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.'<sup>16</sup> Bakhtin's theory of the dialogical nature of literature—and its inevitable inconclusiveness—applies well to the ways writers in the Caribbean are treating Jonestown and Peoples Temple.

## II. VOICES FROM THE CARIBBEAN

Writers working out of Caribbean life experiences exert a significant centrifugal pull against the dominant North American narrative. Most accounts of Jonestown ignore or dismiss the relevance of Guyana, a cooperative socialist republic located on the north coast of South America. Despite its location, Guyana 'is a part of the English-speaking Caribbean, both for historical and cultural reasons'.<sup>17</sup> The country became an unofficial front in the US war against Communism in the Western Hemisphere after the rise of Castro, and the USA clandestinely supported an Afro-Guyanese government against explicitly Marxist political parties.<sup>18</sup> The CIA funneled money through American trade unions in the 1960s to foment labour violence and destabilise the Marxist-leaning government of Cheddi Jagan. In 1964, the British rigged national elections to ensure Jagan's defeat, and gave Guyana its independence two years later. In 1968, the CIA provided a voter registration system

guaranteed to keep Jagan's successor, Forbes Burnham, in power. Burnham made himself 'president for life' in 1973, and remained in office until his death in 1985.

A wave of political assassinations occurred in the tiny nation throughout the 1970s. They included the fatal stabbing of Father Bernard Darke, a political activist, in the presence of the police; the shooting death of the Minister of Education; the murder of two opposition party members; and the disappearance of Guyana Security Chief James Mentore. The violence culminated in the murder of postcolonial intellectual Walter Rodney in 1980, killed by a bomb explosion in his car. The deaths of more than 600 African Americans in 1978 made Jonestown a part of Guyana's immediate violent past, as well as part of the broader story of colonialism in the New World. Indeed, Jonestown 'was not an ideologically isolated or unconsidered endeavor', according to Duchess Harris and Adam Waterman. 'Jonestown was planned as a means of participating in the project of cooperative socialism with which elements of the Guyanese government were engaged.'<sup>19</sup> Yet Jones' close ties to the Burnham government made the former and his followers uncritical if not unconscious participants in repressive measures backed by US interests.

Recent history, as well as the larger picture of the North Atlantic slave trade and colonialism in the Caribbean, shapes the views of the four authors I discuss. Two non-fiction accounts by Caribbean writers set the stage for examining two literary depictions.

The late Shiva Naipaul—novelist, social critic and younger brother of V.S. Naipaul—divorces Jonestown from its Caribbean context, attributing the rise of Peoples Temple to a decadent California culture that was already 'shop-soiled, eaten up with inner decay'.<sup>20</sup> Naipaul's extremely bitter view of what he considers to be a venal and incompetent Guyanese government and a bunch of self-indulgent North Americans spares no one, but he takes particular aim at 1960s Flower Power and San Francisco radical chic. 'Jim Jones built his movement on the debris of the sixties; on its frustrations, failures and apostasies.'<sup>21</sup>

Naipaul is equally critical of Guyanese resistance to Burnham. He describes a visit he made to the headquarters of the opposition Peoples Progressive Party (PPP) in terms he might have used about members of Peoples Temple.

I was surrounded by believers, by men and women possessed of and possessed by a faith, who saw the world very differently from me. It impressed on me afresh the power of ideas to remake men, to turn them into different kinds of creatures.<sup>22</sup>

He writes that PPP members seemed to have 'hieratic' secrets, and adds that a young woman who said she was learning to be a Communist frightened him.

When he left the meeting and walked the streets of Georgetown, Guyana's capital city, he noted the disintegration evident in the rotting houses built in the colonial era. A discussion he had with Janet Jagan, wife of the opposition leader, leaves him thinking that 'even the massacre of a thousand people could be absorbed without disturbance into Guyanese political realities'.<sup>23</sup> Naipaul sees Guyana as mortally wounded by its colonial past, unable to advance beyond the decline of its former grandeur. Attitudes towards Jonestown reflect this decay, an attitude of 'Guyanese futility' he identifies in the Marxist opposition to the Burnham regime.

