



“NEITHER RACIAL JUSTICE NOR SOCIALISM BUT A MESSIANIC PARODY OF BOTH”: THE JONESTOWN MASSACRE AT FORTY-THREE

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On 18 November 1978, just over 900 people were killed on the remote settlement of The Peoples Temple Agricultural Project—informally known as Jonestown. Located in Guyana, Jonestown was the latest and most radical manifestation of insular community building, self-ostracization, and indoctrination undertaken by the People’s Temple at the behest of their leader, Jim Jones. Until the attacks on the World Trade Center on 11 September 2001, the murder-suicide of almost 1000 American citizens at Jonestown constituted the largest single mass-death event in US history.

JIM JONES

Jim Jones (1931-1978) was born to a low-income family in Indiana, J. Oliver Conroy writes that Jones was an “intelligent and strange child” who was “instinctively attracted to religion, especially charismatic Christian traditions like Pentecostalism” (2018). Famous for founding the Peoples Temple and for leading the Jonestown massacre, Jones’s religious education would serve as the foundation for his beliefs, which were a blend of Christian traditionalism, New Age teachings, and political ideologies. Jones was a singular figure, with Elvis-like hair popular in the 1960s and 70s; he is nearly always pictured in dark sunglasses, which he used to conceal his debilitating drug addiction (Dikes 2018, 96).

THE PEOPLES TEMPLE

Founded by Jones in 1955, the Peoples Temple of the Disciples of Christ was a racially integrated church that espoused Christian teachings through the lens of communist



and socialist values. In the mid-twentieth century in the United States, it was not only uncommon but in many cases unheard of to serve a racially integrated congregation. With segregation well-established in many states and communities, Jones's church became both a compelling alternative to an oppressive and divisive system while the church thrived on its unique congregation. According to Jones, helping those in need was one of the Peoples Temple's core values, and his parishioners were often lower income individuals or families, or people who had visions of a better world that they hoped Jim Jones would provide.

Although Jones founded the Peoples Temple in Indianapolis, he eventually moved his congregation to Redwood Valley, California in 1966 (Rosenberg 2020) and later opened churches in San Francisco and Los Angeles (Crime Museum 2021). It was in California that Jones's vision for his followers began to gain traction. Jones idealized his mandate of equality by envisioning a "communist community" wherein "everyone lived together in harmony and worked for the common good" (Rosenberg 2020). Jones's preaching was often inflammatory and contradictory. He predicted an "imminent nuclear holocaust, after which the surviving elect would create a new socialist Eden on earth" and "began deriding traditional Christianity as 'fly away religion'" but pointed out that "the Bible contained great truths" (Wikipedia "Peoples Temple"). As a result of Jones's often unhinged teachings, the Peoples Temple became "neither racial justice nor socialism but a messianic parody of both" (Naipaul in Conroy 2018).

JONESTOWN

Jones believed that his vision for and idealized, utopian community couldn't be achieved in the US because the US was "the Antichrist" and capitalism "the Antichrist system" (Wikipedia "Peoples Temple"). Therefore, he required that his followers to abandon their homes and families, renounce their US citizenship, and move to South America with the congregation. In 1973, Jones leased a stretch of land from the government in Guyana and began clearcutting it in preparation for his congregation's move (Rosenberg 2020). In Guyana, Jones explained that the congregation could establish an idealized and racially integrated communist community in which everyone would be equally required to contribute to the community's function, and where capitalism and racism would be rejected. Jones crafted his vision of the People's Temple Agricultural Project as a utopian paradise. Of course, this rejection of US society and citizenship also meant Jones's followers would be completely under his control, living on an isolated compound with no financial or legal recourse to leave.

Jennifer Rosenberg (2020) writes that when the bulk of Peoples Temple members arrived in Jonestown in 1977, their promised utopia was nowhere to be found. Because construction on the compound had not been completed, there were not enough living



spaces to house everyone, resulting in overcrowded cabins divided by gender. The tropical conditions lead to heatstroke and long, uncomfortable days working in the hot sun. Furthermore, in an effort to exert control over his congregation, Jones would spend hours preaching into a loudspeaker system that spanned the entirety of the compound, filling the cabins and surrounding area with his stream-of-consciousness thoughts at all hours. Although, as Rosenberg points out, some members of his congregation loved living at Jonestown, many wanted to leave. However, in a remote area cut off from civilization and surrounded by armed guards, leaving was not always possible, and since everyone needed Jones's permission to leave—he also held their passports—residents began to feel more like prisoners.

