

Chapter Title: Deconstructing Jonestown

Book Title: Hearing the Voices of Jonestown

Book Subtitle: Putting a Human Face on an American Tragedy

Book Author(s): Mary McCormick Maaga

Published by: Syracuse University Press. (1998)

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv105bd9k.8>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

Syracuse University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Hearing the Voices of Jonestown*

2

Deconstructing Jonestown

Much of the work that has been done by scholars in the field of new religious movements has focused carefully and effectively on a fairly narrow range of concerns—the conversion and commitment of members and the charismatic powers of the leader—while using, almost exclusively, the method of participant observation. Although a number of interesting and well-researched pieces have resulted,¹ little has been attempted to forge new theoretical ground in the study of new religions. I challenge here the implicit assumptions of the theoretical framework that has been used to analyze Peoples Temple and, in so doing, suggest new ways of interpreting the data available. The scholarly method that most informs what follows is deconstruction. This two-step process involves both a critical evaluation of the underlying assumptions that frame what has been written about Jonestown and a challenge of those assumptions by asking questions from outside the predominate ideology of that frame. The conclusions I have drawn about Peoples Temple based on this method are surprising and unlike what has been written before.

A Survey of Jonestown Scholarship

Scholars of religion admit the difficulty of explaining what happened at Jonestown, Guyana, on 18 November 1978. In *Salvation and Suicide* David Chidester uses *structured empathy*, which he describes as “a curious combination of detached objectivity and empathic subjectivity” that “requires that we temporarily suspend prejudicial

1. Among the best are Barker 1984 and Carter 1990.

biases and value judgments in order to enter imaginatively into the worldview of others" (Chidester 1988b, xiv). Not surprisingly, given that sociological theories often reflect the methodology employed by the scholar, Chidester concludes that "collective suicide fused the worldview into a single act" (155). As Thomas Robbins has rightly pointed out, arguing that the "worldview" of Peoples Temple caused the suicides does not explain what happened at Jonestown because Chidester's construction of a universally held outlook on life is a somewhat static abstraction that is ahistorical (Robbins 1989, 34). In addition, Chidester fails to take into account the socioeconomic, educational, and racial diversity of the movement, which surely affected the way in which each member experienced, internalized, and expressed that worldview. Although it is among the most analytical treatments of Peoples Temple to date, Chidester, nonetheless, operates with the assumption that the movement acted as a group in its thinking and that its understanding of the world was derived primarily, if not exclusively, from Jim Jones. The former concept is a view that is common in Jonestown scholarship and derives in part from the image of the "mass" suicide in which the people are perceived to have acted in one accord and must, therefore, have been of one mind all along. In my view this is a more sophisticated version of the popular brainwashing theory. The latter concept—that the worldview and the organizational direction of Peoples Temple flowed from Jim Jones through his leadership circle and then to the members—is one of the assumptions that I challenge.

Judith Weightman's starting point with Peoples Temple is quite different from Chidester's although her conclusion is much the same. Rather than treat the members of Peoples Temple as a "mass," Weightman, in her book *Making Sense of the Jonestown Suicides* (1983), examines the racial and socioeconomic diversity of the group and then asks how such a diverse group could act collectively in committing "revolutionary suicide." Her method is an application of Weberian *verstehen*, which posits that social behavior can only be understood in terms of the "motives" of those who perform the actions. Like Chidester, she identifies Jones as holding the power in the group although her understanding of how that power functioned between Jones and the members is rather more sociologically sophisticated. According to Weightman, the ultimate power actually lay with the people, but since they bestowed Jones with authority and helped him to maintain it "Jones remained the central source of power in the

Temple" (208). Weightman identifies an elite of "young, attractive, white women" who were instrumental in implementing Jones's vision for the group and who were more loyal to Jim Jones than they were to the movement (208). "Initiation" into the leadership elite was accomplished through these young women having a sexual relationship with Jones (208). Weightman repeatedly links female power in Peoples Temple with sex in a way that narrowly defines and limits the kind of power that the women in the leadership of Peoples Temple exercised. This noncritical acceptance of a "natural" connection between gender and sex when women within a group are studied and the failure to address in any kind of nuanced way the power that was exercised by women in the leadership of Peoples Temple is another ideological schema that I deconstruct and examine.

