

RHETORIC, REVOLUTION, AND RESISTANCE IN JONESTOWN, GUYANA

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ABSTRACT

Initial reports of the deaths that occurred in Jonestown, Guyana in November 1978 characterized them as mass suicides. As accounts of the deaths of children and old people emerged, however, the events began to be described as murder, especially by conspiracy theorists. But scholarship in New Religions studies over the last three decades has begun to claim that at least some of the deaths for some of the people were a type of martyrdom. A narrative of martyrdom pervaded life in Jonestown, as well as life within Peoples Temple, the group sponsoring the agricultural commune. Jim Jones, the group's leader, appropriated and re-interpreted the Black Panther Party rhetoric of revolutionary suicide, calling upon residents to lay down their lives to protest capitalism. This act of protest was rehearsed many times in Jonestown, and in the Temple in the U.S. Some survivors who lived in Jonestown challenge the assertion that residents took these rehearsals seriously, although a number of audiotapes have parents providing the justification for killing their children to save them from torture; others on tape state that they are taking their own lives as a rejection of capitalism. In any event, by killing the children first, the mass suicides of the parents seemed virtually assured.

KEYWORDS

Jonestown, Peoples Temple, Suicide, Black Power, Martyrdom

A complete understanding of all the factors contributing to the deaths of 918 people in Jonestown, Guyana in November 1978 may forever elude us. Nevertheless, an important factor often overlooked is the radical rhetoric that dominated black activism in the fifteen years preceding the mass deaths. A discourse asserting the positive need to fight, and even to die, for the cause infused Peoples Temple at least by the late 1960s in northern California. It permeated daily life in Jonestown, especially when Jim Jones, the group's leader, arrived in mid-1977 to make his permanent home in the community.

This discourse was framed in the language of martyrdom. Given the times in which the Temple arose, when political murders in the U.S. seemed commonplace, this rhetorical move was eminently rational. Huey Newton, a leader in the Black Panther Party, called the militant activism of the era “revolutionary suicide,” in recognition of his belief that “the revolutionary must always be prepared to face death” (Newton 1973, 7). Jim Jones reinterpreted revolutionary suicide to mean actual suicide, rather than suicidal actions. He viewed mass death as a form of resistance in which a strong protest was made through the lives, and bodies, of those courageous enough to take the step.

The question of whether or not Jones’ followers fully understood or completely accepted his perspective, however, continues to haunt considerations of the deaths in Jonestown. This paper addresses several of the issues that persistently demand attention. First, it looks at the explicit threats that members of Peoples Temple made concerning mass suicide, before turning to initial news accounts of the deaths in Jonestown, and the reasons the media initially reported them as mass suicide. It then examines the ongoing debate regarding the nature of the deaths: Did adults voluntarily kill themselves? How should we characterize the deaths of the children? The paper locates this analysis within a broader discussion of the social stigma associated with suicide. Finally, it compares the revolutionary rhetoric used by Black Power movements in the U.S. with the language used by Peoples Temple. The discourse of both movements emphasizes a willingness to die fighting persecution and repression, and reveals an expectation that this will indeed happen. The paper concludes by arguing that the members of Peoples Temple saw themselves as true martyrs in the cause of African American liberation.

THE THREAT OF MASS SUICIDE

It seemed to come as no surprise that more than 900 Americans living in Jonestown, a communal agricultural project in Guyana, committed mass suicide on 18 November 1978. Members of Peoples Temple, a new religious movement headquartered in San Francisco, had made ominous threats throughout 1978.

An oppositional group called the Concerned Relatives—comprised of former members and relatives of those in Peoples Temple—filed an “Accusation of Human Rights Violations” in April 1978 in which the first item referred to suicide. The “Accusation” quoted a letter that Temple member Pam Moton had written the previous month to members of the United States Congress, which stated that, “I can say without hesitation that we are devoted to a decision that it is better even to die than

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to be constantly harassed from one continent to the next" ("Accusation of Human Rights Violations" 1978). Additional evidence in the "Accusation" came from Yolanda Crawford, a former member of the Temple who had recently returned from Jonestown. Crawford said that, "I heard Jim Jones say, 'If anyone tries to start anything, we are ready and prepared to die for our cause'" ("Affidavit of Yolanda D. A. Crawford" 1978).

