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Taking sides

On the (im)possibility of participant observation

Rebecca Moore

It was during the April 2015 reunion of Jonestown survivors – occasions characterized mainly by friendship and warm memories – that the conversation veered dangerously close towards confrontation.

The reunions embody the remnants of Peoples Temple, the religious group that tragically and dramatically ended in a mass murder-suicide of more than 900 men, women, and children on 18 November 1978 at its agricultural project in Jonestown, Guyana. Fewer than 100 members of the Temple living in Guyana survived that day. These include 16 Jonestown residents who had left with a congressman to return to the US; a handful who escaped into the jungle; a half dozen who were on Temple boats or in Venezuela on Temple business; about 45 members who were in the Temple's headquarters in the capital city of Georgetown; and seven who survived in Jonestown itself. Several hundred members who still lived in California and others who had left the organization – or defected, in the Temple's rhetoric – also survived the final cataclysm. Ever since the twenty-fifth anniversary of the deaths, members in each of these categories have gathered together periodically for memorial services, potlucks, and reunions. Although we had never belonged to Peoples Temple, my husband, Fielding McGehee, and I are included in these events.

On this occasion, though, the discussion grew a little tense when one of the survivors claimed that Jonestown survivor Mike Prokes used to criticize the Temple in private conversations with reporters, even as he only praised it in public. In 1972 Prokes, a television newsman, had visited the Temple's facilities in northern California in order to do an exposé on the group, which had already received negative media attention. He joined the Temple instead, impressed with its political vision and action, and became its media adviser (Reiterman and Jacobs 1982: 264). Prokes left Jonestown on 18 November with two other young men, all three carrying suitcases full of cash with orders from Jonestown leaders to deliver them to the Soviet Embassy in Georgetown.

(Full disclosure: Mike was the "husband" of my sister Carolyn in a sham wedding designed to give her illegitimate son a last name.) At a press conference he called four months later in March 1979, Prokes announced that a conspiracy against the Temple had existed and challenged the assembled reporters to investigate it. He then went into a bathroom and fatally shot himself.

I was dubious about the claim that Mike had criticized the Temple to outsiders – especially reporters – and asked the survivor bluntly: "Who said this?" She replied that some had asked her about it, but she did not really answer my query. Although I did not pursue it, my probing indicated my lack of belief in her account.

As the evening progressed, I, too, was questioned about my own assertions that Prokes wanted to declare what he thought was the truth about Peoples Temple and Jonestown. "What was that truth?", someone asked me in a rather hostile tone. A wave of unspoken anger roiled around the table. It subsided a bit, as it always does in these gatherings, because everyone there knows each of them has a different understanding of what is true about Jonestown. In order to maintain camaraderie, it is necessary to give and take, to not fight to the death on principle. That had already happened in Jonestown, and survivors seem to appreciate that some battles are not worth the casualties.

As both an outsider and an insider at these gatherings, I usually back down when things are contested. My older sister, Carolyn Layton, and my younger sister, Annie Moore, died in Jonestown, along with my three-year-old nephew Kimo – one of two illegitimate children fathered by Jim Jones – and hundreds of other people I knew as friends and family of my sisters. Their deaths gave me a type of insider status that I also earned by virtue of establishing Alternative Considerations of Jonestown and Peoples Temple (http://jonestown.sdsu.edu), a website that has served as the demilitarized zone, in the words of one survivor, for the competing and conflicting voices of those affected directly and indirectly by the deaths in Jonestown. Because the website, currently managed by Fielding McGehee, presents a wide variety of opinion – much of which is material with which we personally disagree – survivors view us as fair and open, and see the website as a neutral meeting ground.

But on some occasions at these gatherings, I do take a stand. Several times, for example, I have questioned what survivors mean when they say they were brainwashed. Some have undergone counselling, and their therapists offered brainwashing as the explanation for why they behaved the way they did. Nell Smart, a member of the Los Angeles branch of the Temple who lost four children in Jonestown, along with her mother and uncle, alludes to the discomfort my questioning provoked at the reunion in 2006:

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> It was not the matter of brainwashing alone that ruffled feathers, but rather the statement that one must take responsibility for one's own actions. I believe each of us wants to think of ourselves as a good person, so it is hard to admit that any bad deeds done while in PT could have been done by the good person that we think we are. The only way to accept that is to believe that we must have been brainwashed. And if we have to bear the responsibility for our actions, does that not also mean that each of us is in part responsible for what happened on November 18? (Smart 2006)

I had crossed the boundary between remaining a neutral observer and becoming an engaged participant when I talked about personal responsibility, conscience, and agency with the survivors of Jonestown.