For a purely sociohistorical point of view a student of Peoples Temple could scarcely do better than John Hall, *Gone from the Promised Land* (1987). He places the Temple's political, social, and religious activities in the context of 1960s and 1970s America in an effort to break down the barrier the suicides erected between mainstream society and the members of Peoples Temple. His research is painstaking as is his methodological self-consciousness. "Appendix: A Comment on Methodology," which follows his treatment of Jonestown, demonstrates his theoretical sophistication. He writes about using Max Weber's classic approach through four interrelated analytic frames: historical narrative, sociological analysis, causal historical analysis, and cultural interpretation (313–17). The question that drives his research is, "How much of what happened with Peoples Temple is unique to the group and its leader, and how much can be explained by reference to wider social processes?" (xviii). His interest is in "social forces," not in the internal dynamism of the group. In the end Hall concludes that it was the mix of apocalyptic religiosity and revolutionary politics combined with the pressure from ex-members and members' families that led to the suicides. In Hall's view mass suicide could never be a vehicle for victory for political revolutionaries, only for messianic-apocalyptic revolutionaries. Peoples Temple had already committed revolutionary suicide in a number of respects—by living communally and moving to Guyana—before their ultimate act. Hall concludes that, "they had died to anything but 'principle' long before" (304) and, therefore, the decision to take the cyanide flowed naturally from the political and religious stance they had embraced as a community all along. Because of the macroscopic view of events Hall takes,

he misses the significance of the individuals involved in the decision to commit suicide.

A Survey of Scholarship on Women in New Religious Movements

The linking of women and sex, as though sex is located in the woman and not in the space between two people, is a frequent occurrence in the contemporary study of new religions in the West. Even in scholarly work that is otherwise quite innovative, gender roles and sexual behavior are generally treated together, the assumption being that if one is writing about women, then sexual behavior must be addressed as well. This is not so with men, who can be written about in their various social and leadership roles without mention of sex. Not only do males have no "sex," they also appear to have no "gender" in the same way that "whites" appear to have no "ethnicity." The article by Robbins and Bromley, which suggests that new religions are "laboratories of social experimentation," is an example of this assumption. They suggest that new religious movements challenge mainstream society in terms of "sexual-gender arrangements" and "patterns of economic resource mobilization" (Robbins and Bromley 1992, 1). Women's contributions to the "economic and organizational experimentation" of new religions are not mentioned at all although Peoples Temple is the focus of nearly one-third of the section. The centrality of women's leadership and participation in the social and economic experimentation of Peoples Temple should not have been invisible to the careful scholar. Robbins and Bromley are indeed careful scholars, so I can only conclude that their exclusion of the women in the leadership of Peoples Temple is the result of the constraints of the ideological framework they apply. Given this schema, it is only natural that women are the focus of their section on "sexual patterns and gender roles." The authors argue that the instability of gender roles in mainstream society has created a situation in which women are attracted to either new religions with traditional patriarchal expectations or feminist spiritual groups in which there is "equalitarian" participation and leadership (5–13).

Yet, in many ways, the inclusion of women as a focus for study in the literature on new religions, although frequently linked with sexuality, is an improvement over the erasure of women in the standard histories of American religion. As Mary Bednarowski pointed out in

her foundational study of women's religious practice and leadership in nineteenth-century America, women are the "hidden ones" whose contributions to religion have either "gone largely unrecorded" or are marginalized as merely supportive of male religious leadership (Bednarowski 1980, 208). Bednarowski notes, "The women go to church and the men exercise the authority as members of the clergy and as professional theologians" (208). Many scholars have pointed out, although few with the critical sophistication of Bednarowski, that it is in the marginal or nonmainstream religions that women have found the theological and institutional freedom to exercise spiritual authority. Bednarowski's four-part analytic scheme for understanding the kinds of religious groups in which women are most likely to practice leadership has engendered several excellent essays that are included in *Women's Leadership in Marginal Religions: Explorations Outside the Mainstream* (Wessinger 1993). Like the work of Bednarowski, these studies have tended to focus on those movements in which a woman was the charismatic leader, namely, the Shakers (Ann Lee), the Christian Scientists (Mary Baker Eddy), and the Theosophists (Helena Blavatsky). Interest has also been shown in the role of women in the various Spiritualist groups that were popular during the nineteenth century in America.² Today there is great interest by scholars in Elizabeth Claire Prophet, who succeeded her husband, Mark Prophet, as the leader of the Montana-based Church Universal and Triumphant.