Peoples Temple's response to the publicity generated by the "Accusation" would not have reassured many parents. In a press release dictated from Jonestown via shortwave radio to Temple members in San Francisco, Harriet Tropp stated that "it would seem that *any* person with *any* integrity or courage would have *no* trouble understanding such a position." She went on to quote Dr. Martin Luther King's statement in support of ultimate commitment that "we must develop the quiet courage of dying for a cause." Tropp concluded by saying that the people of Jonestown would "defend the integrity of our community" by dying if necessary, although that was not their purpose (Tropp 1978).

Rather than backing down, the Concerned Relatives gained new ammunition in their battle a month later. In May 1978, Deborah Layton Blakey, who defected from Jonestown, issued a sworn statement upon her return to the U.S. titled, "Re the Threat and Possibility of Mass Suicide by Members of the People's Temple." Blakey reported a number of occasions on which mass suicide was discussed, although she recounted only a single instance of a suicide drill occurring in the five months she lived in Jonestown. At that time, the group was told that the situation was hopeless, and that it was better to die for the glory of socialism than to be tortured by the mercenaries who were coming. Everyone, including the children, lined up and drank a small cup of what they had been told was a poison that would kill them in 45 minutes. Jones "warned us that the time was not far off when it would become necessary for us to die by our own hands" (Blakey 1978). The accounts of Blakey and other members of the Concerned Relatives persuaded Leo Ryan, a Member of Congress from California, to travel to Jonestown in November 1978 to investigate the charges. As he was leaving the agricultural project, he and three reporters, along with a departing Jonestown resident, were shot to death at a nearby airstrip by a few young men from Jonestown. The rest of the community of nine hundred gathered in the central area of the project, where almost all of them either ingested poison, were injected with poison, or, in the case of infants and children, had the poison squirted down their mouths. Only two—Jim Jones and my sister Annie Moore—died of gunshot wounds.

MURDER OR SUICIDE?

Initial accounts of the deaths that occurred in Jonestown characterized them as suicides, beginning in the predawn hours of 19 November when a CIA memo reported “mass suicides” (“The NOIWON Notation” 1978). News coverage during the first week followed the lead given by government sources, as indicated by the second-level headline in the 20 November *New York Times*: “Troops Find Bodies—Mass Suicide Is Indicated After Attack on Americans in Which 5 Were Slain” (Associated Press 1978). The next day: “400 Are Found Dead In Mass Suicide By Cult.” The third-level head for the same article stated that “Parents Reported to Give Children Poison Before Dying Beside Them” (Nordheimer 1978a). By 24 November, however, the deaths were described for the first time as “mass suicide and killings,” although the headline still called it the “Sect’s Suicide Rite” (Nordheimer 1978b), a description that continued to appear in headlines. Three days later, on 27 November, reporter Jon Nordheimer, who had written daily articles for the *Times*, termed it the “mass murder-suicide,” and other writers soon described the deaths as “killings and suicides.” Eventually these specific descriptors were replaced by “massacre” and “tragedy,” terms that reflect the writers’ attitude toward the deaths.

The mass suicide description was never accurate, of course, since the 300 infants and children could not choose to die in any meaningful sense of the word “suicide.” Nevertheless, early eyewitness accounts indicated that most adults voluntarily took the poison. An audiotape made at the time revealed that only a single person, Christine Miller, verbally dissented, and she was shouted down by the crowd (Audiotape Q042 1978). Odell Rhodes, who escaped from Jonestown on 18 November, has consistently stated that most died willingly (Feinsod 1981). Stanley Clayton, who fled during the deaths (and coincidentally is the cousin of Huey Newton), initially reported only a single person resisting, but later claimed in his book that a number of others resisted (Wooden 1981). Dr. Leslie Mootoo, the Guyana government pathologist who investigated the deaths, observed injection marks on the upper arms of at least seventy adults, and questioned whether these individuals died voluntarily. A number of writers have characterized the deaths as murder as a result of Dr. Mootoo’s testimony (e.g., Hougan 1999).