The anthropologist Benjamin Paul captures my dilemma when he writes: "Participation implies emotional involvement; observation requires detachment. It is a strain to try to sympathize with others and at the same time strive for scientific objectivity" (Paul 1953: 441). A large body of ethnographic literature has described in great detail the role of the participant observer in the field. A discernible shift from valorizing the detached analyst to lionizing the engaged scholar occurred over the course of the twentieth century. Anthony Forge represents the former viewpoint in an article from 1972:

> It is true that the anthropologist must strive for a certain sort of objectivity but it is the objectivity that comes from analysis rather than the supercilious objectivity of the disinterested observer that must be his aim. If he is getting a real understanding of the workings of the society he is studying, he must be involved without identifying, he must participate in the exotic culture but at all times remain a member of his own. (Forge 1972: 297)

Reneé Fox reflects the newer perspective on engagement and detachment when she writes that

> it is through ongoing interaction and a developing relationship with the individuals and groups who belong to the milieu being explored that the researcher enters ever-more deeply – psychologically and interpersonally, as well as intellectually – into its social structure and culture and the experiences, personae, and lives of those who people it. (Fox 2004: 315)

In a literature review that traces the shifts from monograph to memoir to narrative ethnology, Barbara Tedlock notes that, "What was only a trickle [of first-person accounts] in the 1930s grew into a stream of confessional accounts by the 1960s and became a swollen river of self-revelatory celebration by the 1980s" (Tedlock 1991: 79). She attributes the change to a number of factors, including a wider reading audience for ethnographic material and

a democratization of knowledge that embraced indigenous anthropologists. More fundamentally, an "epistemological shift" occurred in anthropological analyses and ethics, and the stigma of "going native" was replaced with the positive task of becoming "bicultural" (ibid. 82).

In this chapter I would like to question whether it is possible to be perfectly bicultural, or if at some point we must make the decision to choose one identity at the expense of the other. The issue of making a choice, of taking sides, would appear to make the classic participant observer – in, but not of, the culture – an impossibility. Anthropologists today emphasize the responsibility that the researcher has for the relationships being established with persons, rather than subjects (Strathern 2006). I wish to go further than the idea of responsibility, however, and raise the issue of commitment. To what extent have we committed ourselves when we as scholars enter into the lives of others? Whose side are we on?

My answer is too ambivalent to be satisfying: I believe we are on both sides, all sides, and no sides. My own experience of being an insider and an outsider within the Peoples Temple survivor community is one of constant negotiation, reflection, empathy, alienation, love, disgust ... and much more. On the one hand, the survivors have become my very family. I have exchanged much more than anecdotes and potlucks with them. On the other, as long as I continue to write about Peoples Temple and Jonestown, I remain locked outside, a place I intentionally choose to be at times. Once I retire for the night during our weekend gatherings, Temple survivors continue to talk for hours, freed of my inhibiting presence. Even a fly on the wall makes a buzz.

What follows is a description of how I came to this understanding of participant observation through my probe of Peoples Temple and interactions with its survivors. I describe a number of ways in which my thinking has changed about the organization and the events of Jonestown. A major part of this transformation is my growing conviction that memory is extremely untrustworthy, which has led to increasing scepticism about whatever survivors relate about the past. Their narratives have become set in stone and thus prove very difficult to dislodge, even when faced with evidence to the contrary. This disjunction between fact and fiction has made me less patient with the old, old stories that are rehashed at every meeting. I should add that I particularly distrust my own memories of anything having to do with Peoples Temple.

My experiences have taught me to interrogate the stories I now hear, especially those that I pick up for the very first time some 35 to 40 years after the events. "What is true" has become "What is true *for them* today." That is not the same as history. The trauma of Jonestown has undeniably affected

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the memories of survivors, making them unreliable witnesses. While the Jonestown website has offered them a venue for exploring the past and putting their stories into texts that others may utilize to understand Peoples Temple and Jonestown, how much credence can we grant them other than the subjective truth of their own testimony?

I therefore conclude by arguing that we cannot escape taking sides. Even the observer adopts a position: to observe rather than to be absorbed, to remain outside rather than to enter inside all the way. This may explain why I am alive and my sisters are dead.

Observant participation

I have always felt that autoethnography was one of the lowest forms of self-gratification. "If classic ethnography's vice was the slippage from the ideal of detachment to actual indifference, that of present-day reflexivity is the tendency for the self-absorbed Self to lose sight altogether of the culturally different Other," says anthropologist Renato Rosaldo (1993: 3). Max Weber repeatedly emphasizes that the scholar "should keep unconditionally separate" the establishment of facts and his/her own evaluation of the facts, at least in the classroom (Weber 1949: 11). I agree with both Rosaldo and Weber, and consider autoethnography lazy research conducted by individuals too egocentric to be able to enter into the lives of others. Unable or unwilling to engage with people different from oneself in a meaningful encounter, the autoethnographer turns inward to report on her own feelings and anxieties. Even an armchair anthropologist attempts to understand foreign cultures by reading about them. Yet this chapter can only be described as autoethnography, though it is not merely that.