Another school of interest has focused on the three religious groups that are credited with the most gender role and sexual experimentation during the nineteenth century: the Shakers, Mormons, and Oneida Perfectionists. Most scholars who have studied these groups agree that the motive for both men and women's involvement was a desire to restructure the social disorder and gender ambiguity that was pervasive in America in the early nineteenth century (see Aidala 1985, 287; Foster 1981, 227; Kern 1981, 15–16, 312–13). Although these movements were viewed by mainstream society as being dangerously innovative, they were, in fact, deeply conservative attempts to subsume sexuality and women's power within a religious-utopian ideology. Even "free love" within the Oneida community is best understood as hyper-regulated communal love. Foster notes, "Although outsiders typically fantasized about the 'licentious' behavior that sup-

2. See Braude 1989 for an analysis of women's leadership in contemporary Spiritualist groups. See also Haywood 1983.

posedly went on in this 'free love' colony, in reality complex marriage at Oneida was associated with control mechanisms that might appear even more restrictive in some respects than Shaker celibacy. Romantic liaisons were systematically broken up; group criticism sessions dealt bluntly with any sexual behavior that did not conform to Community norms" (Foster 1981, 235). All three authors suggest that members of these new religions had a "low tolerance for ambiguity" (Aidala 1985, 287).

When female followers have been studied within contemporary new religions, there has been a tendency to focus on those groups in which "traditional" gender roles and male-female relationships are present. Janet Jacobs's analysis of the religious commitment of seventeen women to eight different "nontraditional" religious groups is representative of the concerns of this theoretical approach.

The analysis suggests that in religious commitment an economy of love is operationalized in which the commodities of exchange are affection, approval, and intimacy. As such, the male religious hierarchy plays a significant role in the lives of female converts through control over the emotional rewards of religious commitment. Such control often leads to sexual exploitation, abuse, and discrimination, sources of female subordination that are reinforced by the pervasiveness of romantic ideals, expectations of male protection and love which come to dominate the interaction between the female devotee and the male leadership. (Jacobs 1984, 155)³

Although my research into Peoples Temple demonstrates that emotions, sex, and love were elements in the involvement of many women, it is clear that these were not separate motivational impulses from their desire to exercise leadership and to contribute to changing the world. My disagreement with Jacobs comes down to how she and I evaluate the social function of these relational experiences. The basis of my argument about the women in leadership of Peoples Temple, particularly Carolyn Layton, is that love for the male charismatic leader grew out of love for the movement. The basis of Jacobs's argument is that a woman's involvement in a new religious movement is a reflection of her unmet emotional and sexual needs, which she finds temporarily met in her involvement with the male charismatic leader.

3. See also Jacobs 1989.

Jacobs asserts that it is “the responsibility of the female devotees . . . to serve the male religious leaders in exchange for the rewards of emotional gratification” (Jacobs 1984, 156).

For Jacobs, the power in the movement flows from the male charismatic leader to the female followers, who are subject to subordination and abuse because of their emotionally vulnerable states of mind. Three assumptions about women in new religions undergird her work: first, that a woman who involves herself in a group with conservative “sex role socialization patterns” could not have intellectual or political reasons for doing so, but joins only because of a condition of emotional deprivation; second, that sex and romance are at the heart of the relationship between the male charismatic leader and his female followers; third, that all the power and authority in these groups is held by the male leader.⁴ Although all of these assumptions may have been supported by the data in Jacobs’s study (see below for the bias implicit in using only “apostates”—people who have left new religious movements—in one’s study) her conclusion that “this analysis suggests that female religious commitment involves a love-centered economy in which conversion is experienced as an emotional exchange” (Jacobs 1984, 170) is a universal pronouncement that reflects a particular ideology, which, by virtue of its gendered parameters, does not allow for women (or male charismatic leaders) who do not fit within its framework of assumptions (for gendered ideology see chap. 3). I am not suggesting that affection and intimacy between a follower and leader is never the primary motivation for a woman to join a religious movement, only that Jacob’s analysis maintains that this economy of love inevitably places the follower in a position to be exploited and abused. It is not clear to me whether this concentration of power in the hands of the charismatic leader actually derives from the data Jacobs collected or was implicit in the schema she applied.