The 2006 edition of *the jonestown report* featured a forum titled “Was It Murder or Suicide?” in which a dozen writers, myself included, weighed in on the topic (“Was It Murder or Suicide” 2006). Some authors argued strongly that it was murder, because Jonestown residents did not seriously intend to kill themselves; nor did they have any choice in the matter. As Josef Dieckman writes, “There was only one option: death.

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The only 'choice' they were offered was whether that death would be by their own hand or by someone else's. That's not choice, that's murder" (Dieckman 2006).

However we may understand the nature of the deaths in Jonestown, we cannot escape the fact that events of the last day were carefully organized and rehearsed a number of times. My own two sisters, Carolyn Layton and Annie Moore, are implicated in the planning process. Carolyn wrote Jim Jones an "Analysis of Future Prospects" in which she asked:

If we make a stand or decide to die how are we going to do it? How would you convince Stephan, or would you? How will we have the knowledge to know now is the time to go ahead and do it? Do you give everyone pills (Layton 2005)?

Annie submitted various ways to kill people, proposing exhaust fumes or poisoning the water or food supply. In a note to Jim Jones, she wrote, "I never thought people would line up to be killed but actually think a select group would have to kill the majority of the people secretly, without the people knowing it." She thought that chopping people's heads off would be "terrorizing," and argued that the main reason for suicide was to assure the safety of the children, who might be hurt if the residents of Jonestown violently resisted any attacks (Annie Moore n.d.).

Even conceding that the death of a child of five months or five years could not be considered a suicide, the following question remains: how did the parents who killed their children in Jonestown view their own actions? We may look to similar historical instances of parents killing children for the answer. The male Jews at Masada slew their wives and children with the knives they had before they killed themselves as the Roman army advanced. Chaja Kubrzanska and Basia Binsztein of the village of Jedwabne, Poland, drowned their children and then killed themselves in a nearby pond rather than let the Nazis take them ("The Testimony of Szmul Wasersztein" 1945). Terrified civilians on the island of Saipan threw their children over a cliff into the Pacific Ocean, and jumped in afterwards, to avoid torture from invading American troops, which they fully believed would occur if they were captured ("Victory in the Pacific" n.d.). Should we consider these deaths, including those of the children in Jonestown, as acts of murder if the parents believed they were sacrificing their children to avoid a fate worse than death?

The people of Jonestown had discussed this possibility openly. During one White Night on 12 April 1978, residents announce their willingness to take the lives of their own children rather than leave them for the fascists to find. Jones elaborates, saying

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that they are already prepared to be “genuinely compassionate” in the case of such an emergency. If the child were over the age of 11, “she would take up a cutlass and fight till she was dead, unless it came to an overwhelming invasion, and then we would gently put them to sleep” (Audiotape Q637 1978)

I believe that we should consider the children’s deaths in Jonestown, just as we view them at Masada, Jedwabne and Saipan: parents did indeed kill their children, but they did not murder them. A literary example makes this same point. The character Sethe in Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved* has been brutalized by slave owners, and to prevent her daughter from facing the same doom, she cuts the throat of Beloved. “She had to be safe,” says Sethe,

and I put her where she would be... I’ll explain to her, even though I don’t have to. Why I did it. How if I hadn’t killed she would have died and that is something I could not bear to happen to her. When I explain it she’ll understand, because she understands everything already (Morrison 1988, 200).

THE STIGMA OF SUICIDE

The question of when suicide should more appropriately be called murder is not a new one. Suicide itself carries negative moral freight, with most people in the U.S. saying it is “morally wrong” (Saad 2011). But according to the French sociologist Emile Durkheim, suicide is a neutral term that should be “applied to all cases of death resulting directly or indirectly from a positive or negative act of the victim himself, which he knows will produce this result” (Durkheim 1951, 44; original text appears in italics). Durkheim then uses the word suicide to describe a range of behaviors, which include what he calls “altruistic suicide,” as in the case of soldiers fighting in a lost cause, Jains abstaining from all food, and Christian martyrs dying for their faith. He also identifies a type of obligatory altruistic suicide, such as *sati*, the centuries’ old practice, now outlawed, in which Hindu widows throw themselves upon the funeral pyres of their husbands; and *hara-kiri*, in which disgraced Japanese men disembowel themselves to save their families from dishonor.