I find the discussion by Barbara Tedlock helpful in this regard. She writes that participant observation has become "observing participation," a method that locates the observer in the narrative, but makes her or him a secondary character in the account, rather than the hero of the story (Tedlock 1991). In this way, the inevitable impact of the presence of an outsider on in-group activities is taken into consideration but does not become central to the plot, as it would in a traditional memoir. It takes ethnography out of the world of abstractions and into the reality of human lives and actions.

I would like to modify Tedlock's model slightly by characterizing my own investigations of the Peoples Temple survivor community as "observant participation," although my studies have been neither systematic nor methodical. My research cannot be classified as the intensive fieldwork of Malinowski,

the functional interpretation of Oeser, or the thick description of Geertz. On the contrary, I fell into it by accident as I reflected upon my sisters' deaths. We might call Carolyn and Annie my sponsors into the closed system of the Temple, if we follow the classic fieldwork pattern of entry, maintaining one's position, and exit from the group (Bell 1969). My credibility derived from several sources: their leadership in Peoples Temple, with Carolyn as one of Jim Jones' primary mistresses and Annie as his nurse; the high regard for my parents John and Barbara Moore which Jones cultivated among the wider membership; and the loss experienced in the deaths that I shared with survivors of Jonestown. My position as an observant participant has changed over the years, which I discuss below. Unlike most researchers, however, I have never left the group under observation. We only half-jokingly say that I have been a member of Peoples Temple longer than either of my sisters lived. The difference is that I have written about my participation, and theirs, in a number of different ways that have been altered by time: apologetic, analytical, critical, and, in this chapter, self-reflexive. We could therefore call my research a longitudinal inquiry into the effects of trauma on the members of a high-commitment group, and upon myself.

Initially I saw my role as a mediator or interpreter, the go-between that was neither harshly critical of the "crazy cultists" nor cautiously defensive of the group's actions. In the immediate aftermath of Jonestown, my family's self-appointed task was to humanize those who died, by talking with reporters, friends, and outsiders about my sisters. We tried to describe who they were and what they were trying to do. This effort earned us the sobriquet of cult apologists, and worse, collaborators in the evils of Jim Jones, epithets which can be found on the internet today.

But we also saw ourselves as government watchdogs, monitoring the activities of various local, state, and federal agencies in order to find out what transpired in Peoples Temple and in Jonestown. Given conflicting news stories, discrepancies in the body counts, and the prevalent climate of political paranoia in the 1970s, it was only natural that we sought the truth in much the same way that conspiracy theorists seek it today. This led to our making dozens of Freedom of Information Act requests with government agencies, and to filing three FOIA lawsuits against the government.

Within a year of the deaths, I began transcribing letters which my sisters had written to my parents with the idea of writing a book. This led to publication of five books with Edwin Mellen Press – the only press at that point that would consider a work on Peoples Temple and Jonestown from someone who was neither a scholar nor a journalist. These books had provocative titles, such as *The Need for a Second Look at Jonestown* (Moore and McGehee 1989), *A*

Sympathetic History of Jonestown (Moore 1985), and perhaps most incendiary of all, *In Defense of Peoples Temple* (Moore 1988). These names reflect the apologetic, even defiant, stance I had adopted in the first decade after Jonestown.

The end of the 1980s marked the beginning of a ten-year abandonment of all things relating to Peoples Temple and Jonestown. I donated dozens of boxes of original research and family memorabilia to the California Historical Society. The moratorium continued throughout graduate work in an entirely different area of Religious Studies. This period ended, however, at the twentieth anniversary of the deaths, when I launched Alternative Considerations of Jonestown and Peoples Temple at the University of North Dakota as an educational and informational website. Given the fact that twenty years of scholarship had sharpened understanding of Peoples Temple, and that comparative studies following the 1993 tragedy at Mount Carmel in Waco, Texas had highlighted the flaws in the standard anticult narrative, I wanted the alternative to afford a substitute for apostate accounts. My purpose had become analytical rather than apologetic.

In retrospect, I recognize that I had finally accepted my dharma – or duty – of being an interpreter of the history of Peoples Temple. I did not have to accept this duty, but once I did, I saw my task as a vocation that required total commitment. This allowed me to move into a number of new directions. One path led into the academic examination of New Religions in general and of Peoples Temple in particular, and resulted in having the privilege of serving as a co-editor for *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* for ten years.

