

Chapter Title: The Triple Erasure of Women in the Leadership of Peoples Temple

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.9>

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The Triple Erasure of Women in the Leadership of Peoples Temple

The women of Peoples Temple, particularly the women in leadership, have been triply erased in the narratives about Jonestown, whether scholarly or popular.¹ First, “cult” members as a whole, both male and female, have been presented as “brainwashed” victims of a fraudulent enterprise orchestrated by an “insane” leader. This has been particularly the case in the popular literature on Jonestown, but a perceptible thread of it runs throughout the scholarly material as well. Second, within the treatments of new religions in Western culture as a whole, wherever male charismatic leaders have predominated, female followers have been portrayed as sexually exploited and psychologically manipulated at the hands of the cult leader. This characterization is as true of the scholarly works as of the popular. Third, the fact that the movement ended in suicide has erased the lives that preceded that cataclysmic act, whether male or female.²

The erasure of the women of Peoples Temple has occurred because the practice of the sociology of new religious movements has created interpretive frameworks in which their experience simply has not fit. As a result the data about their experience in Peoples Temple has passed “beyond what could be conceptualized in the established forms,

1. I have put quotation marks around terms such as “cult,” “brainwashed,” “insane,” and “normal” at first mention to indicate that these labels are ideologically determined rather than scientifically established.

2. For the first and second examples of erasure, see this chapter and chapter 4. I address the third example briefly at the close of this chapter, then reengage it in chapter 7 where I explore a new interpretation of the suicides based on the restoration of the people involved.

[therefore] we have learned to practice a discipline that disattends them or to find some way of making them over so that they will fit" (D. Smith 1987, 73). One must identify these interpretive schemata and the assumptions that are implicit in them regarding women in new religious movements.

Erasure through Membership in a "Cult"

The question as to whether people who join new religious movements have been brainwashed is a sociologically and politically overdetermined one. The central institutions of mainstream Western society, such as the family, public schools, representative government, and mainstream religious organizations, are each invested in the proposition that "normal" persons can get their needs met within the legitimated structures of society.³ This conviction is challenged when individuals join a new religious movement, particularly if they stay for an extended time and come from a white, educated, middle-class (or above) background. When this occurs, the ability of these institutions to meet the sociological, political, and psychological needs of their members is brought into question. Membership in a new religion specifically implies a critique of mainstream religious organizations but also of the consumer capitalist society that maintains and is maintained by them.⁴ The potential cost to both the individual and the society is extremely high should the challenge be seen by others as legitimate. As Peter Berger points out:

To go against the order of society is always to risk plunging into anomie. To go against the order of society as religiously legitimated, however, is to make a compact with the primeval forces of darkness. To deny reality as it has been socially defined is to risk falling into irreality, because it is well-nigh impossible in the long run to keep up alone and without social support one's own counter-definitions of the world. When the socially defined reality has come to be

3. I use the term *mainstream religious organizations* to refer to churches, synagogues, temples, and mosques where those organizations predominate within the mainstream of the social structure. Within the context of this study it refers primarily to the historical Protestant denominations, the Roman Catholic Church, and Reform Judaism.

4. For a sophisticated treatment of how religious institutions provide a "sacred canopy" for mainstream society, see Berger 1967, chap. 2.

identified with the ultimate reality of the universe, then its denial takes on the quality of evil as well as madness. The denier then risks moving into what may be called a negative reality—if one wishes, the reality of the devil. (Berger 1967, 39)

The ideological portrayal of the charismatic leader as insane and his followers as brainwashed is effective in maintaining the boundaries and values of mainstream society by delegitimizing the challenge(s) of the new religion. As Bromley and Richardson point out, this function of the term *brainwashing* in maintaining the values of Western culture is embedded in the history from which it originated. Following Biderman (1962, 560), they note that *brainwashing* first came to be used as part of the anti-Communist rhetoric of the 1950s and 1960s where the assumption was that communist beliefs were “fundamentally alien to human nature and social reality” and that “the acceptance of Communist beliefs is consequently regarded as ipso facto evidence of insanity or a warped, evil personality, or both.” Thus, brainwashing ideology is at its core anticomunitarian, antisocialist, and antitotalitarian. For this reason the shift in application of brainwashing from anti-Communist to anti-new religions was not a difficult one (Bromley and Richardson 1983, 6). Although the new religions that blossomed during the 1960s and 1970s in America were diverse in theology and practice, the challenges they presented to mainstream society tended to constellate in three areas. First, these groups generally accepted and acted upon a wider continuum of spiritual beliefs, practices, and experiences; obviously, a challenge to mainstream religious organizations. Second, most redefined family as religious community, a challenge to the nuclear family. Third, most viewed financial resources as belonging to the group rather than to the individual and tended to encourage the channeling of individual financial resources into the movement for group maintenance and mission, a challenge to consumer capitalism. Shupe and Bromley identify the challenges to family and economic order as particular areas of strain between the new religions and the families of members:

There were two major sources of strain between families and the new religions: a challenge, first, to the family’s authority structure and second to its goal of preparing offspring for participation in the economic order. Families devoted much of their socialization activity to producing offspring capable of achieving socially and economi-

cally successful careers and lifestyles. (Shupe and Bromley 1981, 181)