In contrast, Gordon K. Lewis, a Caribbean Studies scholar, locates Peoples Temple and Jonestown within a Caribbean context of religious toleration, adventurism, utopianism and a romanticized view of the 'natural'. The Caribbean was always a sort of El Dorado for 'the soldier of fortune, the pirate, the profit-seeking merchant, the sugar planter, the "poor white", the slaver, the merchant prince, and all the rest'.<sup>24</sup> Guyana in particular functioned as the escape route for convicts and rebellious slaves, with the interior serving as a symbol for freedom. Unlike Naipaul, who distances Jonestown from Guyana, Lewis ties it to Guyana's history in several ways.

He notes the connection between Jonestown and the Guyana government's attempt to rebuild the country in the wake of a colonial, plantation economy. The racial composition of the Jonestown members, predominantly African American, corresponded to the composition of Forbes Burnham's party, the People's National Congress, which comprised Afro-Guyanese. The PPP was made up of Indo-Guyanese, and racial politics had always played a significant role in Guyana politics. Jonestown was seen as a successful economic development project in the hinterland, a goal the government had sought for its own people. Finally, Jonestown's location in the Northwest District of Guyana, an area in dispute with Venezuela, made the community useful. 'Whether they knew it or not, then, the Jonestown *comuneros* became an element in the attempted solution of all those problems. If they used Guyana, Guyana also used them.'<sup>25</sup>

Lewis also analyses the implications of Jonestown in light of its Caribbean context. He recalls previous collective suicides of indigenous peoples in the face of Spanish and French enslavement or extermination. In addition to serving as a symbol for literal escape, the Caribbean also symbolises spiritual escape, with its acceptance of new gods and anti-slavery religions. This religiosity has an escapist element, which flees oppression rather than resisting it. Lewis concludes by asking what impact Jonestown will have upon Guyana and the Caribbean. He observes that Jonestown will always be tied to the image of Guyana, adding 'It is not too much to say that Jonestown places the image of the whole Caribbean in jeopardy'.<sup>26</sup> He points to Papa Doc Duvalier, voodoo, Graham Greene and other stereotypes—such as the dangers

of the jungle—that the deaths help to perpetuate. While American journalists turned to Joseph Conrad's short story 'The Heart of Darkness' as a literary analogy for Jonestown, Lewis proposes Conan Doyle's *Lost World* and W.H. Hudson's *Green Mansions* as more accurate comparisons with the history of Guyana.

Neither Lewis' nor Naipaul's viewpoints appear in the dominant culture's account of Jonestown. Their focus on the effects of colonialism upon Guyana and the meaning of Peoples Temple and Jonestown for the Caribbean thus contributes to Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia. We find clear evidence of Bakhtin's idea of 'alien words' and 'alien value judgments and accents' in the writing of these two figures. Two additional literary examples further this argument.

Fred D'Aguiar, a Guyanese poet, reads Jonestown through postcolonial eyes in *Bill of Rights*, a collection of poems that suggests Jonestown, but is much larger than a single day, event or locale.<sup>27</sup> The poems reflect the 'cross-culturalities' of Guyana, with references to Tom and Jerry (the USA), Whitbread and Brixton (the UK) and Banks Beer (Guyana).<sup>28</sup> D'Aguiar puts Jonestown within the context of the surge and flow of immigrants across continents, always demonstrating an awareness of the legacy of domination, whether by colonialists or by Jim Jones.

*I see stars you see wounds in that flag  
I see red you see blood  
I see sky you see blue  
I see black you see white  
I see stripes you see bars*

The poems present oppression and domination as global problems. What happens in Guyana, happens around the world. Is a bill of rights needed, D'Aguiar asks:

*A Bill of Rights for the Front Line  
As much as for the boys from the Blackstuff,  
For Glasgow's tenement  
Blocks and the Shankhill Road,  
for Tiger Bay and Millwall's Den?*

The poems weave Jonestown into a song of protest. '*We were undernourished... What filled us up was song*', D'Aguiar writes, reminding 'L—' of the way they once sang Bob Marley songs together. The poems criticize Jim Jones, who 'doesn't know his okra/From his bora/His guava from his sapodilla/His stinking-toe from his tamarind'. Yet the deaths in Jonestown are larger than one man or one place, according to the poet.



