8

Conclusion

Not everyone drank the deadly potion. Mike Prokes and the Carter brothers were sent with a suitcase of money to the Russian embassy in Georgetown. Maria Katsaris chose Tim and Mike Carter and Mike Prokes because they were Temple leaders and because Prokes had been to the embassy before (Moore 1985, 334). Several people, including black members Odell Rhodes, Stanley Clayton, and Grover Davis, escaped into the jungle. Peoples Temple lawyers Charles Garry and Mark Lane also fled before the dying began. Annie Moore and Jim Jones both died of gunshot wounds. The autopsy performed on Moore stated that the gunshot wound to her head indicated suicide was likely although there was also evidence that she had been injected (336). Before she took her own life, Moore wrote in her notebook, "I am 24 years of age right now and don't expect to live through the end of this book. I thought I should at least make some attempt to let the world know what Jim Jones is—OR WAS—all about." Her sister, Rebecca, speculates that because she used the past tense for Jonestown, she might have been writing as the suicides were taking place. Her "suicide note" for the community is a defense of Jim Jones, who she describes as "the most honest, loving, caring concerned person whom I ever met and knew." It is also a catalog of what the people had created at Jonestown:

> What a beautiful place this was. The children loved the jungle, learned about animals and plants. There were no cars to run over them; no child-molesters to molest them; nobody to hurt them. They were the freest, most intelligent children I have ever known. Seniors had dignity. They had whatever they wanted—a plot of

> land for a garden. Seniors were treated with respect—something they never had in the United States. A rare few were sick, and when they were, they were given the best medical care.

In a different color ink at the bottom of the page Annie Moore wrote, "We died because you would not let us live in peace" (Moore 1985, 336–38).[1]

To put a human face on the horror of Jonestown and to hear the voices of those who died there it has been necessary to critique the ways the people, particularly the women in leadership, have been portrayed in the secondary literature. Crucial to this deconstruction has been the identification of ideological schemata that constrict and, sometimes, control the way scholars understand the behavior of women in new religious movements, in particular the acceptance of an unidirectional power flow from male charismatic leader to female follower and the uncritical linking of women and sex. I have suggested that the relationship among the women, power, and sex in Peoples Temple was more complex than the traditional sociological theories allow for. A restoration of the women in this scholarly analysis has helped to shed additional light on the events of 18 November 1978.

Peoples Temple was an intense organization that took itself very seriously. Previous accounts have not taken into consideration the role that the social complexity of the group might have played in the Jonestown tragedy nor how the intensity of the emotional entanglement of Jones and his movement might have contributed to the decision to commit suicide. It is an uncomfortable conclusion for me to draw, but a high degree of loyalty and a plurality of perspectives are probably difficult to maintain together in a community as demanding as Jonestown. Peoples Temple developed the level of loyalty that led them to suicide in part because its view of the world was based on a highly developed "insider-outsider ideology" and also because the views of only one group of people—the inner circle surrounding Jim Jones—were privileged over those of the others. Had the leaders of Peoples Temple been willing to say, "We've got one solution to the social problems of racism and ageism, but there may be others equally valid," I wonder how many of the educated elite would have been willing to move to Guyana? Perhaps part of the attraction for smart,

1. For the complete text of Moore's letter see Moore 1985, 336–38.

ambitious women such as Carolyn Layton, Harriet Tropp, and Teri Buford was that with Peoples Temple they got to be in the forefront of developing what they believed were *the* solutions to fundamental social ills. Being on the side of truth and justice for the disadvantaged had to have been a powerful motivation in their commitment; how much more so if they thought they were developing *the* model for solving the world's problems? The tragedy of Jonestown is that their pursuit of worthy Christian and humanitarian goals led them to destroy that which they valued most.

These women leaders found in Peoples Temple a structure through which to focus their considerable talent and energy. They did not have to spend the time that most do, deciding whether they were doing the right thing. One of the reasons the situation became so difficult for Layton and the others by the end was because the cognitive dissonance became so great that they had to start thinking through what they were doing and whether it was right. The most compelling letter in the Peoples Temple Archives was the one by Tish Leroy (Reiterman 1982, 430) quoted in chapter 6 in which she talks about the stress and pain of saying "yes" with her mouth and "no" with her heart. For years the new religious movement members had been asking, "How do we accomplish this task?" Suddenly, the situation at Jonestown required that they ask the far more complex question, "What direction should we go in?" and "Are we still on the right path, or have we lost our way?" The existing Temple theology and outlook did not allow for sophisticated, measured considerations such as these. Nor did it provide a way for the inner circle to get real advice from the sect and urban black church members. Because the edifice of egalitarian decision making had been in place for years—an edifice that gave the appearance of democracy but functioned more as a public forum for the "performance" of discussion—it was not possible for those in leadership to ask for the authentic help they needed to figure out the future of the Temple. To admit that Peoples Rallies and Forums were not truly democratic would have been too great an indictment of what had gone before. Peoples Temple was deeply invested in being in the right and was never very good at correcting itself or admitting its failings. By the end Jonestown was crushed by the debris of its self-righteousness.