In modern Western culture mainstream religious organizations have, for the most part, accommodated a split between private religious life and public secular life. The vast majority of Christian denominations in America have theologies and ministries that uphold the nuclear family and consumer capitalism, and offer few religious experiences that can claim authority over these mainstream institutions of secular life. Like most new religions, Peoples Temple challenged the gulf between private religiosity and public life by claiming the authority of the religious (Peoples Temple) over the public (American capitalist culture). Because religion is understood by the paradigms of scientific rationalism to be irrational and, for the most part, irrelevant in everyday life, the idea that a person would throw away success in mainstream society for membership in a new religion is seen as ludicrous. To do so unwillingly is brainwashing; to do so willingly is subversion. Freud's idea that religion is a kind of infantile wish fulfillment that one can grow out of is an idea that holds currency for the critics of new religions. He believed that what religious practitioners required to live as mature adults was an "education to reality" (Freud 1961, 63).

The "anticult movement," (Bromley and Shupe 1981) as scholars call the amalgam of groups who embrace the brainwashing theory,⁵ cut its teeth in the legal battles against the Unification Church during the early 1970s. Dick Anthony, the most vociferous opponent of the brainwashing theory among the sociologists who study new religious movements, describes the theory's understanding of conversion:

Converts have been "programmed" to claim adherence to an alien set of beliefs as the result of diabolically effective psychotechnological manipulation by the unscrupulous agents of the religious group. As the story goes, converts have no authentic interest in the groups they have joined and their true selves subsist in a kind of suspended animation while their bodies function essentially as robots controlled by their cultic masters. (Robbins and Anthony 1990, 295–96)

5. The Washington Council for American Family Foundation (AFF) and the Cult Awareness Network (CAN) are the most active and vocal on a national level in the United States.

Although this description might sound overdrawn as the statement of a critic, Margaret Singer, the leading proponent of the brainwashing theory, says:

Charismatic, unscrupulous cult leaders such as David Koresh institute thought reform programs in order to ensure compliance among their followers. The belief systems of such groups are of secondary importance. . . . The belief systems' common characteristic is that they serve as "tools" to advance the leader's hidden agendas (which may sometimes be mere financial fraud, and other times, as with Koresh, the propping up of the leader's fragile and pathological ego). Members follow the leader not so much because of a rational and informed acceptance of the belief system, but because of the orchestrated program of psychological manipulation designed to gain their compliance. (Bardin, 1994, app. D)

Shupe and Bromley (1981, 186; 1980, 331) have summarized the major elements of this ideology as (1) cults are not legitimate religions but use religion as a "cloak" for "profit-making ventures operated by egomaniac charlatans for their own personal aggrandizement"; (2) people who join have not experienced a legitimate religious conversion but are "victims of deceptive, seductive, and/or manipulative processes that destroy their free will"; and (3) involvement in the cult is injurious to the member as an individual and dangerous for mainstream American social institutions, for example, the family, mainstream religious organizations, and democracy (Wilson 1981, 186; see also Shupe and Bromley 1980, 331). Anticult movement activists label the religious movement itself as wrong or evil and the members as brainwashed victims, which places all the power in the hands of the cult. The members of cults are seen by the anticult movement as both powerless and "innocent," thus they are in a condition to be restored to family and society.

Eileen Barker, in her study of people who have joined Unification Church, concluded that there are four variables at work when individuals "choose" to join a new religious movement: first, their hopes, fears, and values; second, their expectations of society; third, their general understanding of the attraction of the new religion; and fourth, the specific experiences of their interactions with the group (Barker 1984, 137). The choice to join a group is a result of a combination of these "pushes" and "pulls." Her participant observation of

Unification Church suggested to Barker that the group could only control the fourth variable (and that only to some extent) and influence the third but that it was not possible for Unification Church to “deceive” potential members into overriding their own personalities. As Barker has pointed out, the strongest proof against brainwashing is the high number of “non-joiners” who have some exposure to Unification Church when attending the two day, seven day, or twenty-one day workshops. As her data—and that of Galanter, (1983, 986)—demonstrate, the Unification Church recruitment process is at least “90 per cent *ineffective*” (147; italics in original).

Jonestown was, in many respects, a godsend for the anticult movement, for it demonstrated in graphic and horrifying terms what it had been warning parents and society against all along—that the kind of challenge to society that new religions represent does lead to “evil as well as madness” as Berger had suggested. “The ACM [anticult movement] used the Jonestown tragedy to promote its view of exotic religions. . . . In 1988, a major ACM drive promoted the tenth anniversary of the Jonestown tragedy with widely dispersed press packets stressing that cults brainwash members, and keep them through mind control practices” (Richardson, Best, and Bromley 1991, 8). Not only did Jonestown provide the anticult movement with its first martyr, Congressman Leo Ryan, and, more generally, in the more than two hundred children who died but it “objectified the anticultists’ own worst fears about the destructive potential of cults and provided a concrete referent to which they could point as evidence in their appeals to the public and to political officials” (Levi 1982, 114).