Listing the rivers of Guyana, and the Georgetown airport, Timehri, he links Jonestown inextricably to Guyana, just as Lewis predicted:

These are bodies lying on mud floors  
In huts; on the grass; around dead fires;  
In the final embraces throughout  
The neat wooden walkways;  
On every clearing; and from now on  
By the banks of the Potaro, the Mazaruni,  
Essequibo, Corentyne, Demerara.  
At Timehri. Quetzalcoatl,  
Tell me this is not so.

D'Aguiar makes several references to Quetzalcoatl, one of the most important deities in Mesoamerican religion prior to Spanish contact. This pre-colonial past is explored in greater detail by Wilson Harris, another Guyanese, in his novel *Jonestown*, which moves backward and forward between ancestral Caribbean time and Jonestown time.<sup>29</sup> Harris 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',<sup>30</sup> indicating his purpose in placing Jonestown and Jim Jones (Jonah Jones in the novel) in an enlarged and expansive drama that transcends time and space, and yet is intimately linked to the reality of colonialism in the Guianas—British, French and Dutch.

Harris concerns himself with history and memory, especially the gap in the history of pre-colonial peoples that has been erased due to their extermination. He claims that 'it is essential to 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'.<sup>31</sup>

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].<sup>32</sup>

Harris here alludes to the memory theater of classical rhetoric described by Frances Yates in *The Art of Memory*.<sup>33</sup> Memory theater is a mnemonic device by which an orator remembers a speech by forming mental images in particular places, 'so that the order of the places will preserve the order of the things'.<sup>34</sup> Yates notes that during the Renaissance memory theater became 'a total world-reflecting system',<sup>35</sup> and this seems to typify Harris' approach. Jonestown itself serves as 'a total world-reflecting system', as the book examines a number of important issues: justice, life, death and oppression. It is the

hall where we can visit and revisit the past because the past continues to emerge in the present. 'Memory theatre takes us back and helps us revise things which we did not understand in the past,' says Harris.<sup>36</sup>

The protagonist of *Jonestown*, Francisco Bone, escapes death at the last moment because a character named Deacon, Jonah Jones' right-hand man, shoots Jones just before Jones plans to kill Bone. As the sole survivor of Jonestown, Bone feels great responsibility to the past: not just his own, but the past of previous victims of holocausts in the New World. 'Revisiting the past, Bone realizes how misguided Jones's [*sic*] desire to create a new Rome in the South American rainforest was,' according to Dominique Dubois. 'It is again hindsight that enables Bone to begin to perceive the analogy between himself and all past and future victims of Jones's [*sic*] look-alikes.'<sup>37</sup>

Critical theorist Homi Bhabha argues that post-colonial literature is produced through a strategy of disavowal, 'where the trace of what is disavowed is not repressed but repeated as something *different*—a mutation, a hybrid'.<sup>38</sup> *Jonestown* is just such a mutation and hybrid, in which Harris retells the history of conquest, of Jonestown, and of Guyana on multiple levels and layers so that in the end Jonestown is indistinguishable from the history of colonialism and of Guyana. Bakhtin also discusses hybrid construction in a way that seems relevant to Harris' work in the novel.

What we are calling a hybrid construction is an utterance that belongs, by its grammatical (syntactic) and compositional marks, to a single speaker, but that actually contains mixed within it two utterances, two speech manners, two styles, two "languages," two semantic and axiological belief systems . . .<sup>39</sup>

Harris creates a hybrid construction by telling the history of Jonestown—and of South America—in a circular rather than linear way. 'You cannot write a history of South America that is final, a history that is located in a single linearity.'<sup>40</sup> Bhabha notes the problem of linearity in contemporary constructions of 'nationness', arguing that it creates a historicism that 'most commonly signifies a people, a nation, or a national culture' that ignores a number of other elements, 'like sexuality, class affiliation, territorial paranoia, or "cultural difference"'.<sup>41</sup> We may apply the same critique to official or popular representations of Jonestown; that is, they create a historicism that is both over-determined and under-representational. A hybrid construction rejects linearity and closure almost by definition.