This study has raised a number of questions about the role of heretics and traitors in the outcome of Peoples Temple. For the residents of Jonestown, especially those who were the most invested in

the purity and righteousness of the Peoples Temple worldview, the traitor became the focus of what was feared most—an insider who is unmasked as an outsider, a person who appears to be a loyalist, but whose heart belongs to the "other." It is sadly ironic that this masked character—the heretic within a heretical movement—was such a central player in the tragedy of Jonestown as Jones himself had long been playing the traitor in Indiana and San Francisco. While Jones appeared to support mainstream liberal political efforts (and was rewarded for doing so), he and his movement were engaged in creating a revolutionary social order that called into question the policies of these same liberal politicians.

Could Jones even be called a traitor within his own movement? As the leader of Jonestown he was the ultimate insider, or so it would seem. As his drug addiction increased, however, his obsession with enemies, traitors, and death meant that his heart belonged not to the elderly black women or to the children who made up the majority of his community but to the "other." His energy was consistently poured into his confrontations with the Concerned Relatives and those who had defected. In the end, his nearly exclusive death by gunshot wound when his wife, Marceline, and his community died from poison, perhaps unmasks him as an outsider.

Carolyn Moore Layton, however, died as an insider. She loved both Jim Jones and Peoples Temple. For her, these loves were entangled with one another. In the end, she chose to die with her friends in the inner circle, not with Jim Jones. Perhaps, her last decision, where to die and with whom, reflects her choice of the movement over Jones. Perhaps, she died of disappointment. Maybe before she took the poison she realized that there could have been another way. I hope so. The last message Sandy Bradshaw received in San Francisco on 18 November was: "Hold on a minute. Carolyn wants to tell you something" (Moore 1985, 335). That "something" was never told. Layton died in Jim Jones's cabin, one-quarter mile from the pavilion, with thirteen other people.

> Someone had brought a thermos of cyanide. Another, a pan-full. The children, found in their bunks, were probably sleeping, or put to sleep, before being injected. A few adults drank the poison, while others chose injection. A few elected "double death": drinking and injection. They lay on their bunks, on Jim's bed, or on the floor, and went to sleep. (Moore 1985, 335)

Among the people who died in the cabin with Layton were Maria Katsaris, Jim McElvane, Layton's three-and one-half-year-old son Jim-Jon, John Victor Stoen, and Annie Moore (Moore 1985, 335).

A sign hanging above the pavilion at Jonestown, where the Peoples Temple community gathered for all their group activities, including the final one, quoted from George Santayana: "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." Yet, remembering, and the history that is written out of that remembering, is not an act devoid of political and social context. What is it that one remembers about Peoples Temple and Jonestown? Does one remember the mad leader and the brainwashed followers? Is one "remembering" anything that *actually* happened, anyone who *really* lived, when one does so?

The difference between foolish suicide victims and courageous martyrs may come down to what one remembers. Jonestown and Masada are separated not so much by the centuries as by the people who construct the memory of them. When one remembers a "brainwashed victim," one is both devaluing the person and the ideas and values that motivated the person. Was the tragedy of 18 November 1978 truly just a "cowardly defeatist act of final protest" as Tim Reiterman has suggested? (Reiterman 1982, 375). Or, is the *New Yorker* article, written with the cooperation of Jim Jones's three surviving sons, a more accurate reflection of the loss suffered on that day? "The great might-have-been of Jones's unlived future is whether he would have brought healing to the racially divided cities of America. It was that noble dream, however, which blinded Temple followers to obvious signs of internal decay, both in their pastor and in his movement" (Wright 1993, 74).

The legacy of Jim Jones is certainly one of grief and tragedy. Yet alongside this well-known tale is another story of Peoples Temple. One day, after I had been interviewing Stephan Jones, he left me alone in his living room while he went to change his clothes. I casually flipped through his wedding album and saw picture after picture of the most gorgeous integrated family. He and Kristi had been married only the year before, and their wedding party, made up of mostly family members, included black, white, Asian, and several children of interracial marriages. When he came back in the room, I mentioned how beautiful his family looked. His reply was: "Peoples Temple had a lot to do with that. Jim Jones had a lot to do with that."

My goal has been to challenge memories. If one remembers that which is comfortable, that which protects the status quo, is one not doomed to repeat history? Forgetting is a terrible thing. Remembering what never happened is, perhaps, more dangerous.