The anticult movement’s successful co-optation of Jonestown as a symbol of the danger of cults had the effect of utterly delegitimizing the challenges to mainstream society that Peoples Temple embodied. The Peoples Temple ministry to the disenfranchised in society was erased by the promotion of the view that Jim Jones only used concern for the poor, elderly, and blacks as a tool of manipulation in his fraudulent enterprise. Most of the books written just after the deaths at Jonestown were classic apostate stories with Jones depicted as evil or mad or both and his followers as brainwashed victims.⁶

Dorothy Smith has suggested that some theoretical constructs are so deeply embedded in the practice of a scholarly discipline that any

6. Among these books are Kerns and Wead 1979; Thielmann and Merrill 1979; Feinsod 1981; and, most notably, Mills 1979.

and all data seem to naturally “fit” into the categories that are presupposed. When disjunctures occur between the data and the theory, the datum, or “experienced actualities,” as Smith calls these instances, are disregarded or recontextualized to fit the theory. Smith argues that sociology works within the parameters of an “ideological procedure.” “The ideological circle as a method of producing an account selects from the primary narrative an array of particulars intending the ideological schema. The selection and assembly procedure discards competing reasons (*her reasons*) and permits the insertion of ideological connectives” (D. Smith 1990, 171; italics in original).

These ideological connectives span the informational distance between a “lived actuality” and the “interpretive schema” (D. Smith 1990, 152). To make sense out of a person’s experience, certain assumptions come into play to fill the gap where either information or understanding fall short. Because the experience of people in new religions is so different from the experience of “normal” people in mainstream society, ideological connectives function for analysts of Jonestown in a particularly influential way. In fact, what Smith’s theory suggests is that what one “knows” about Peoples Temple and about what happened at Jonestown on 18 November 1978 has more to do with the ideological schema being used by sociologists than with the lived experience of the people who were actually there. The task, then, if understanding and not merely persuasion is the goal, is to pull the account back into the sphere of influence of the lived actuality of the people who committed themselves to Peoples Temple and to allow their own words and behavior to challenge the authority of the interpretive schema. Still, even if a scholar is successful in doing this, Smith admits that although this method will “open up and expand how we know the world of our experience,” it does not provide access to actual truth. What she is interested in identifying are the intellectual practices that cause people to discount information that could be important in evaluating the power dynamic in social relations (1990, 200–201). She does not value experience more than analysis but sees a person’s lived actuality as a necessary starting point if one’s understanding is not to be censored by one’s analytical schema (D. Smith 1987, 89).

Certainly, the madman-brainwashed victim scenario is one such instance of an interpretive schema that is so laden with assumptions that any evidence running contrary to it is filtered out by the analyst. Examples of sanity on the part of the leader and agency on the part of

the followers are either discounted or made further examples of the diabolical nature of the movement. ("Look, the cult leader can even make his followers *appear* normal!") This interpretive schema has dominated the analysis of Jonestown to such an extent that otherwise careful journals, such as *Political Psychology*, have published articles on Jonestown that include such unsubstantiated conclusions as: "The charismatic leader weaves a hypnotic spell over the members of a mass movement. Under such a 'mass hypnosis,' the members of a mass movement may blindly follow the orders of a charismatic leader as in a day dream or trance" (Ulman and Abse 1983, 641).

The media have played a central role in reflecting and constructing this view of cults for popular consumption. In "The Social Construction and Interpretation of Deviance: Jonestown and the Mass Media" (1980) Danny Jorgensen argues that the role of the media in constructing as well as reflecting reality is especially apparent in its coverage of cults. Partly, this complicity exists because apostates with an atrocity story to tell make themselves readily available to reporters; partly, because new religious movements have learned to be suspicious of the media and, therefore have not been open to investigative reporters writing stories on their movement from an insider's perspective. Besides a lack of information about the actual lived experience of people within new religious movements, the media is attracted to sensational stories. As mentioned in chapter 2, most atrocity stories feature accusations of food and sleep deprivation, sexual and physical abuse, and excesses of spiritual and emotional authority by the charismatic leader. Fear about the safety of children within cults has begun to play a more central role in the anticult movement accusations about the activities of new religions. The allegation of child abuse within the Branch Davidian compound at Waco, Texas, was the accusation that drove the decision to use tanks and gas to end the siege on 19 April 1993. This attempt to "save the children" resulted in the deaths of all the children in residence at the compound, and the allegations of child abuse were later proven to have been groundless. These are subjects for which the public has shown a voracious appetite. Less commented upon is the implicit assumption by journalists that none of their audience could possibly be involved in such a group. Cult leaders and members are treated as completely "other" than the audience. This was especially true in the case of the media coverage of Jonestown, which was widespread and consistent in its portrayal of the madman-brainwashed victim schema.

In every sense Jonestown was a big story. One month after the tragedy a Gallup Poll showed that 98 percent of the American public had heard about Peoples Temple and the Jonestown suicides. Only Pearl Harbor and the dropping of the atomic bombs in Japan had equaled this level of public awareness (Barker 1986, 330). *Christianity Today* reported in 1979 that “the major secular media in the United States gave more coverage to the People’s Temple tragedy than to any other single religion-related story in recent memory. That includes the election and death of Pope John Paul I and the subsequent election of John Paul II” (Jorgensen 1980, 314). In part this was the case because the Jonestown incident occurred during a traditionally slow news period, the week before the American Thanksgiving. That the event was “bizarre” and tragic also contributed to its popularity as a news subject.