Another path led to becoming a public scholar through the Alternative Considerations website, which is now the largest digital archive of any New Religious Movement. Hosted by the Special Collections at the San Diego State University Library, and featuring literally thousands of pages of primary source documents, hundreds of digitized audiofiles, photographs, articles, and reviews, Alternative Considerations is the first stop for researchers, writers, documentarians, students, and any casual visitors wanting to understand Peoples Temple and Jonestown. Playing an instrumental role in this accomplishment is Fielding McGehee, who has worked full-time on Peoples Temple research for twenty years, and on the website itself for fifteen. Additionally, the digital archive that is Alternative Considerations would not exist without the whole-hearted support provided by Robert Ray, the Head of SDSU Special Collections.

Yet a third path took us directly into the community of survivors by way of the website and its listing of those who died. Because the deaths in Jonestown were highly stigmatized, the grief that survivors felt was disenfranchised

(Moore 2011b). The guilt and shame that survivors and relatives alike felt over the deaths in Jonestown were exacerbated by their inability to express bereavement publicly. Almost all experienced ostracism – including loss of jobs, housing, and relationships – once their connection to Peoples Temple became known. All felt isolation and shame borne by the expression "drinking the Kool-Aid." And all learned to keep quiet. The presence of Alternative Considerations allowed them to connect with each other and to locate friends and relatives they had not seen since 1978. As a "locus for grief," it empowered survivors to speak up in a safe environment.

In an era before social media, the website actually helped to create the community of survivors. For one thing, they could find each other. For another, outsiders could find them. This led to a wave of documentaries which told the old story in fresh ways. Perhaps most extraordinary was creation of the drama, *The People's Temple* (purposely spelled with an apostrophe), which could not have occurred without relying upon a network of survivors. More than 40 individuals were interviewed for the documentary play, which debuted in 2005.

The contours of the website have changed over the years. Not only is it a repository of primary source material that conveys the story of Peoples Temple in its own voice, it has become an online memorial for those who died. The addition of membership and passport photos literally gave faces to the names; the biographical data on each of the deceased identified them as human; the link for writing memorials gave relatives and friends an outlet for the expression of love and grief. Working with Denice Stephenson at the California Historical Society, and with Laura Johnston Kohl and Don Beck, two Temple survivors, Fielding finalized a roster of everyone who died in Jonestown. If there is an official death list, this is it. In 2011, the Jonestown Memorial Fund – an ad hoc survivor group – relied upon "The Jonestown Memorial List" in the engraving of four plaques placed at Evergreen Cemetery in Oakland, California. And in 2014 the medical examiner's office in the State of Delaware used the register to locate the relatives of Jonestown victims whose cremated remains were found at a defunct funeral home, 36 years after their deaths.

Although both Fielding and I have become participants in the survivor community, we are occasionally reminded that we have not been wholly accepted into the tribe. It was only in 2015, as I was planning to move out of California, that two survivors felt comfortable enough to let me know that they disliked my sister Carolyn. Because she had the ultimate access to power by sleeping with Jim Jones, she was feared and distrusted. She also had a sharp personality and was not easy to like, in contrast to my sister Annie, who was

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a spontaneous and free-spirited prankster. Another survivor told me that he forgave me for writing, in 1985, that he was a CIA agent; since he has forgiven me many times for this I suspect that I am *not* forgiven.

An exchange between Garry Lambrev, a Temple member and defector, and my husband really brings home our outsider status. Fielding has transcribed hundreds of audiotapes made by Jim Jones and members of the Temple; moreover, he has written all of the tape summaries that appear online. One of these tapes, Q 608, made in 1974, is a telephone conversation between Lambrev, who was desperately suicidal, and Karen Tow Layton, a Temple member whose advice seemed intended to protect the life of Jim Jones rather than that of Garry Lambrev. Fielding tries to remain dispassionate and analytical in his summaries, but on this occasion he let himself offer an editorial comment: "[Layton's] handling of a potential suicide is naïve at best, her response blinded by her loyalty to the Temple. She says some soothing things ... but they are buried under the Temple's party line" (McGehee 2014).

Lambrev responded, both in a phone call and in writing, to Fielding's notes. "This just shows you were never a member of the Temple," he remarked. "You just don't get it." My husband suggested he put his response to the tape and the summary in writing so that it could end up on the site. Lambrev did.

> Though I can understand that someone who was not "there" – in that very complicated, potentially difficult and perceived as "dangerous" context – might regard the part played by Karen as high-handed, inconsiderate and/or manipulative, the truth is that she was navigating very treacherous waters, thinking she knew my fundamental reason for calling but needing to be certain in her conclusions before she reported back to Jones. (Lambrev 2014)

As outsiders looking in, we hear the exchange simply as ordinary people listening to a shocking tape, rather than as insiders speaking a coded language they know very well. The website does allow us to compensate for our outsider status by publishing the insights and reflections of those like Lambrev, whose experience gives them knowledge we would never have.