Philosophers and theologians have challenged Durkheim, R. G. Frey (1978), R. B. Brandt (1975), and others who seem to consider all forms of self-destruction to be suicide. William Tolhurst rejects the view that “mere foreknowledge that one’s death will result from one’s actions is a sufficient condition for suicide” (Tolhurst 1990, 77). He gives examples of “altruistically motivated self-caused deaths,” which he claims are

not suicides, such as the pilot who guides a disabled plane away from a populated area, knowing he will die in the consequent crash. According to Tolhurst, these examples are different from other instances of actual altruistic suicides, such as the Buddhist monk who immolates himself to protest a war. What Tolhurst is trying to do is to “reconsider the moral status of suicide,” by saying that “it seems clear that suicide is not selfish and blameworthy by definition” (Tolhurst 1990, 84).

In contrast, Suzanne Stern-Gillet contends that rhetorically it is necessary to consider “different *manners of viewing* a person’s death” (Stern-Gillet 1990, 93; italics in original). She is concerned that Durkheim broadens the definition of suicide to include the self-sacrifice of Socrates, Jesus, and Bobby Sands, the IRA prisoner who died during a hunger strike. The central issue for Stern-Gillet is the question of who is truly responsible for the individual’s death: Athens or Socrates? Pilate or Jesus? Margaret Thatcher or Bobby Sands? She concludes:

To call X a suicide amounts, among other things, to ascribing X the moral responsibility (and sometimes, but not always, the blame) for X’s death. To call X a martyr amounts, amongst other things, to ascribing the moral responsibility (and, usually, the blame) for X’s death to someone else (usually a government, an institution, or an organization) (Stern-Gillet 1990, 99-100; original text appears in italics).

In other words, the concept of suicide indicates responsibility for the death. In Stern-Gillet’s view, to say that someone is “forced to commit suicide” negates the meaning of suicide.

These arguments counter Durkheim’s (failed) effort to de-stigmatize the concept of suicide. The word itself bears judgment against the individual doing it, and the act carries a stigma which explains our efforts to differentiate between types of self-caused deaths. Immanuel Kant was opposed to suicide in all circumstances, yet allows it by another name: “It is no suicide to risk one’s life against one’s enemies, and even to sacrifice it, in order to preserve one’s duties toward oneself” (qtd. in Brandt 1975, 64). Commenting upon the view that one can sacrifice one’s life to save one’s humanity, John Donnelly adds, “But this can in no way be construed as an act of suicide” (Donnelly 1978, 103; the exact quotation ends with “suicide,” because Donnelly is referring to a specific set of cases he has examined). Even in daily life we use euphemisms concerning biomedical end-of-life decisions which might be called suicide: letting nature take its course, withdrawing life-sustaining treatment, and so on (Szasz 1999, 6).

Religious acts of self-sacrifice are rarely called suicide, except in the case of today's suicide bombers. (It is important to note that Muslim supporters consider these individuals as martyrs, the same way that Christians describe those who sought death for the glory of God in the Roman arena. May we call Samson—who deliberately brought down the Temple of Dagon to destroy the Philistines, killing himself in the process [Judges 16:30]—a suicidal hero?) While most mainline religions today condemn suicide, they also continue to provide the justification, or “invitation,” in Margaret Battin's words, for death: reunion with the deceased; release of the soul; self-sacrifice; martyrdom and avoidance of sin; death and the attainment of the highest spiritual state (Battin 1995, 57-74).

This discussion does not resolve the debate over whether the deaths in Jonestown were suicides or murders, but it does illuminate the problems inherent in identifying those deaths as “mass suicide.” Deaths that occur within a religious or political setting, in which the actors see themselves participating in a larger drama on a world stage, cannot be reduced, or trivialized, by one epithet or another. Thus the deaths in Jonestown defy easy categorization.