Commentators have also observed that the media took the Jonestown tragedy very personally because some of their own—NBC correspondent Don Harris, NBC cameraman Bob Brown, and *San Francisco Examiner* photographer Greg Robinson—were murdered by Peoples Temple members at the Port Kaituma airstrip. This involvement may have contributed to the amount of coverage given and certainly to its content in that Don Harris, particularly, was presented within the motif “journalist as hero.”⁷

Danny Jorgensen, who surveyed all the coverage of Jonestown in the United States from 19 November through 26 November 1978, notes that explanations of Jonestown emerged within days of the event and that these explanations were repeated so often that they began to carry “symbolic significance.” “This explanation involved three important components: The People’s Temple was labeled a *cult*, Jones was held to be *depraved*, and the members of the group were defined as *deprived*” (Jorgensen 1980, 317; italics in original). Most coverage included all three components, generally with an exploration of the “socioeconomic deprivation or psychological abnormality” of the members, which left them open to the abuses of Jones’s insanity, and the combination of which created the Peoples Temple cult (Jorgensen 1980, 321–22). Together they created a tightly woven ideological fabric nearly impossible to penetrate with other perspectives. As Jorgensen discovered when following the experience of scholars whose views were solicited by reporters but not used: “notions at odds with

7. See Nimmo and Combs 1985, chap. 1.

common sense are unlikely to be reported or even to be recognized as explanations from the news perspective” (322–23). Common sense for the news media who cover new religious movements is generally determined by what they have heard about the movement from former members. As Shupe and Bromley point out:

Virtually all of the public “knowledge” about the new religions . . . has been obtained indirectly from accounts in the media, a substantial proportion of which was initiated by opponents of the new religions in general and apostates in particular. Because these individuals have often been readily accorded credibility by the media, they have had a disproportionate influence in setting the agenda for public discussion of the new religions. (Wilson 1981, 181).

The use of the term *cult* in reference to Peoples Temple, with all that it implies about the emotional or social instability of its members (dramatically confirmed by the death they chose), created an impassable distance between the American public and those who died at Jonestown. In an angry denunciation of the way the bodies of her sisters, Carolyn Layton and Ann Moore, and the other Peoples Temple deceased had been treated, Rebecca Moore demonstrates how the full humanity of the cultists was called into question:

If you’re a cultist, you don’t have the same civil rights ordinary Americans enjoy. If you die, the government doesn’t have to perform an autopsy, or investigate your death. It can entertain the notion of dumping you into a mass grave. It can destroy evidence of the cause of your death, frustrate your family’s efforts to secure your remains, stick you in an airport hangar on a military base 3,000 miles from home for weeks on end, and depend upon public apathy to get away with it. (Moore 1988, 91)

It was not “public apathy” alone that allowed the United States government to “get away with it” but the dehumanizing power of an ideological schema that caused the Jonestown dead to appear totally “other” than the mainstream population.⁸ This erasure of its members is especially ironic because Peoples Temple was more representative in its membership—in race, age, and class—than any other new religious movement that has been studied. Demographically, Peoples Temple

8. For more on this schema, see Chidester 1988, 681–702.

was “us.” Yet the label *cult* made Peoples Temple “them.” The people who died at Jonestown were truly “the most intimate other.”

Erasure Through Sex with the Leader

A less-visible yet equally powerful interpretive schema in the study of new religious movements is that of the sexual exploitation of the female follower by the male charismatic leader. Here, assumptions about men and women are embedded in the schema applied to new religions. Even in the case of Peoples Temple, in which there is clear evidence of women exercising institutional authority, their power is addressed in the scholarly literature almost always in the context of the women’s sexual relationship with Jim Jones.

What is the interpretive schema that frames what has been written about women involved in new religious movements and their relationship to the male charismatic leader? First, there is the primacy of sexual pleasure as a “legitimate” motivation for the male charismatic leader to become sexually involved with his followers. In fact, no other motivation need be demonstrated by the scholar. It is assumed that if a male leader could have sex with his followers, he naturally would for the enjoyment it would afford him. To deconstruct the gendered assumptions that undergird this point, all one needs to do is look at its opposite case. If a female follower claims that she wants to have sex with the leader for pleasure, this is raised as additional evidence that she has been brainwashed (an anticult movement argument) or victimized (mainstream new religious movement scholars). The assumption undergirding these conclusions is that only an “aberrant” or maladjusted woman would want sex for the sake of sex but that men (especially men in power) “normally” want sex and the pleasure it affords. (This is an expression of a wide-spread cross-cultural belief that sex is dirty and that a woman who enjoys sex is a “slut.”) There are issues of power here, of course, which are addressed in chapter 4, but the point raised at present is that sexual activity is seen as a legitimate, normal desire for a male charismatic leader but not a motive for a female follower unless something is wrong with her.

The second component of this “sex in cults” interpretive schema is that in addition to sexual pleasure the charismatic leader may have sex with his followers for a utilitarian reason. Sex may be used as a way to gain deeper loyalty from individual members or, if he has sex with more than one follower, a way to keep the women competitive

with one another by using a “divide and conquer” strategy. This interpretation assumes that the leader is interested in keeping power (part of the normative anticult movement interpretive schema), not in building a community. It also fails to take into account the possibility of sex between a female follower and male leader as being utilitarian for the woman *and* the man; or, if this is taken into consideration, the relationship is depicted as a “secretary sleeping with the boss” scenario in which the woman is portrayed as a manipulative seductress.