Moreover, literary 'realism', according to Harris, neglects the diverse peoples living under the umbrella of empire. Bhabha characterises the discovery of 'the English book' in India (the Bible), and the development of an English literature of empire as a process of 'displacement, distortion, dislocation, repetition'.<sup>42</sup> Harris agrees when he says that, 'the **art** of

Empire in the **novel-form** of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries displayed all-white characters from all-white families and ignored all other peoples, diverse and peculiar, under the imperial umbrella'.<sup>43</sup> By abandoning a linear narrative format, *Jonestown* challenges the nineteenth-century novel and, by extension, nineteenth-century imperialism and colonialism.

Harris evokes the indifference of empire past and present with the character of Carnival Lord Death who mocks justice with his 'pitiless barter of the numb word, numb lips, numb ears and eyes'. Harris asks: '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?'<sup>44</sup> 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.

It is exactly this dismissal of traditional history that is so maddening in Harris' work. Although the novelist is grounded in a 'Caribbean poeticist tradition', he also maintains a 'notoriously difficult poetics'.<sup>45</sup> He uses Jonestown to develop his project of giving voice to those who have been voiceless. For those whose family members died in Jonestown, however, as well as for historians, Harris paradoxically trivialises Jonestown by making it greater than 18 November 1978. His macrocosmic perspective loses the trees for the forest. Yet it is precisely this departure from traditional novelistic forms that contributes to the heteroglossia that pulls centrifugally from the central narrative about 'what happened'.

### III. CARNIVAL

At the outset of this article, 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 literary *representations of the events*.

'Carnival as a specifically Caribbean cultural event used to be a temporary explosion of liberation only possible because inseparable from the oppressive order and codes against which it reacted.'<sup>46</sup> Perhaps not surprisingly, then, Wilson Harris wrote a series of three novels titled *Carnival Trilogy* (*Carnival*, *The Infinite Rehearsal* and *The Four Banks of the River Space*).<sup>47</sup> Like *Jonestown*, the novel *Carnival* deals with 'the art of memory operating as redemptive historical witness'.<sup>48</sup> Similarly, 'the "rehearsal" (potentially "infinite") of

past conflicts and tragedies from different angles and states of being encompassing the multi-layered unconscious/consciousness of those who were involved in them',<sup>49</sup> suggests the idea of performance that undergirds participation in carnival: masks, reversal and dress-up create the subversion inherent in the event. 'In Harris' eyes [carnival is] a Harlequin Picasso-esque reassemblage of dark and light, line and plane, celebrating human energies in all their outward expressions.'<sup>50</sup>

Carnival presents a form of resistance to the dominant culture's form of discourse, exerting a centrifugal strength out from and against the status quo. In this respect, it would be particularly apt to describe literary representations of Jonestown as carnivalesque, since dialogism 'defines itself by its refusal of all forms of transcendence, all attempts to unify'.<sup>51</sup> 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.<sup>52</sup> Jonathan Z. Smith's examination of the 'Dionysiac pattern' of religion by which scholars might explain Jonestown, also hints at carnival. Smith notes that the Dionysiac understanding emphasises the grotesque, the monstrous and the bizarre. Because Jones transgressed social distinctions and the Temple inhabited subversive space this explanation might carry some weight.<sup>53</sup>

But equally exotic in today's world is the social experiment that led so many to abandon a materialistic, capitalistic, individualistic existence in favour 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 biological 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.