NARRATIVES OF REVOLUTION AND SACRIFICE

The term adopted by the Jonestown community both before and on that fateful day—revolutionary suicide—provides the best description of the cultural and emotional context that existed in Jonestown. Civil rebellions and antiwar protests in America's cities provided the backdrop for the rapid expansion of the Temple from rural northern California in the late 1960s to urban San Francisco and Los Angeles in the early- to mid-1970s. In addition, anti-colonial movements sweeping throughout Africa and Asia, and the establishment of socialist governments in Latin American countries, created a global awareness that African Americans were part of a larger struggle for justice and equality. The emigration to Guyana, a co-operative socialist republic, solidified the commitment Temple members had to the global struggle for freedom. They saw themselves as comrades-in-arms in the great fight against capitalism.

The specter of violent death at the hands of agents of the state was an ever-present reality for 1960s radicals. This could be seen in the murders of black leaders, Civil Rights workers, and student protestors, as well as in the deaths of hundreds in the civil rebellions that swept through American cities during that decade. Coupled with the loss of thousands of American soldiers in Vietnam, not to mention millions of Vietnamese, death loomed large in all sectors of society. While radical rhetoric may

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have exaggerated the extent of the crisis, social activists nonetheless could see that the apparatus of government clamped down harshly when its interests were challenged.

This repression engendered a revolutionary narrative that emphasized resistance to oppression, even at the cost of one's life. We find appeals both to armed struggle and to sacrificial death in speeches, newspapers, essays, sermons, poetry, literature, and drama. An eerily prescient poem titled "Revolution!!" by Richard W. Thomas reads:

We will not die for nothing.
Not anymore.
Our deaths shall be noisy and beautiful to the last swing...
We shall die properly, all at once! (Thomas 1968, 196).

Many additional examples of the revolutionary narrative African American writers employed in the 1960s appears in the 1968 anthology *Black Fire*. An essay by Calvin C. Hernton titled "Dynamite Growing out of Their Skulls" predicts that African Americans will explode in violence, while whites "will be at a complete loss to understand why so many black people have gone mad." The essay concludes that "nothing will stop the blacks except to kill them" (Hernton 1968, 78, 104). Another illustration of the radical narrative is the one-act play "Black-Ice," in which a group of radicals kidnap a congressman and hold him hostage in exchange for the release of a prisoner on death row. The plot is foiled, three of the schemers are killed as they attempt to escape, and a woman is left with the congressman, who begs for his life.

Congressman: All of you will go free.
Martha: How can you promise that? You're just a Congressman.
Congressman: You'd be surprised at the power a Congressman has. We
run this country.

At the end of the play, Martha shoots the congressman. The last line is: "You didn't die very well!" (Patterson 1968, 564, 565).

The clearest and most confrontational articulation of the priorities and programs of Black Power came from the Black Panthers. Founded in 1966 in Oakland, California, the Black Panther Party (originally the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense) directly challenged police brutality against African Americans. In contrast to the practice of nonviolent resistance, the Panthers encouraged armed resistance, especially against the police who carried out state-sponsored oppression of African Americans and other people of color. They argued that "all Black and oppressed people should be armed for self-defense of our homes and communities

against these fascist police forces” (“March 1972 Platform” 1972). This provocative stance led to lethal showdowns between the Panthers and the police, which in turn fed the belief that death was just around the corner.

Huey P. Newton, co-founder of the Black Panthers, served three years in prison on charges of killing a police officer and wounding another, before winning an appeal and being released from San Quentin in 1970. His theory of revolutionary suicide, and his persona as persecuted political figure, served as the model for discourse in Peoples Temple. In the essay “Revolutionary Suicide,” Newton writes that, “[a]lthough I risk the likelihood of death, there is at least the possibility, if not probability, of changing intolerable conditions” (Newton 1973, 5). He contrasts “reactionary suicide”—what he calls the self-murder of those who are crushed by reactionary forces—with revolutionary suicide, in which “we must move against these forces, even at the risk of death” (Newton 1973, 5). Newton then goes on to cite a number of revolutionaries, such as Che Guevara, Fidel Castro, and Mikhail Bakunin, who argued that revolutionaries are essentially doomed men. He compares the 1960s radicals with the American colonists, the dispossessed of the French Revolution, the Russians of 1917, the Jews of Warsaw, and other heroic radicals. These revolutionaries were not suicidal, nor did they actively seek death, yet they knew that their lives were at stake.