Third is the assumption that all the power is in the hands of the charismatic leader and that other than sexual pleasure or political manipulation, the leader has nothing to gain from contact with the specific woman follower with whom he has sex. Deeply entrenched cultural assumptions regarding women and the nature of sexuality are embedded in this belief in the charismatic leader as all powerful: (1) that women are easily manipulated sexually; (2) that, once sexual relations are introduced into a male-female relationship, the woman’s power, insight, and abilities disappear; (3) that sex (and occasionally issues concerning domesticity) are definitive of women involved in new religious movements; and (4) that sex is primarily about male-female coitus with sexuality rarely addressed as a larger, more diffuse dynamic in the group.

The work of Andres Pavlos on women in new religions is typical of a perspective that blends the brainwashing and “sex in cults” schemata:

On the verbal level, some religious leaders promulgate feminism; however in reality, the low valuation of women in cults is often expressed most directly in a common cult practice that demands that males be eagerly served as avatars by the cult’s females. Most females are only tolerated as economic resources as they serve to advance the patriarchal lineage of the cult leader. (Pavlos 1982, 132–33)

This book typifies the anticult movement tendency to treat all cults as the same no matter what their theological, sociological, or philosophical diversity.

Because of the proclivity for male charismatic leaders and even male members to take sexual, economic, and emotional advantage of female members, a situation that is endemic to cults according to Pavlos, a woman’s status is never improved by joining a new religious

movement. He concludes that the greater opportunities afforded women in the secular world, as a result of the successes of the feminist movement, mean that women will leave cults in greater numbers than ever.⁹

To hear the voices of the women of Jonestown one must deconstruct this gendered understanding of power and sexuality in new religions. I do so by examining how a woman in the leadership of Peoples Temple, Carolyn Moore Layton, has been portrayed in the secondary literature, with an emphasis on the best of the scholarly treatments. In chapter 4, I introduce evidence about her power and influence and that of a number of other women in the leadership of Peoples Temple. In other studies this information has been filtered out through the “sex in cults” interpretive framework.

The best of the secondary literature on Peoples Temple is John Hall’s (1987) study. One of the puzzling aspects of the history of Peoples Temple that he attempts to explain is how a small group of religious devotees from Indiana, numbering no more than seventy when they migrated to California during the summer of 1965, could grow into a major political and religious movement numbering more than three thousand members by the early 1970s (see chap. 5). His answer was that a fundamental shift occurred in the organization when white, educated professionals began joining Peoples Temple. He mentions by name Linda Amos, Larry and Carolyn Layton, Elmer and Deanna Mertle, and Timothy Oliver Stoen, asserting that the involvement of these people with their “organizational skills and social prominence . . . helped propel the group toward an entirely different scale of operations” (66). What is interesting from the perspective of an analysis of gender is where Hall proceeds after establishing this general point. He writes two paragraphs, one each about Carolyn Layton and Timothy Stoen, respectively, in which he asserts that Layton’s contribution to Peoples Temple was to cause a “social transformation [which] stemmed from a relationship that developed between Jim Jones and newcomer Carolyn Layton” while Stoen “marshalled his considerable organizational talents and professional

9. The pro-feminist note in Pavlos’s work, “as a feminist you must be naturally opposed to the subjugation and abuse of women which takes place in cults,” has arisen in many of the informal conversations I have had with anticult movement activists. For more on the relationship between feminism and anticult activism, see Richardson, Best, and Bromley 1991, chap. 5.

connections to help Jones build a powerful social movement” (66). Stoen’s contributions along this vein are irrefutable; however, he was not alone in establishing Peoples Temple as the influential religious and political organization that it became during the 1970s. Carolyn Layton was as much at the center of building and maintaining the organization of Peoples Temple and later, Jonestown, as was Tim Stoen, perhaps even more so (see chap. 4). The fact, however, that she was Jones’s long-term sexual partner and mother of one of his children has caused scholars to discount or marginalize this evidence in conformity with the ideological schema reviewed above.

It would be well to remember at this point that Dorothy Smith makes clear that a sociologist does not have to be a sexist to practice a scholarly discipline that is constituted from certain gendered assumptions. I am not, therefore, arguing that Hall or any of the writers on Peoples Temple whom I critique are sexist but that the schemata they use *presuppose* a certain kind of relationship between the charismatic leader and women in new religions, which Hall, Weightman (1983), and others have applied noncritically.

Within a well-researched piece such as Hall’s there are bound to be tensions between data and interpretive schema. (Ideologically based schemata hold up best where the least amount of research is done.) This is certainly the case in his portrayal of Carolyn Layton. Sometimes this tension is embodied in a single sentence. For example, when writing about the administrative capabilities of Layton from the perspective of a highly placed Temple member, Hall begins the sentence with “[Jones’s] lover and closest companion, Carolyn Layton,” thus firmly placing her in the sexual-domestic sphere, but then completes the sentence with Teri Buford describing Layton as “the top of the line” within the Peoples Temple organization. Because this causes a clear interpretive discontinuity within the schema traditionally used, Hall must resolve the conflict and decide whether Layton is, in fact, a sexual partner or an organizational leader. He does so two sentences later. The entire section is quoted below so excerpted portions can be read in context.