As in Jacobs’s work, Susan Palmer widens the scope of analysis without challenging the theoretical and methodological assumptions that undergird it. She offers students and scholars specific “insider” details about the variety of roles available to women in new religions through an application of this same ideological framework. She directly links women and sex at the outset of her investigation. One of

4. For a sociological analysis of some of the reasons why women embrace traditional gender roles, see Kaufman 1991; for a more personal analysis, see Ochs 1990; for a specific treatment of charismatic Christian women, see Susan Rose 1987.

her two standard questions when interviewing the women in the seven groups she investigated was, "Which social-sexual problems she [the member] sought to resolve by moving into a religious commune and what she hoped to leave behind" (Palmer 1994, xii).⁵ Her theoretical framework not only assumes that women and sex are linked but that a woman must have "problems" that have driven her into the new religious movement. One wonders how different her results would have been had she conducted these interviews outside of the "sex-problem" framework. Like those who studied the Shakers, Mormons, and Oneida Perfectionists, Palmer concludes that women join marginal religions in response to "dramatic upheavals in the structure of society" that directly affect how they understand their role as women (xiii). Women desire a community that offers gender role clarity in a world that is "characterized by sexual freedom, gender confusion, family breakdown, and moral ambiguity" (xvii).

All these studies, whether focusing on the nineteenth or on the twentieth century, female charismatic leaders or members, broaden understanding of women's participation in new religions but do not challenge either the methods or theories employed in the study of religion. An implicit assumption remains that to study the leader is to understand the religion; to know the abstract formulations of the social confusion of an age is to understand the attraction of the religion to its members. Stripping these assumptions away, one discovers something quite different: a new theoretical framework leads to a different set of questions. A different set of questions leads to different results.

An Application of the Methods of Foucault and Smith

Foucault and Smith agree that scholarly inquiry must be guided by a search for the weaknesses of a theoretical construct. They also agree that those weaknesses are easiest to find where assumptions, rather than evidence, most heavily undergird conclusions. Foucault expresses it in the form of a wish: "I dream of the intellectual who

5. The book is the first in a Syracuse University Press series, *Women and Gender in North American Religions*, suggesting that the analysis of women's religiosity from an interdisciplinary, cross-cultural perspective is of increasing interest to scholars and students.

destroys evidence and generalities, the one who, in the inertias and constraints of the present time, locates and marks the weak points, the openings, the lines of force" (Foucault 1988, 124). Foucault has been my guide through the labyrinth of existing narratives about Peoples Temple. He cautions one to be suspicious of analytical packages that are too tightly wrapped.

We must question those ready-made syntheses, those groupings that we normally accept before any examination, those links whose validity is recognized from the outset. . . . And instead of according them unqualified, spontaneous value, we must accept, in the name of methodological rigor, that, in the first instance, they concern only a population of dispersed events. (Foucault 1972, 22)

The idea that Jim Jones held all the power in Peoples Temple and that the women who were within the leadership circle of the movement were primarily there because they were in a sexual relationship with Jones are two such "ready-made syntheses." To go back to the "population of dispersed events" one must put to one side the conclusions that have already been reached by others and then listen carefully to the silence that remains. Chidester summarizes Foucault's method as an "archaeology of [the] silence" of those discourses which are excluded when a field narrows (Chidester 1986, 2).

Foucault reminds scholars to practice archaeology within their chosen disciplines: to dig, and in digging to uncover the framework of power and knowledge that constrains what they label "truth." Lawrence Kritzman has called this a "new form of social activism" in which intellectuals challenge the "institutional regime of the production of truth" (Foucault 1988, xviii-xix). I uncover here the outlines of this "production of truth" about Peoples Temple and Jonestown—the sticky web of assumptions about new religions, about women, about the relationship between sex and power in which Jonestown is caught.