Observing trauma remembered

Perhaps more descriptive than the concept of observant participant is the idea of observant listener, since any scrutiny of Temple survivors requires being an attentive witness to their testimony as to what they endured. At times this seems to be an exercise in trauma studies. Survivors' experiences in the Temple, as well as their losses in Jonestown, clearly meet the definition

of trauma: an event that is life-threatening or capable of producing severe injury, in which one experiences pain, terror, and helplessness, and feels a threat to the integrity of one's self or others (McNally 2003: 79). A threat to integrity: Jones' requiring a young woman to strip naked in front of members of the Temple Planning Commission. A feeling of helplessness: euthanizing all of the pets in Redwood Valley before making the move to Jonestown. An experience of terror: being enveloped by a large snake, or being sent into the jungle where tigers supposedly await.

Audiotapes graphically depict the physical and emotional cruelty members both dispensed and received. Jim Jones and the residents of Jonestown, for example, heap abuse on one young man during a White Night in April 1978, humiliating him, berating him, and probably beating him, since Jones warns people not to tear the man's clothes (Audiotapes Q 635–Q 639 1978). Most of us would consider these examples to be traumatic events, and that is certainly how survivors see them. But can we trust their memories?

Those who study trauma today seem to be divided regarding the accuracy of memories created as the result of catastrophic events. Although Freud can be said to have inaugurated the formal exploration of trauma, the field changed dramatically as a result of the Vietnam War and the post-war flashbacks, intrusive memories, and nightmares that veterans reported. In 1980, the American Psychiatric Association introduced Post Traumatic Stress Disorder into its *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-III); subsequent updates of the DSM include as symptoms of the disorder the paradox of having excruciating memories of the initial trauma, and of having an inability to remember the incident (McNally 2003: 10; American Psychiatric Association 1980). Numerous studies of trauma have attempted to deepen our understanding of the impact it has on memory. Some argue that trauma is encoded in the brain differently than other events, leaving, in effect, a hole or gap where the memory should be (van der Kolk et al. 1996; Caruth 1996). They contend that memory does not exist but only the event itself, waiting to be repeated or re-lived, rather than remembered. Others dismiss this view, claiming that while memories of trauma may be more vivid and clear, they are encoded the usual way (Leys 2000; McNally 2003).

Since I am neither a neurobiologist nor a psychologist, I cannot make a judgment on how the brain processes these terrible experiences. But as an observant listener, I can report that survivors' memories are quite imperfect when it comes to remembering some of the things, although not everything, that happened when they were members of Peoples Temple. Studies of Operation Desert Storm war veterans support this ad hoc observation (Southwick et al. 1997), as does the research of Elizabeth Loftus on

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the distortion and degradation of memory of stressful incidents. Loftus and her colleagues describe the role that "misinformation acceptance" plays in shaping, or rather re-shaping, individuals' memories (Loftus and Hoffman 1989). The phenomenon of misinformation acceptance not only explains why accounts of Temple members change, but also illuminates why it is so difficult to correct the general public's understanding of Jonestown. For example, because initial intelligence reported a changing body count, many continue to believe that hundreds of Jonestown residents escaped into the jungle. A more trivial example is the fact that most people believe that residents of Jonestown "drank the Kool-Aid," whereas in reality they drank a British copy, called "Flavor Aid."

I myself have tried to correct survivors' misperceptions on a number of occasions. I have disputed the belief that massive numbers of guns were smuggled into Jonestown, by providing evidence that only 35 weapons were recovered from the community (McGehee 2013). While it is true that a few dissidents in Jonestown were drugged in order to control them, it is not true that everyone in the community was secretly given tranquilizers. It is unimaginable that they could have accomplished the arduous work that they did under any kind of pharmaceutical influence.

Another factor undermining the accuracy of the survivors' memories is the fact that memories are re-encoded each time we take them out for a viewing. "Recall of memory is a creative process", according to neurobiologist Eric Kandel. "What the brain stores is thought to be only a core memory. Upon recall, this core memory is then elaborated upon and reconstructed, with subtractions, additions, elaborations, and distortions" (Kandel 2006: 281). In other words, remembering is not like viewing a videotape or DVD; instead, it is a reconstruction and reconstitution, with changes and modifications made each time we look back. We revisit the memory, rather than revisiting the past itself. "It is startling to realize that some of our most cherished memories may have never happened," observed the neurologist Oliver Sacks, "or may have happened to someone else" (Sacks 2013).