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'.<sup>54</sup> It must be serious in order not to reinforce existing power structures, so that it can truly 'become the scene of its *other*'.<sup>55</sup>

Coextensive 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 writers and other 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 is fair to say that Jonestown acts like a magnet, pulling people to itself. While this article has narrowly focused on voices from the Caribbean, it is important to note that there is a vast range of representations of Jonestown, from literary to musical to dramatic to artistic. These representations all contribute to the polyphony of Carnival and undermine the dominate narrative about 'what happened in Jonestown'. The magnetism of Jonestown attracts and invites reflection and depiction, as artists try to grasp its unfathomable existential magnitude.

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*.'<sup>56</sup> He resists completion, teleology and closure. Writing about the novel, Bakhtin says that polyphony promotes 'an indeterminacy, a certain semantic open-endedness, a living contact with unfinished, still-evolving contemporary reality (the open-ended present).'<sup>57</sup> The same is true of Caribbean literature about Jonestown. Instead of writers—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 all the voices be heard, in all of their Babel of tongues and contradictions.

*Department of Religious Studies, San Diego State University, 5500 Campanile Drive, San Diego, CA 92182-6062, USA*  
*remoore@mail.sdsu.edu*

## REFERENCES

- \* I would like to thank Eric Ziolkowski and the anonymous readers whose comments and insights helped to focus the argument of this article.
- <sup>1</sup> R. Tropp, in D. Stephenson (ed.) *Dear People: Remembering Jonestown* (San Francisco and Berkeley: California Historical Society Press and Heyday Books, 2005), pp. xv–xvii.
  - <sup>2</sup> S. Nelson (dir.), *Jonestown: The Life and Death of Peoples Temple* (2006).
  - <sup>3</sup> A. Dawid, 'Fathom These Events: Jonestown, A Novel. A Writer's Journal, excerpts', *Alternative Considerations of Jonestown and Peoples Temple* (2005), available online at <http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/AboutJonestown/JonestownReport/Volume7/artdawid.htm> (date last accessed 11 February 2008).
  - <sup>4</sup> Stephenson, *Remembering Jonestown*, pp. xv–xvii.
  - <sup>5</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the Novel' in M. Holquist (ed.) *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. C. Emerson and M. Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 270.

- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 271.
- <sup>7</sup> W. D. Lindsey, "'The Problem of Great Time': A Bakhtinian Ethics of Discourse", *The Journal of Religion* 73 (1993) p. 314.
- <sup>8</sup> R. Young, 'Back to Bakhtin', *Cultural Critique* (1985–86) p. 76.
- <sup>9</sup> Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the Novel', p. 271.
- <sup>10</sup> Although the government of Guyana also possessed a considerable number of documents relating to Jonestown, those documents were lost in a fire in 1979, which destroyed the building housing those records.
- <sup>11</sup> Audiotape Q 042, U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation, available at <http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/AboutJonestown/Tapes/Tapes/DeathTape/death.html> (date last accessed 11 February 2008).
- <sup>12</sup> J. R. Hall, *Gone from the Promised Land: Jonestown in American Cultural History*, 2nd edn (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1987, 2004); D. Chidester, *Salvation and Suicide: Jim Jones, the Peoples Temple, and Jonestown* (revised edn) (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1988, 2003).
- <sup>13</sup> Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the Novel', p. 276.
- <sup>14</sup> Lindsey, 'The Problem of Great Time', p. 317.
- <sup>15</sup> R. Moore, 'Reconstructing Reality: Conspiracy Theories about Jonestown', *Journal of Popular Culture* 36 (2002) 200–20.
- <sup>16</sup> Bakhtin, 'Epic and Novel', in *The Dialogic Imagination*, p. 30.
- <sup>17</sup> G. K. Lewis, 'Gather with the Saints at the River': *The Jonestown Guyana Holocaust 1978. A Descriptive and Interpretative Essay on its Ultimate Meaning from a Caribbean Viewpoint* (Río Piedras, Puerto Rico: University of Puerto Rico, 1979), p. 30.
- <sup>18</sup> R. Moore, A. B. Pinn and M. R. Sawyer (eds) *A Sympathetic History of Jonestown* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1985), pp. 403–11. See also D. Harris and A. J. Waterman, 'To Die for the Peoples Temple: Religion and Revolution after Black Power' in R. Moore, Anthony B. Pinn and Mary R. Sawyer (eds) *Peoples Temple and Black Religion in America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), pp. 103–22.
- <sup>19</sup> Harris and Waterman, 'To Die for the Peoples Temple', p. 118.
- <sup>20</sup> S. Naipaul, *Journey to Nowhere: A New World Tragedy* (New York: Penguin, 1980), p. 297.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 293.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 88.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93.
- <sup>24</sup> Lewis, 'Gather with the Saints at the River', p. 31.
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 24–25.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.
- <sup>27</sup> F. D'Aguiar, *Bill of Rights* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1998).
- <sup>28</sup> The term 'cross-culturalities' comes from Wilson Harris. M. Camboni and M. Fazzini, 'An Interview with Wilson Harris in Macerata' in M. Fazzini (ed.) *Resisting Alterities: Wilson Harris and Other Avatars of Otherness* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2004), pp. 53–64 at p. 57.
- <sup>29</sup> W. Harris, *Jonestown* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996).
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82.
- <sup>33</sup> F. A. Yates, *The Art of Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1966).
- <sup>34</sup> Yates, citing Cicero, *De oratore*, II, lxxxvi, pp. 351–54, 2.
- <sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 335.
- <sup>36</sup> Camboni and Fazzini, 'An Interview with Wilson Harris', p. 58.
- <sup>37</sup> D. Dubois, 'The Redemptive Power of Bone's Revisionary Fiction' in H. Maes-Jelinek and B. Ledent (eds) *Theatre of the Arts: Wilson Harris and the Caribbean* (New York: Rodopi, 2002), p. 197.
- <sup>38</sup> H. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 111.
- <sup>39</sup> Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the Novel', p. 304–5.