Smith poses the issue in terms of a sociological method that intentionally listens for the voices that have been systematically silenced through application of the "discourses of power" (D. E. Smith 1987, 3). She writes about a "point of rupture" (49) that occurs when women practice sociology and discover that the experience of their gender has been largely ignored, marginalized, or misconstrued. The task of the feminist scholar is to identify the "gender subtext" of the theories that

she employs. Women “outside the frame” (63) have an opportunity to evaluate sociological data in a new way, in a way that questions not only the results of the research that has been done but the methods that have been employed and the theoretical constructs that have determined what constitutes data. When sociological results consistently serve to shore up patriarchy—as the results of research into women in new religions surely do—then it is likely that the analysis is more dependent on the ideology undergirding the theoretical apparatus than on the data itself.

When applying Foucault and Smith to the case of Peoples Temple, I discovered what had been left out of the narratives that have been told about its history, namely, the particularities of the people who were members and, specifically, the exercise of power by the women in leadership. In what has been written to date Jim Jones is centrally located to the exclusion of the experience of many of the people—mostly women—who actually made Peoples Temple and Jonestown function day to day. The fact that women have been excluded—both by men and through their own complicity, as D. E. Smith points out (1987, 34)—from the “ideological work of society” has resulted in “a history constructed largely from the perspective of men, and largely about men” (35). This has certainly been the case in what has been written about Peoples Temple. What happens to the portrait of Jonestown when the women are restored to their positions of power and authority in the narrative? What happens when a “systematic consciousness of society and social relations from the standpoint of women” is adopted with regard to Peoples Temple (16)?

To reconstruct the Jonestown narrative with women restored to their positions of organizational and moral agency is not without risk. Part of the reason they have been marginalized and tightly contained within an ideological schema that limits their power is because their “heresy” in joining Peoples Temple and contributing toward the decisions that led it to its tragic end is too threatening to contemplate. It is better to keep the women as the blameless victims of a madman than to recognize them as participating in the destruction of an entire community. But then Chidester, reflecting on Foucault, reminds that “there is the tendency of any ‘us’ to dehumanize ‘them’,” in an effort to “create a sense of self by excluding others” (Chidester 1986, 7). What would happen to our sense of “self” as women, as religious practitioners, as seekers after social justice, as Americans, if we integrated the “them” of Jonestown into “us”?

Virginia Burrus has called heretics “the most intimate other” (1991, 2). Herein lies a tension that has colored our ability as scholars and citizens to understand people involved in new religions: because they are intimate they are threatening to “our” sense of who we are; because they are “other,” they seem to bear no relation to who “we” are. The women in the leadership of Peoples Temple embody this tension of “the most intimate other.” It is possible for me to recognize myself in their relentless and self-sacrificial search for justice and human decency. At the same time, it is almost impossible to see myself devising a plan to kill an entire community in a symbolic act of “revolutionary suicide.” To bridge this heretical gap so that my intimacy with the women in leadership is maintained while their otherness is mitigated makes the Jonestown narrative more difficult to read and experience because it challenges the constructions of female power in new religions and, in so doing, makes the actions of the women in leadership understandable as the behavior of mature, politically and religiously motivated, human beings. In so doing I risk falling over the heretical edge. (This creates a kind of empathic dilemma for the scholar and student: Does understanding why humans engage in horrific behavior lead to a justification of it? Scholars such as Robert J. Lifton, whose work on the Nazi doctors has helped to make their barbaric actions “understandable” within their own psychological and sociological frame of reference, have encountered this dilemma. Here, as did Lifton, I explain but do not condone.)

An Evaluation of Primary Sources

Each of the various resources and sources I have used contributes its own particular perspective to the portrait. The documents held in the Peoples Temple archives at the California Historical Society, which were retrieved both from Jonestown and the San Francisco administrative offices of Peoples Temple, have given a sense of the bureaucratic complexity of the Temple as a religious, social, political, and economic organization. The documents of specific interest to me were written by residents at Jonestown.