In an interview with the official organ of the African National Congress of South Africa, the liberation group in that country in 1970, Newton describes the program of the Panthers as one of armed struggle. “We have hooked up with the people who are rising up all over the world with arms, because we feel that only with the power of the gun will the bourgeoisie be destroyed and the world transformed” (Newton 1995, 198). In response to the uprising at the Attica State Prison, in which 39 prisoners and guards were shot and killed in the prison yard, Newton asserts that “Prison Warden [Richard] Nixon...leaves no alternative but violent, armed resistance” (Newton 1995, 205). His eulogy for Jonathan Jackson and William Christmas, who were killed in a shoot-out in the Marin County Courthouse in 1970, includes the statement: “If the penalty for the quest for freedom is death, then by death we escape to freedom” (Newton 1995, 221). He concludes the eulogy for another Black Panther who was shot and killed, with the words:

Samuel Napier was a servant of the people; he gave the supreme gift to the people. So therefore Samuel Napier was the Supreme Servant of the people (Newton 1995, 230).

Newton’s concept of revolutionary suicide unmistakably required dying in the cause of battle.

REVOLUTIONARY SUICIDE IN PEOPLES TEMPLE

While the fiery rhetoric of Newton, the Black Panthers, and those in the Black Power movement may appear overblown and self-aggrandizing today, it is vital to remember that activists at the time believed they were engaged in a life and death struggle. Documents obtained under the Freedom of Information Act and other public records suggest that this belief was not mere paranoia (Jones 1988). The members of Peoples Temple used the same language, since it was an African American political-religious group also responding to the social turmoil raging in the U.S. in the 1960s and 1970s. Duchess Harris and Adam John Waterman argue that many Temple members deliberately utilized Black Power rhetoric, “because it was an available and appealing syntax of revolutionary social and political change” (Harris and Waterman 2004, 105). Perhaps more to the point, African Americans comprised between eighty and ninety percent of the membership of the Temple in California, and accounted for seventy percent of those who died in Jonestown. Black Power was not empty rhetoric for Temple members.

Jim Jones expounded a political message that radicalized the young and exhorted a social gospel message that offered spiritual hope to the elderly. The Temple offered “survival programs” (Harris and Waterman 2004, 106) such as health services for senior citizens and welfare advocacy for poor people. Members also volunteered as activists in a variety of political movements that included protesting the Bakke decision by the U.S. Supreme Court, which rejected the principle of affirmative action; joining the California Coalition against the Death Penalty; and participating in a Gay Rights rally. The Temple sponsored anti-colonial events, such as the 1976 African Liberation Day celebration, which hosted speakers from liberation movements from the U.S. and abroad. Members circulated petitions against the incarceration of South Africa’s Nelson Mandela, and refugees from the military coup in Chile, like Orlando Letelier and Laura Allende, spoke at the Temple.

Jones himself was “an obscure socialist thinker, blending elements of atheism, Christianity, Marxism, Leninism, Maoism, and Third World revolutionary rhetoric into a complicated brew of political sentiments” (Harris and Waterman 2004, 106). Audiotapes recovered from Jonestown feature Jones reading news from *Pravda*, a Soviet newspaper, and Tass, the Soviet news agency, about liberation movements from around the world (the head of Tass and his wife actually visited Jonestown on 15 April 1978). In the news from 6 November 1978, Jones reported on protests in the Arab world against the Camp David Peace Agreement; the handover of power from

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the Rhodesian government to black majority rule; the decision in the Philippines to release those detained under martial law; and trade talks between China and Thailand (Audiotape Q169 1978).