- <sup>40</sup> Camboni and Fazzini, 'An Interview with Wilson Harris', p. 57.
- <sup>41</sup> Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p. 140.
- <sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 105.
- <sup>43</sup> W. Harris, 'Theatre of the Arts' in Maes-Jelinek and Ledent, p. 2. Boldface type in original.
- <sup>44</sup> Harris, *Jonestown*, p. 70.
- <sup>45</sup> H. A. Murdoch, review of 'Caliban's Reason: Introducing Afro-Caribbean Philosophy', by P. Henry, in *SubStance* 31 (2002) 296–301.
- <sup>46</sup> H. Maes-Jelinek, 'Ulyssean Carnival: Epic Metamorphoses in Wilson Harris's Trilogy', *Callaloo* 18 (1995) 45–58, at 49.
- <sup>47</sup> W. Harris, *Carnival* (London: Faber and Faber, 1985); *The Infinite Rehearsal* (London: Faber and Faber, 1987); and *The Four Banks of the River Space* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990).
- <sup>48</sup> P. Sharrad, 'The Art of Memory and the Liberation of History: Wilson Harris's Witnessing of Time', *Callaloo* 18 (1995) 94–108, at 102.
- <sup>49</sup> Maes-Jelinek, 'Ulyssean Carnival', p. 56.
- <sup>50</sup> Sharrad, 'The Art of Memory and the Liberation of History', p. 98.
- <sup>51</sup> Young, 'Back to Bakhtin', p. 80. Young appraises various analyses and discussions of carnival and Bakhtin in his useful article.
- <sup>52</sup> For the sites of carnival, see J. Kristeva, 'Word, Dialogue, and Novel' in Leon S. Roudiez (ed.) *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, trans. T. Gora, A. Jardine and L. S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), p. 82.
- <sup>53</sup> J. Z. Smith, 'The Devil in Mr. Jones' in *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982).
- <sup>54</sup> Kristeva, 'Word, Dialogue, and Novel', p. 82.
- <sup>55</sup> Kristeva, 'Word, Dialogue, and Novel', p. 80.
- <sup>56</sup> Lindsey, 'The Problem of Great Time', p. 321.
- <sup>57</sup> Bakhtin, 'Epic and Novel', p. 7.