Paralleling Weber’s description of the charismatic community in general, one member of Jones’s staff would be in charge of security; another, counseling; yet another would oversee the Needs Department, and so forth. . . . Jones used his personal secretaries as envoys to the wider network. His lover and closest companion, Carolyn

Layton, probably was “the top of the line,” as Teri Buford later put it. Buford herself worked for years as the liaison between Jones, various departments, and Tim Stoen (for whom she also worked directly). But based on his legal training, Stoen had greater organizational expertise than Carolyn Layton or Teri Buford, and according to various Temple members, including Jones himself, Stoen probably knew more about the operations of Peoples Temple than any single person aside from Jones. (Hall 1987, 99)

Buford’s comment about Layton being “the top of the line” is used by Hall in the context of his having described her as one of Jones’s “personal secretaries.” This is a slippery designation at best, in that Layton was involved in organizational strategies for the Temple and, from her training as a high school government teacher, was more interested in theorizing about the movement as a utopian community than in the kinds of tasks commonly associated with secretarial work. Even in their leadership roles, the women of Peoples Temple are segregated into the specifically gendered role of secretary. A more appropriate designation for the kind of work performed by Carolyn Layton, and by Maria Katsaris and Teri Buford would certainly have been administrators or executive officers. By referring to Layton as a secretary and then as “lover and companion” to Jones, Hall alludes to the ideological schema of the secretary having sex with the boss in order to move up in the organization. By contextualizing Layton’s organizational authority in this way Hall makes it difficult to believe that she could have been both Jones’ sexual partner *and* “the top of the line,” an argument that I make in chapter 4.

Hall goes to great length to outline the variety of social services offered by Peoples Temple to members and the financial sophistication required to do so. Carolyn Layton is mentioned as involved in many of these enterprises, including providing counseling after worship services (along with Tim Stoen) “about everything from automobile accidents to welfare eligibility” (Hall 1987, 82); depositing money in numerous bank accounts (89); and being designated as the named recipient (often together with Stoen) of wills or “life-care” agreements (93). Nonetheless, he describes her in terms that would be unthinkable if he were writing about a male in the group and that are based on little more than the ideological schema within which he is working. “For her part, Carolyn *passed time* in the early California years *playing* with the Jones children; she *sought to nurture a friendship* with Marcie

and *fretted* over Karen Layton, the young woman who had married her former husband Larry, for ‘the countless times she has looked flirtatiously at Jim’ (126; italics added).

It is not the factual basis of this sentence I dispute but the way in which it contextualizes Carolyn Layton’s work in Peoples Temple as being about her relationship with Jim Jones and not (equally) about her commitment to Peoples Temple as a movement, which represented the very challenges to society (outlined earlier in this chapter) to which she was most committed.

Judith Weightman (1983) concentrates more specifically on the women of Peoples Temple than does Hall. Her understanding of the women in leadership places them even more firmly within the confines of the “sex in cults” interpretive framework than does Hall’s. There is no question that Jones had sexual relations with many, if not most, of the women in leadership. His long-term relationship with his wife and Carolyn Layton did not preclude his being involved sexually with others. Weightman argues that Jones’s widespread and nonexclusive sexual activity is one of the psychological tools he used to manipulate and control his leadership circle. She points out that by November 1978 nearly all the members of the inner circle were women who became part of the elite “not only because of their abilities but also because of their loyalty to the cause and their intense personal loyalty to Jones. For the most part, this personal loyalty was very much connected with the fact that they were, or had been, Jones’s lovers (117). This question of loyalty will become a central issue when the dynamics behind the decision to commit suicide are explored in chapters 6 and 7.¹⁰

Weightman quotes widely from the books of people who had left Peoples Temple or had lost loved ones there. She is noncritical in her use of these materials and conveys the information contained in them as though they were factual reports of the events, even going so far as to suggest that there are two possible exceptions to her critique of brainwashing as a reason for people having been involved in Peoples Temple: one of the exceptions was Maria Katsaris, the daughter of her central informant, the other, Larry Layton, who she thinks may have

10. It is important to note that most of the speculation about the Jonestown suicides has focused on why the members of Peoples Temple were willing to commit suicide once they were told to do so. My analysis is more concerned with why and how the decision was made in the first place.

been “brainwashed” because he “had two wives co-opted by Jones” (Weightman 1983, 160, 164). She uses the experience of Deborah Layton Blakey, who had several sexual encounters with Jones before defecting in May 1978, and who felt that Jones’ preference for her had made her a rival to Carolyn Layton and Maria Katsaris, to make the broad point that “the female members of the elite were divided by sexual jealousy, division encouraged by Jones, who urged them to keep tabs on each other” (118). Because her evidence for this sexual jealousy is so scant, it is difficult to weigh its credibility, but my conclusion is that it is an assumption built into the framework of her analysis.

In the paragraph after her treatment of rivalry among the females in the inner circle she writes about the male elite. What is notable in this paragraph is how the names of the men are each preceded by the title of his official function in the organization, whereas the list of women two pages earlier had described all of them as “young, attractive, white women” (Weightman 1983, 117). It is worth noting, too, that she does not speculate about the emotional motivation for the men’s loyalty either to Jones or the movement, nor does she explore their relationship with one another as she had with the women.

There were some male members of the elite as well. Assistant Pastor Jack Beam, Temple attorneys Eugene Chaikin and Tim Stoen, and Temple public relations person Michael Prokes were most significant among them. . . . Although the women members of the elite were “initiated” through sexual encounters with Jones, there is no evidence as to whether or not these men had sex with Jones. Stoen and [Larry] Layton both publicly “confessed” their homosexuality, though without mentioning Jones by name. For both of these men, however, an actual sexual encounter would be unnecessary, because Jones had achieved effectively the same end by co-opting their wives. (119).