Peoples Forum, the newspaper of Peoples Temple, also printed news of radical leaders and events. The first issue, published in April 1976, highlighted Dennis Banks, the co-founder of the American Indian Movement who was fighting extradition proceedings to South Dakota in connection with the Wounded Knee uprising of 1973. An article on intimidation against the Temple from the December 1976 edition focused on spies identified at a talk given at the Temple by civil rights activist Unita Blackwell Wright. "This country must be maintained on the road to social democracy," the article reads. "It is beginning to appear that our corporate state has gotten out of touch with the needs of its people." It concludes with a warning to all those attempting to:

circumvent the Constitutional guarantees of freedom of speech, religion, and assembly, that we will not stand idly by while these freedoms are smothered... We would be prepared to do so even if it meant our death, because we firmly believe that liberty is worth that price ("Intimidation Won't Succeed" 1976, 2).

A review of *Peoples Forum*, audiotape transcripts, and other primary source documents reveals that the discourse of Peoples Temple was neither as cogent, coherent or radical as that of the Black Panthers or other Black Power movements. The expression of a willingness to die, however, is marked, as can be seen in the above quotation. Six months after my sister Annie Moore joined the Temple in 1972, she wrote a letter in which she stated: "I want to be in on changing the world to be a better place and I would give my life for it" (Rebecca Moore 1986, 94). In her last letter to me, from October 1978, Annie described various conspiracies against the group that had been uncovered. "What's interesting," she wrote, "is that it is all coming out before we are all dead, not the case with JFK, RFK, and MLK" (Rebecca Moore 1986, 282).

The notion of suicide was not explicitly discussed by the residents of Jonestown until September 1977, when they believed they were under attack. Tim Carter, who escaped on 18 November, writes that Jim Jones claimed that the situation was so dire that they needed to commit suicide in order to prevent the fascists from killing the people. Jones called for a vote, but only two people supported the suicide option; in a second vote the next day, three more joined the two. All were female leaders of the Temple (Carter 2006). Nevertheless, when Jones spoke to the Deputy Prime Minister

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of Guyana via shortwave radio, he reversed the outcome: all but two supported “a vote that we would rather die than return to the United States.” The two dissenters, he added, thought they might be able to bring about revolutionary change in the U.S. (Audiotape Q800 1977).

A journal kept by Temple member Edith Roller and an audiotape recording indicate that revolutionary suicide was unambiguously and repeatedly discussed at a community meeting on 16 February 1978. (This may have been the discussion Deborah Layton referred to in her affidavit of June 1978, following her defection.) Roller wrote that Jim Jones had said the political situation in Guyana was dangerous and that alternatives needed to be explored. Many residents proposed moving to Africa, and Roller publicly recommended “that instead of revolutionary suicide (which had been suggested), we seek to send our young people to some African country where they could be used in a revolutionary cause” (Roller 1978). Other people who spoke that night agreed, arguing that they should take a stand and fiercely resist any attacks, but Jones maintained that revolutionary suicide was preferable to being taken prisoner, becoming a slave, or returning to the U.S. “There’s no way to make any moral sense out of further fighting,” he said, “because it’d be maybe black people having to kill black people that they’d use to come after us, and we would lose our moral impact” (Audiotape Q642 1978). At the end of the discussion, Jones announced that there was no alternative to revolutionary suicide, and ordered residents to line up to take what they believed was poison.

Discussions of revolutionary suicide intensified throughout 1978. Julia Scheeres maintains that “night after night, Jones held his death vote” (Scheeres 2011, 127). Sometime between November 1977 and June 1978, residents were asked to write down what they would do in a final “white night.” Their responses veered from the sincere to the fanciful:

Rose O. Sharon: I have given my life to you. [I] Don’t care about my life.

Thom Bogue: What I would do if I was sent to kill someone, I would have a vessel of nitroglycerin along with a full screen spark strike, then I would walk up to [a] person and pull the string and blow me and the person up. And if I were caught along the way I would put out a do-or-die threat. If you get in my path or try to stop me, I will blow you up....