All data available for an analysis of Peoples Temple are biased in one way or another. Defectors and the Concerned Relatives told “atrocious” stories. Residents of Jonestown wrote letters and educational assignments deeply influenced by the isolation of their community and the information they were receiving from their leaders. The

media were sensationalist. The U.S. government was and is selective about the information it makes available. Survivors and sympathetic family members are emotionally scarred from their losses. Most journalists and many scholars have discounted any material written by Peoples Temple members as biased beyond use because of the assumption that the residents of Jonestown were the victims of mind control. (See chapter 3 for the allegations of brainwashing.)

An accurate evaluation of the available first-person narratives about Peoples Temple depends upon an understanding of the psychosocial dynamics at work when people write or speak about their experiences in a new religious movement. When individuals rejoin mainstream society after leaving a new religion, former members must explain their previous commitment in a way that will help them be accepted back into families and communities. Most people who leave a new religion after having made a serious commitment to it defect with very little money and few friends outside the movement. The goal for the apostate is to reenter mainstream society with relatively few emotional and social penalties.⁶ The narratives generated in this psychosocial process of reintegration share certain particulars that “explain” the estrangement of former members from their families: food and sleep deprivation; chanting, frequent prayer, unrelenting harangues from the charismatic leader; threats to people’s safety if they should leave the group. All of these “cult” practices allegedly contribute to the “brainwashing” of the person who had been a member. The public, the media, and some scholars subscribe to the belief that these “atrocities” narratives reflect “the truth” about what goes on inside new religions and that anyone who has something positive to say about their experience as a member of a new religion must still be under the power of the “cult’s brainwashing, mind-control technique.” As Bromley, Shupe, and Ventimiglia point out, however:

The intent of such tales is not to present the complexity of events dispassionately but rather . . . to make the event and individual stand out from the ordinary. Each contestant in this struggle to define reality will portray events as he or she sees them or wishes others to see them. Whether such stories represent some kernel of

6. Shupe and Bromley have explored this process of “apostates” telling “atrocities” in several of their jointly written articles and books, most notably in Shupe and Bromley 1980, 1981. See also Bromley and Richardson 1983.

"truth" is not only difficult to validate in many cases but is also irrelevant. The stories gain their persuasiveness and motivating power from their larger-than-life quality. (1979, 43–44)

The "truth," then, of a narrative such as Debbie Blakey's affidavit, in which she alleged that widespread physical, financial, and psychological abuse was taking place at Jonestown was in Blakey's belief that self-destruction by the group was at hand and that attention needed to be drawn to that possibility (Steve Rose 1979, 168–75). The truthfulness of her specific charges are more a question of perspective than of accuracy. In article 9 of her affidavit Blakey wrote, "Rev. Jones insisted that Temple members work long hours and completely give up all semblance of a personal life." What may have looked like an appropriate exertion of physical effort to an "insider" may, on reflection, appear to be unfair work demands to a newly received "outsider." This switch in perspective is decidedly more likely when the "apostate" is being counseled by those who believe that a lack of privacy and physical labor are necessary components of a mind-control strategy. The Reverend John Moore, who visited Jonestown with his wife Barbara the same week that Blakey defected, wrote upon his return: "The two words that came to my mind immediately as I was there [at Jonestown], and as I tried to reflect upon my experiences, were "impressive" and "amazing." It almost boggles the mind to see that great clearing, and to understand how so much could have been done in the relatively short period of time" (Moore 1985, 264). The communal nature of Jonestown could scarcely have come as a surprise to Blakey, who had been a member of Peoples Temple since 1971. The emphasis on the group over the individual had always been a part of Peoples Temple philosophy and social organization (Moore 1985, 261). Blakey was drawing attention to the hard work and lack of personal space with an awareness of how this would sound to people who were skeptical about the motives of people who would involve themselves in a communal living arrangement in the first place.

Still, drawing attention to the meta-narrative of atrocity tales does not discount the validity of much of what was being said by former members about Jonestown. Because of what happened on 18 November and the understandable unwillingness of any family to admit or believe that their loved one participated "in sound mind" in the poisoning deaths of nearly three hundred children, the brainwashing argument is especially compelling. What happened at Jonestown

seems beyond what any rational individual, let alone more than nine hundred individuals, would ever do. *Time* magazine in the fortnight after the tragedy reflected the most frequent explanatory tone based on the atrocity stories of former members and journalistic conjecture: “In an appalling demonstration of the way in which a charismatic leader can bend the minds of his followers with a devilish blend of professed altruism and psychological tyranny, some 900 members of the California-based Peoples Temple died in a self-imposed ritual of mass suicide and murder” (Geline 1978, 16). Although this kind of explanation protects readers from any sense of connection with the people involved and, thus, saves them from subsequent experiences of grief, guilt, or complicity, it does not explain what happened and why.