The men are presented to the reader within a framework different from that of the women. Jones’s relationships with Stoen and Larry Layton are mediated through his sexual relationship with their wives, according to Weightman. The schema she uses is, ironically, a reflection of the behavior that she criticizes in Jones: women are not individuals in their own right but are extensions of the men with whom they are sexually involved. Carolyn Layton is introduced in this chapter as Larry Layton’s wife and as one of Jim Jones’s “most important

mistresses" (Weightman 1983, 138). In the introduction to her book in a list of people associated with the Peoples Temple, Carolyn Moore Layton is described as "Larry's first wife, she became, with Maria Katsaris, one of Jones's two most important mistresses." Weightman's assumption is that the sex between Jones and the women was all a power play between him and the husbands of these women. Jones had sex with his female followers to humiliate the men and to manipulate the women. There is no space within Weightman's thesis to entertain the possibility that the women may have been having sex with Jones in an attempt to exercise power within the community. Within her framework only Jones can "initiate" relationships and only the men act. An interesting example of factual inaccuracy in support of this gender-biased schema are the two lines following the paragraph quoted above: "Larry was the first member of the Layton family to join the Temple. He brought with him his wife, Carolyn Moore Layton, with whom Jones became enamored" (119). The men have all the agency in this passage with Larry "joining" and Jones becoming "enamored," whereas Carolyn is either an appendage or object of the men's behavior. In fact, all the accounts of Carolyn and Larry Layton's initial involvement in Peoples Temple suggest that either it was a joint decision or that Carolyn had initiated it.

Weightman underscores the importance of sex in the Peoples Temple leadership structure. She argues that "Jones created the elite of the Temple by making them his property, or by taking the property of his male followers. He marked out his property by having sex with selected individuals" (Weightman 1983, 120). Using the work of Susan Brownmiller (1975) on rape, Weightman maintains that Jones's sexual relationship with the women was aggrandizing for him and dehumanizing for them. Yet, while persisting with the property metaphor, she concedes a point that is the subject of chapter 4—that having sex with Jones gave the women power. Weightman writes that "a sexual relationship with Jones . . . may have appealed to the women because it gave them access to power, power unobtainable in any other way" (121). The power she is referring to is access to the financial dealings of the Temple and the "research" for the bogus healing practices of the early California years. I argue, however, that the power these women, particularly Carolyn Moore Layton, possessed was not derivative, but central. It was the power to influence Jim Jones and the authority to make decisions about the day-to-day functioning of Peoples Temple.

Weightman's thesis is an ideal example of the "sex in cults" perspective. The main components of this schema—(1) sexual pleasure is a "legitimate" motive for a charismatic leader to have sex with his female followers, but not vice versa; (2) sex is often used in a utilitarian way to "divide and conquer" female followers; and (3) power flows from the leader to the followers and, other than pleasure or control, the leader has nothing to gain from his female followers—contextualize a woman's commitment to the new religion she has joined and any power or authority she might exercise within her sexual relationship with the leader. Thus, for women, sex precludes power. She is an object of desire and manipulation without sexual or psychological agency of her own. (Whether this theory might apply to heterosexual relationships outside of new religions is a question beyond the purview of this study.) In my view, this is a sophisticated extension of the brainwashing theory, one which is gender specific. It suggests that once a woman has had sex with a leader she can no longer think for herself or control her behavior.

A different framework for understanding sex and power within new religious movements provides a new perspective on why Jonestown ended in the way that it did. By restoring the power and agency of Carolyn Layton and other female leaders within Peoples Temple one gains a new understanding of what happened during its final months. A starting point for this inquiry is to ask what the possible benefits would be to a woman follower in a sexual relationship with a male charismatic leader.

First, she may become a person with "favored status" within the religious community. Because the authority of a new religious movement is most frequently embodied in the charismatic leader, the closer a follower is to the leader, the more deflected authority the individual obtains. In addition, people within the organization know that the woman who is having sex with the leader can act as a conduit for information both from the leader to the community and from the community back to the leader. Thus, a woman in a sexual relationship with the charismatic leader functions as both "gatekeeper," filtering and distilling important information about the community for the leader's consumption, and "communications officer," transmitting information from the leader in an informal way back into the community. Another possible benefit for a woman who sleeps with the charismatic leader is that she has more casual time with the leader

than other members of the movement do. In addition, “pillow talk” may serve as an important time for the woman follower to educate the leader about the movement. It is a time when great influence can be exercised and much teaching and learning can take place that does not necessarily flow exclusively from the “leader” to the “follower.” Within charismatically organized groups the leader tends to become conflated in the mind of the follower with the movement itself. It is possible that a woman who loves and nurtures the charismatic leader may, in fact, be serving the community and the cause embodied in the person of the leader.