I have witnessed many instances of the slippage of memory among Temple survivors. One of the most striking was an email exchange from 2006, in which a survivor who had been living in San Francisco in 1978 declared with certainty that Christine Lucientes had not died in Jonestown. He wrote in an email to another survivor that, "Christine didn't die in Jonestown. If she did, I've lost my mind. I could swear I saw her here long after 1978" (James Randolph, personal email correspondence, 2006). And yet there is solid evidence to the contrary. Christine's own brother told us that he had received her remains from Jonestown. Her name also appears on numerous, independently

created catalogues of those who died in Jonestown, including the first list produced by the US Department of State (Staff Investigative Group 1979: 120). Another instance of faulty memory: Laura Johnston Kohl does not recall ever being physically harmed as a member of the group. But a tape recorded in Jonestown plainly indicates her being beaten at one of the public gatherings:

> [Rose Shelton]: (striking Laura repeatedly as she speaks to her) How come you can't keep your – keep your mouth shut and do your work? Huh? How come you can't keep your mouth shut and do your work ... (Audiotape Q 734, 1978)

A final case: Thom Bogue, who was wounded at the Port Kaituma airstrip as he attempted to escape from Jonestown on 18 November, distinctly remembers that on one occasion Stephan Jones put a chokehold on him until he passed out, and, on another occasion, pointed a gun at him (Bogue 2012); Stephan Jones, however, had no memory of either incident. Fortunately, Bogue's article on the Alternative Considerations website led to a reconciliation between himself and Stephan.

Yet another factor that leads to the erosion of memory is the contamination – if I may employ a loaded word utilized by psychological researchers – by a number of different sources: counsellors who proffer particular lenses with which to view experiences; the news media that frame the story; competing narratives that offer new facts and alternative theories; and survivors who tell their own stories. In the immediate aftermath of Jonestown, therapists at the Human Freedom Center in Berkeley, California persuaded the few who sought help there that they had been brainwashed. This explanation also satisfied the widespread disbelief engendered by the fact that parents killed their own children. Journalists continually constructed the Jonestown story as a morality tale featuring good guys and bad guys. It has been extremely difficult to eradicate this paradigm, and, through repetition, the framing has tended to stick. Competing narratives provided in numerous books can reinterpret the story, but they simultaneously introduce misinformation. A relatively recent non-fiction book about Peoples Temple and Jonestown describes Jim Jones as pulling people towards the vat of poison, an allegation probably made by Stanley Clayton, who escaped that day (Scheeres 2011: 232). But Clayton is an unreliable witness for a number of tragic reasons; moreover, Temple survivors agree, Jones always had others do the dirty work. Yet this new version of the final day will undoubtedly alter the historical record.

When survivors chronicle their own histories at the reunions, they also affect the perspectives of others. Memories are either confirmed or challenged as people muse about those who died, or about events that occurred in San Francisco, Redwood Valley, Los Angeles, Georgetown or Jonestown.

Some survivors had been insiders and knew a great deal; others had lived on the margins of power, or were too young, to be involved in a number of decisions being made. At the earliest reunions, people asked for forgiveness from those they felt they had wronged; those supposed to give absolution had no memory of the offense that had occurred. While these therapeutic sessions provide opportunities to process traumatic memories, they also alter those memories. Laboratory studies confirm that peripherally disturbing memories can be distorted (Crombag, Wagenaar and van Koppen 1996) and "even traumatic memories are experimentally malleable" (Nourkova, Bernstein and Loftus 2004: 575).

Sometimes interpretation of events, rather than memory of them, may differ. Various survivors can remember the same episode in radically dissimilar ways. Grace Stoen, an apostate survivor, remembers a nightmarish trip on a boat travelling up the Kaituma River to Jonestown, and describes the people on board as being hot, hungry, and exhausted. Laura Johnston Kohl, a loyalist survivor, remembers a wonderful adventure sailing into a tropical paradise with high hopes. They were riding the same boat at the same time. Whom are we to credit?

It is also possible to see development in survivors' narratives. Laura Johnston Kohl's book *Jonestown Survivor* presents Peoples Temple and Jonestown in a positive light (Kohl 2010). She found the hard work meaningful and valued the opportunities available for self-development and personal growth. She especially prized the commitment to inter-racial egalitarianism. Yet over the years I have watched Laura become more critical of Jim Jones, and even modify her explanation of the Jonestown tragedy. Whereas she once described the deaths as mass suicide, she now calls them mass murder, declaring that people would not have killed their children or themselves had not Jones facilitated and encouraged the deaths through his leadership team.