Narratives that portray Peoples Temple as having been a relentless horror are overstating the case as much as are the narratives—much less frequently publicized by the media or used by scholars—that argue that Jonestown was a paradise before conspirators and traitors set out to destroy it. Both reflect views that are tightly organized around a core ideological imperative. Apostates emphasize the negative to reintegrate into mainstream society. Loyalists emphasize the positive to reaffirm the commitment they have made to the new religion.⁷ Both kinds of narratives contain elements of truth and untruth. Part of my method in researching Jonestown has been to weigh more heavily those narratives that have been marginalized or erased as a result of an assumption of brainwashing by those who have heretofore written about Peoples Temple. A careful reading of these materials written at Jonestown demonstrates the complexity of the social dynamics at work in the community. The individual struggles and motivations of the people involved are also visible. These letters were written for Jim Jones or others in the community and were not composed to glorify Peoples Temple to the outside world. When compared to the narratives of the apostates and loyalists, they look authentic, containing the ambiguities, longings, and conflicts of life in a highly populated community.

To identify the ideological schema that frames each narrative—whether written by an apostate or a loyalist—and to weigh the “truth” of what has been said and written in light of that schema one must take seriously the writings of anti-cult and Concerned Relatives activ-

7. For more details about how this reaffirmation of loyalty contributed toward the decision to commit suicide, see chapter 7.

ists, but instead of giving specific credence to the charges of brainwashing and coercion, look for what they have to say about issues, such as organizational structures and ministry practices, which were less ideologically bounded. In the same way, as one reads the letters and educational assignments from people who were resident at Jonestown, one analyzes the histrionic denunciations of traitors and pledges for revenge, not in terms of the mind-set of the individual writer but in terms of what those narratives overall had to say about the stress level of the community and the larger organizational and leadership issues being considered at the time.

Demonization of the opposition was practiced by both Concerned Relatives and Peoples Temple. Each labeled the other as the embodiment of chaos and evil. Concerned Relatives accused Peoples Temple of brainwashing their children and labeled them a cult. Peoples Temple accused Concerned Relatives of attempting to destroy their community and labeled them fascist. From a sociopsychological point of view demonization was a useful practice for both groups, for it provided Concerned Relatives and Peoples Temple with feelings of control and empowerment while suggesting that any blame or wrongdoing lay entirely with the "enemy" group. The power that Concerned Relatives and Peoples Temple exercised, however, was not equal. Because Concerned Relatives were closer to the "relations of ruling," as Dorothy Smith (1990) would have it, than was Peoples Temple, they were able to mobilize the political and social resources of mainstream society. Concerned Relatives' ideological schema became the lens through which the media and Congressman Ryan came to understand Jonestown.

For both groups the combination of aggression and self-righteousness, which is at the heart of demonization as a social practice, was a heady mixture that perpetuated itself until both groups could conceive of no way out of the conflict other than the utter destruction of the enemy. Richardson, Best, and Bromley (1991) collected articles by scholars from a variety of disciplines to examine the construction of "satanism" as the most recent (and in some sense, ultimate) example of demonization in American culture. Ironically, although demonization appeared to empower the group that was blaming and pointing fingers, it, in fact, disempowered that group because it placed all the ability to harm in the hands of its opponents. The vast degree of power concentrated in the demonized group is more apparent when one examines the seven characteristics that are fre-

quently ascribed to demonized groups: all-powerful; well-orchestrated; secretive; harmless looking on the outside; require specialists to uncover the evil of the group; pervasive; and the innocent in the group and in society are the most in danger. Demonizing accusations raise the stakes of the conflict and make the differentiation between an "insider" and an "outsider" paramount. The most dangerous person of all, once demonization is in place, is the traitor; the one who looks like an "insider" but is, in fact, an "outsider." The demonization of Concerned Relatives and those who had left Jonestown resulted in an environment that made defection and the freedom that it would provide impossible.