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Shirley Baisy: I can give my life, my children[']s] life or any member of my family. I don't think we were put here to live forever ("What I Would Do..." n.d.).

We know that Thom Bogue's declaration, at the least, was fraudulent since he tried to escape from Jonestown many times, and did in fact survive on 18 November 1978 by leaving with Congressman Ryan.

Whatever their private thoughts might have been, residents affirmed their commitment to die on a tape made at the end of that summer. The statements clearly are intended to be made for posterity, as several speakers allude to the future and those who will listen to the tape. Although they do not agree on a single definition of revolutionary suicide, they do admit that death is the only way out. Some want to die to prove that they laid down their lives for something worthwhile; some would rather die than live any other place in the world; some want to make a statement in support of the communism practiced in Jonestown; some are dying in solidarity with other freedom fighters around the world; and some are just tired of running. The declaration of Liane Harris perhaps rings truest of those made that night:

I wanted to say that if I can't participate in this liberation struggle here in Guyana—where all the people here in Jonestown are free, they have lots of food, everyone has housing, the children are blooming and growing with education where they are learning everything they can. This is the only place where I found freedom—and if I can't have it here, I'd rather be dead (Harris 1978).

Liane was not in Jonestown on 18 November, but instead died in the bathroom of the Temple headquarters in Georgetown, Guyana, along with her mother and two siblings.

The tape made on the last day as the deaths are occurring includes Jim Jones' pronouncement that they were not destroying themselves, but rather were committing revolutionary suicide:

One thousand people who said, we don't like the way the world is. [Tape edit] Take some. [Tape edit] Take our life from us. We laid it down. We got tired. [Tape edit] We didn't commit suicide, we committed an act of revolutionary suicide protesting the conditions of an inhumane world (Audiotape Q042 1978).

Just as Huey Newton differentiated between reactionary suicide and revolutionary suicide, Jim Jones distinguished self-destructive suicide from revolutionary suicide. He condemned ordinary suicide, saying, "It's *immoral* to commit suicide for selfish reason. It's *hostile*. It's an act of vengeance to do it" (Audiotape Q833 1978, italics in transcript). He claimed that a suicide would be reincarnated for 10,000 years. In contrast, revolutionary suicide was an unselfish act intended to resist the evils of capitalism.

CONCLUSIONS

Members of Peoples Temple were immersed in the rhetoric of revolution. Resistance shaped the discourse they used to describe America, the Babylon of racism and capitalism. (Members and Jones referred to the U.S. as Babylon e.g., Audiotapes Q182 1978; Q217 1978; Q673 1977; and Q933 1977). The group worked on two fronts to oppose these evils. First, they worked for social justice in the urban areas of San Francisco and, to a lesser extent, Los Angeles. Second, they created an alternative society in Guyana in which the problems of America's economic and political system no longer existed. The mean streets of the ghetto—with drugs, addiction, crime, alcoholism, juvenile delinquency, and other ills—were left far behind.

Self-sacrifice was required to participate in the struggle. This self-denial encompassed not only martyrdom at the hands of the oppressors, but also self-murder, if the death promoted a larger cause or purpose. In the case of Jonestown, the deaths served as a blow by the powerless against the powerful. Joost Meerloo's description of the honor code among the Japanese who once required hara-kiri to save a family from disgrace resonates with the type of resistance seen in Jonestown. According to Meerloo, such death is a self-justification, a purification, and a recovery of lost honor. "It also meant a silent, honorable revenge on those so high in the governmental hierarchy that they, according to the code, could not be attacked directly without the aggressor losing respect and self-respect" (Meerloo 1962, 53).

Unlike their contemporaries, the people of Jonestown ultimately rejected armed aggression. They turned the violence upon themselves, thereby proving the righteousness of the cause for which they were willing to die. "The 'suicide' says: 'I was right after all; I shall teach you a lesson by my death'" (Meerloo 1962, 54). Thus, the revolutionary suicide of Jonestown was the best weapon that the weak could use against the strong. The people maintained their integrity by dying what they hoped would be a noble death in a cause greater than themselves.

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