My own understanding has changed as well. Like Laura, I have become more critical of Jones and the dynamics that existed in the Temple. I concede some of this in the essay "American as Cherry Pie" (Moore 2000), although even then my discourse retains an apologetic tone: yes, the Temple was violent, but so was the society in which it grew. A decade later, I was willing to write, "While the last day represented the most shocking, extensive, and visible example of violence in Peoples Temple, members had engaged in increasingly severe forms of brutality for at least a decade" (Moore 2011a: 99). I identified a typology of four types of violence applied in the Temple: discipline, behaviour modification, behaviour control, and terror (Moore 2011a). Learning of my own sisters' roles in planning and executing the mass deaths certainly transformed my views (Moore 2014: 76). Listening to the tapes made in Jonestown

is also sobering. And, as I hear the survivors speak for themselves, I have been moved to accept their reality, though not necessarily their historicity.

At the most basic level, though, I no longer believe what survivors and former members say about their experiences in Peoples Temple. Nothing they say is true, although their statements have a truth to them. It is their individual truth, but it is not necessarily true. The survivors of Peoples Temple have told and re-told their sagas so many times that I can mouth the words along with them. So can everyone else. The constant rehearsing of anecdotes for documentaries, plays, TV programmes, books, and news shows not only make survivors' memories less reliable, they tend to make the narrators less believable.

I must confess that my own memory is as fallible as everyone else's. I distinctly recall one survivor telling me she had been asked by the Guyana police to administer mouth-to-mouth resuscitation on someone in the Lamaha Gardens house in Georgetown on 18 November. Liane Harris and her mother had slashed each other's throats in response to the order to commit suicide, but Liane did not die immediately. The survivor I remember telling me this gruesome story, however, had not been in Georgetown or Jonestown that day. The truly sad thing about this admission is that I received this information shortly before writing this chapter.

Taking sides

It is difficult to imagine the possibility of maintaining notions of neutrality and objectivity today, given our postmodern scepticism about them. The oxymoronic participant observer would seem to belong to the modern sensibility of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. When we attempt to combine the insider and the outsider perspectives – the emic and the etic – we get an emetic, a purgative that leaves us either empty and wasted, or freed of our illusions. Renato Rosaldo's description of the death of his wife in 1981 illuminates this ambiguity.

In a critique of the emphasis given to ritual rather than to human processes in anthropological analyses of death, Rosaldo wrote that the formalism of traditional ethnography "conveniently conceals ... the agonies of the survivors who muddle through shifting, powerful emotional states" (Rosaldo 1993: 13). As outsiders, Renato and Michelle Rosaldo studied the way the Ilongot, an indigenous tribal group on the island of Luzon in the Philippines, assuaged the rage they felt at unexpected deaths by going on headhunting missions. It was not until Michelle slipped and fell 65 feet to her death while doing fieldwork

that Renato suddenly understood how anger and grief could be inextricably intertwined. He had moved from simply observing the Ilongot to observing himself, and could feel empathy, rather than sympathy, for the intense emotions that led the Ilongot to murder out of grief. These experiences caused him to re-evaluate and protest the ways in which anthropologists customarily describe mortuary rituals. Nevertheless, empathy is not membership, and Rosaldo did not take up headhunting.

Throughout all of our dealings with Peoples Temple, my family was asked to take sides. Although my parents were never scholarly participant observers, and always remained outside the Temple as far as its members were concerned, their experiences exemplify the quandaries that ethnographers often meet. One such example occurred in 1975, when they explicitly refused to back the Temple. After conducting a hostile interview with my father John in my parents' home in Berkeley, the conservative journalist Lester Kinsolving inadvertently left his briefcase behind. John called my sister Carolyn to let her know, and, in response, Temple leaders asked my parents to bring the briefcase to San Francisco. John and Barbara drove across the bay, leaving the briefcase in their home. Carolyn begged John to give them the briefcase or to destroy it himself. Another Temple leader asked my parents if they would have turned Jews over to the Nazis in Hitler's Germany. Upon returning to Berkeley, John took the unopened briefcase to the Oakland airport, since it bore a luggage tag for United Airlines, and it was returned to the journalist.

For decades afterwards, Kinsolving accused John of leaking the documents to Peoples Temple. It was not until 2007 that we learned that my younger sister Annie had gone to my parents' Berkeley house while John and Barbara were in San Francisco and had taken the papers from the briefcase, photocopied them, and returned them to the briefcase. In this instance, my parents did not choose for Peoples Temple, nor did they take the advice or accede to the entreaty of Temple leaders.

On another occasion, however, they sided with the Temple, refusing a request to join the Concerned Relatives, the oppositional group organized by former Temple members and families of people living in Jonestown. In a meeting with John in spring 1978, Tim Stoen, who had once been an attorney for the Temple and now led the opposition, said that Jones was a devil. "I never believed that Jim [Jones] was God," John later wrote, "nor do I now believe that he is the devil" (Moore 1985: 267).