Several letters written by Ann Elizabeth Moore during her sojourn at Jonestown elucidate the probable thinking of the Peoples Temple inner circle and the mood of the Jonestown community. Moore herself was only a peripheral member of the Jonestown elite. The best proof of this is that there were letters from her to Jim Jones among the papers retrieved from Jonestown. I discovered no letters discussing substantive issues from Carolyn Moore Layton, Maria Katsaris, Teri Buford, Debbie Layton Blakey, Harriet Tropp, Mike Prokes, or Stephan Jones, all people widely considered to be part of the Jonestown "aristocracy." I assume that my failure to discover written documents authored by them indicates they were able to talk with Jones daily and did not need to write. Although not a member of the inner circle, Ann Moore was, nonetheless, privy to much that went on within the highest organizational echelons of Jonestown. She was Jim Jones's personal nurse at Jonestown, and her older sister, Carolyn Moore Layton, was one of the chief administrators of the Peoples Temple community.

Besides letters from individuals, scores of documents at the California Historical Society reveal the bureaucratic depth and range of the Peoples Temple ministry. The Schubert Hall Library of the California Historical Society maintains the Peoples Temple archives. The archive comprises three collections of documents: MS3800, 130 boxes of documents compiled by the receiver of the Peoples Temple estate after the tragedy; these records constitute the remains of the bureaucratic organization of the San Francisco and Los Angeles branches of Peoples Temple; MS3801, 12 boxes of documents taken from Jonestown, Guyana, by the U.S. government; the Moore Family Collection, 5 boxes of letters, photos, sermons, journals, and reflections written by the parents and sister of Carolyn Moore Layton and Ann Elizabeth

Moore. Recently, Stephan Gandhi Jones gave the California Historical Society many of his photographs and other personal items related to Peoples Temple.⁸ The materials written at Jonestown during the fall and winter of 1977 and 1978 documented the creation of a model socialist community. Great effort poured into the organization of the school system, health care provisions, agricultural plans, community-wide socialist education, and so forth. Clearly, the individuals who designed these strategies for community success were not doing so just for themselves (which would have needed far less documentation) rather they were doing so for other groups, or, perhaps, for posterity, as a reference for how such a community was to be run. A kind of optimism pervades these documents. During the spring, summer, and fall of 1978 the focus of these general, anonymous, administrative papers turns from internal to external concerns: the custody battle for John Victor Stoen; the defection of Debbie Blakey; the activities of Concerned Relatives; the negative press coverage from the United States; potential problems, deriving from all these, with the Guyanese government; and, finally, objections to a visit from Congressman Leo Ryan.

Multiple interviews with Grace Stoen and Stephan Gandhi Jones helped clarify a number of specific issues and revealed the emotional intensity of life in Peoples Temple, an aspect missing in most of what has been written about Jonestown and an important factor in understanding the decision to commit suicide.⁹

I focus on Carolyn Moore Layton in chapters 3 and 4 because she embodies the tension between the gendered ideological schema within interpretations of Jonestown and the reality of life in Peoples Temple. She was both a leader in the Peoples Temple movement and the lover of Jim Jones as evidenced in the primary documentation, including FBI interviews, Peoples Temple internal reports, letters and memorandums, the letters that Layton wrote to her family while she was in Peoples Temple and living at Jonestown, and interviews with people

8. References to manuscripts from MS3800 and MS3801 are cited hereafter as CHS followed by the document number.

9. Stephan Jones, Jim and Marceline Jones' son, gave me nine hours of interviews plus access to photos from Jonestown. Grace Stoen Jones, a Peoples Temple member who defected in 1976 and whose son, John Victor Stoen, was at the center of the custody battle that led Congressman Leo Ryan to investigate Jonestown, gave me several hours of interviews. References to these unpublished interviews are given by name and date.

who were involved in Peoples Temple but did not die at Jonestown. To “see” Layton and to “hear” the voice of her motivation and her love, one must deconstruct what one already knows about her—that she was a “cult” member, a woman sexually involved with a charismatic leader, and a suicide “victim.”