Far from the assumption in the “sex in cults” interpretive framework, that a woman’s power is invalidated through her sexual relationship with the leader, this new framework suggests that she gains more authority and influence within the community of which she is a member by having a sexual relationship with the charismatic leader. The major methodological difference between these two schemata is that the routinely used framework (“sex in cults”) derives from an “outsider” perspective, whereas the approach here (“sex and power”) draws upon the experience of people on the inside. Smith points out that a sociologist’s evaluation of the dynamics at work in an organization shifts when the words of actual participants, particularly women, are taken seriously and are allowed to challenge the theoretical schema being employed. “A sociology for women preserves the presence of subjects as knowers and as actors. It does not transform subjects into objects of study or make use of conceptual devices for eliminating the active presence of subjects. Its methods of thinking and its analytic procedures must preserve the presence of the active and experiencing subject” (D. Smith 1987, 105).

Although she calls this a “sociology for women” her interests are broader than carving out a niche for women’s roles to be explored within the traditional paradigms of sociology. Rather, she is interested in a radical shift in the way sociology is practiced. Her method requires that sociological inquiry begin with those (insider) experiences of everyday life that challenge the theoretical abstractions that control the scholar’s (outsider) understanding of social forms and behavior. Smith’s critique of the way in which ideological schemata control what sociologists identify as data extends to the third way in which the women of Peoples Temple have been erased in the narratives—the obliterating power of suicide.

Erasure Through Suicide

Dorothy Smith has argued that the designation “suicide” serves to focus and contain the experience of the person’s death in such a way that it makes “the act of self killing” more comprehensible to those left behind (D. Smith 1990, 142). At the same time, it limits “relevant” information about the actions and events that, apparently, led to the person’s suicide. She uses as her case the death of Virginia Woolf and suggests other ways of interpreting her act of “self killing” aside from the diagnosis of Woolf as mentally ill. Smith argues that Bell’s biography of Woolf is little more than a narrative about a woman’s mental illness that culminated in suicide. Thus, those who commit “suicide” have relinquished their right to a biography that takes in the fullness and variety of the life they led (D. Smith 1990, chap. 7). Those who lost loved ones at Jonestown have expressed a similar kind of frustration over the way in which the Peoples Temple ministry and the lives of those who contributed to it have been subsumed within the “mass suicide.” It is as though suicide has the power to erase the life that led to it.

Along with the writer of a suicide account, the reader plays an interpretive role when the word *suicide* is used. The ideological connective that the reader provides is the belief that only mentally ill or emotionally unbalanced people kill themselves. Therefore, everything that Woolf did in the months before her suicide was understood by the psychiatric specialists, her husband, and the reader of the narratives about her life as evidence of her mental illness. “Acts, utterances, and expressed feelings are reconstructed as constituents of a course of illness or a psychic syndrome” (D. Smith 1990, 194). This belief about the link between mental illness and suicide has contributed to the erasure of the members of Peoples Temple. As Smith points out, Woolf’s “subjectivity” is “subdued” by a schema that assumes that suicide is *never* a rational choice. More to the point, this interpretive strategy has made it difficult, if not impossible, to consider seriously the motives of those who planned the suicide at Jonestown.

Yet the irrationality of suicide was not always assumed. William Willimon comments on the tendency for the interpretations of what happened at Jonestown to focus on either the insane leader–brainwashed followers explanation or the psychosocial deprivation theory. He writes, “Both theories assumed that in the modern world only insane people would die for what they believed.” By contrast, early

Christian history is rife with accounts of people “who quite joyfully parted with possessions, family, friends, even life itself in order to remain faithful” (Willimon 1988, 66). In modern America “freedom of religion” does not include the freedom to care so deeply and so strongly about religion as to include losing one’s life for it. “We are free to exercise our faith—as long as we do so within certain limits, as long as I do not become a fanatic—like the poor, deranged folk at Jonestown who committed suicide rather than forsake their belief in Jim Jones. Although we have freedom to be religious, that does not seem to involve freedom to die for what we believe, because only a crazed fanatic would do that” (Willimon 1988, 66).

I suggest that it was not belief in Jim Jones as much as belief in Jonestown that the leaders of Peoples Temple were not willing to forsake. Nonetheless, Willimon’s larger point is well taken. Deeply held religious commitments are simply not the norm in modern Western culture. So the final act of the people of Jonestown not only appears irrational but decidedly archaic. No wonder the schemata of brainwashing and deprivation hold so much currency: religious commitment itself, not to mention the commitment to justice that was at the center of the Peoples Temple theology-philosophy, is not what is valued in the Western world today. It is far easier to think of Jonestown entirely in terms of the suicides and to allow that interpretive schema to erase the ideals of Peoples Temple than to embrace the challenges of their ministry and to look at how deeply the people engaged in it cared. To do so would make the members of Peoples Temple martyrs and would legitimate the choice they made, even glorify it.

Umberto Eco points out that martyrdom is an old theme in Western religious history. Commenting on the bloody history of Christianity and the relationship of the Peoples Temple suicides to it, he writes:

Suicide is not the rule in all these movements, but violent death—bloodbath, destruction on the pyre—certainly is. And it is easy to understand why the theme of suicide . . . seems to become popular only today; the reason is that for those past movements the desire for martyrdom, death, and purification was satisfied by the authorities in power. . . . [When] authority refuses to administer death, the desire for martyrdom must take on more active forms: *Do it yourself*, in short. (Eco 1979, 99; italics in original)

The decision to commit suicide makes sense in the context of a history of martyrdom that is largely ignored in modern Western culture. So, it is not only the members of Peoples Temple who have been erased but the history of religious commitment with the sacrificial choices believers sometimes make in defense of their community and beliefs.