Benjamin Paul notes the pitfall of factionalism that genuine ethnographers face (Paul 1953). If the researcher favours one party, the other party may reject her or him. And if misfortune strikes, the fieldworker may be blamed. This is exactly what happened to my parents after Jonestown. Because John

and Barbara chose to extend unconditional love and support to their daughters and grandson, they were reproached for not opposing Jim Jones. A few months after the deaths, Jeannie Mills, one of the leaders of the Concerned Relatives, accosted my parents at an event, telling them that they could have prevented the deaths in Jonestown. Ten years later, Deborah Layton – an apostate who had fled Jonestown in May 1978 – said to my mother: "You could have stopped Jim Jones." Lester Kinsolving and his children, Tom and Kathleen, continue to rebuke and disparage my father, charging that he abetted Jim Jones. Tom expresses his ire through the blog "Jonestown Apologists Alert", where he calls me "one of the more prominent cult apologists in circulation", and labels Carolyn and Annie mass murderers (Kinsolving 2012).

I consider the ire of the Kinsolvings and others like them to be a badge of honour, proof that in some respects I am indeed an insider. Their abuse of the Moore family scarcely equals that poured upon actual survivors, however. While apostates are praised, those who remained loyalists sustain ongoing vilification. In summer 2015, I was asked to forward the following email to a survivor:

> Sorry douche bag, you should be tried and convicted of the murder of 909 innocent humans. Nearly 40 years later does not absolve you of responsibility. FUCK YOU, YOU PIECE OF SHIT. (Identifying information withheld)

I did not forward this or any other emails like it that we have received over the years. Not all of it is hate mail: sometimes groupies and voyeurs want to make contact with Jonestown celebrities, separated by less than six degrees from the violence of 18 November. And sometimes people are genuinely seeking information, like those who frequently write Stephan Jones to ask if he has forgiven his father, Jim Jones.

I am often asked why I never joined Peoples Temple. My sisters sincerely wanted my parents and me to take up their cause. By not joining, we would forever remain outside the cadre of those willing to put their lives on the line. In fact, Jones called my parents cowards for not living out their political commitments. Why didn't I join? I usually respond by admitting that I am not really a joiner. Crowds make me anxious, groups make me bored, and leaders make me suspicious. Life in the Temple, as revealed by the audiotapes, makes me realize I would not have lasted five minutes under the barrage of the Temple's radical rhetoric and the members' uncritical glorification of their leader. Perhaps it is simply geography that saved me: I lived in Washington DC throughout the 1970s, while the Temple flourished in California.

Which side, or rather, whose side am I on today? If neutrality is no longer an option, is participant observation even conceivable? I believe that it is, to

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the extent that researchers try to be fair, impartial, and honest to the best of their ability. We are trusting the instincts and integrity of the scholar, a problematic endeavour to be sure. Ethnographers are doing the best that they can.

Ultimately, though, I think it is *not* possible to remain neutral. That does not mean accepting one dogma and rejecting another. Rather, it means being engaged and responding in a human fashion to other humans as individuals. Disagreeing, arguing, challenging, questioning – being real. The way this has affected my relations with Temple survivors is mixed. I am accepted and not accepted: acknowledged as a facilitator of larger cultural conversations about Peoples Temple and an interpreter of the Temple to outsiders; but not received as someone who has suffered the outrages of membership in my person, or more directly, in my body. I did not undergo the terror, joy, shame, or the fundamental life and death undertaking that Temple survivors can boast. That is where they put me.

But where do I put myself? Observant participation and observant listening truly portray the social location of both my husband and myself. Our participation in the Temple is qualitatively different than that of other survivors, despite the deep bonds of love and affection we have in what Fielding calls the "Temple Community". Fielding's credentials as a member of that community are much stronger than mine. He organized the campaign for the early release of Larry Layton from prison; identified all 918 who died on 18 November; raised money to pay for memorial plaques at Evergreen Cemetery; and has edited books, articles, and memoirs by survivors. My own scholarly work has gone largely unnoticed by the survivors, although I always write under the assumption that they will read what has been written. I am also critically aware of whether or not we have profited financially from the losses we have all experienced and am happy to reiterate that our work has not been remunerative in the slightest.

As an observant participant I have decided not to thoroughly identify with the survivors. This gives me the freedom to be honest with myself, and with them, when I disagree with what they are saying. Sometimes diplomacy requires silence: the issue is not worth an argument. Other times, integrity demands voice: the truth is at stake. The tricky part is having the wisdom to know the difference.

About the author

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