Eventually, Jonestown residents were also forced to perform what Jones called “white nights,” wherein the Peoples Temple congregation would practice committing mass suicide or responding to outside attacks.

THE MASSACRE

Events came to a head on 17 November 1978 when US Representative Leo Ryan visited Jonestown with a crew from NBC Television. Ryan, having heard various accounts of the poor conditions and prison-like captivity Jonestown residents endured, opted to visit the compound himself in order to discover the truth. He arrived with his advisor, the TV crew, and a handful of family members concerned about their relatives' involvement with the Peoples Temple (Rosenberg 2020). After encountering the deplorable conditions at Jonestown and after a Peoples Temple member attempted to stab Ryan on 18 November 1978 (Conroy 2018), Ryan and his posse collected a handful of names of those who wanted to leave the compound and returned to their small plane with their footage and the knowledge that the utopian vision Jones wanted to project to the world was a farce.

Before they could leave, the armed Peoples Temple members escorting the delegation opened fire, murdering Ryan and four others while the rest of the group fled, wounded, into the woods (Conroy 2018). At Jonestown, Jones began to prepare his followers for the final “white night,” or “revolutionary suicide” as he alternately called it. After he realized that Congressman Ryan would return to the US and expose the conditions at Jonestown, Jones began to enact his plan. Revealing a stash of cyanide collected over multiple years, Jones's most loyal followers began systematically poisoning those on the compound with Flavor-Aid mixed with cyanide. 300 children were poisoned first (Conroy 2018), followed by the adults. While a handful of survivors fled to the woods, many people were held down and poisoned murdered by people they knew and worked alongside.

When the FBI arrived in the following days, they recovered Jones's long rambling recordings of his voice, including the tape recorded just before and as his followers



were being poisoned. On the tape screaming, crying, and voices of dissent or protest can be heard as Jones preaches. This final tape is known as the Jonestown Death Tape and is a matter of public record and is now “a subject of intense fascination” (Montell 2021, 67). Jones himself was discovered at the center of the compound, surrounded by hundreds of dead followers, apparently killed by a self-inflicted gunshot wound. Only thirty-three Jonestownians would survive by fleeing, hiding, or being away that day (Montell 2021, 67).

When researching for his book, *Journey to Nowhere: A New World Tragedy* (1980), Shiva Naipaul arrived in Jonestown two months after the mass murder-suicide. There, he encountered “coffins were still being flown out from the capital and native Indians were still laboring over an incineration pit, disposing of whatever remnants—shoes, mattresses, clothes, blankets—were left of the Peoples Temple” (Andrews 2011). Naipaul’s book provides a look into the trauma and horror left behind by Jim Jones and the events at Jonestown, a horror we remember over four decades later.

JONESTOWN TODAY: “DRINKING THE KOOL-AID”

In her book *Cultish: The Language of Fanaticism* (2021), Amanda Montell explores the linguistic devices behind some of the most famous cults in history, including Jonestown. For Montell, Jones’s own manipulation of language is a compelling insight into what could have led so many people to join Jones in Guyana, and could even have led to others assisting him in murdering hundreds of people. However, Montell also interrogates how we perceive Jonestown today. According to her, the phrase “drinking the kool-aid” proliferates in our culture. Today, she argues, even the word “cult” is “inarguably judgement-laden” (2021, 34), connoting an active dismissal of certain groups of people, their free will, and immediately rejecting ‘cultish’ subjectivities as othered and easily controlled. Montell points out that “once the press identified Jonestown’s victims as ‘cultists,’ they were instantly relegated to a subclass of human” (37). The dismissal of the Jonestown deaths as the deaths of brainwashed and foolish people unable to see Jim Jones and the Jonestown settlement for what it was immediately allows for an implicit categorization of those deaths as having less meaning overall. This perception discounts the complex and often legitimate reasons that Peoples Temple members were drawn to Jones and Jonestown and the ways in which Jones took advantage of those reasons, and it also disregards the hundreds of people who were murdered there.

Forty-three years on, this implicit dismissal manifests in the cultural idiom “drinking the Kool-Aid.” Montell writes that “today, ‘drinking the kool-aid’ is most often used to describe someone mindlessly following a majority, or as shorthand for questioning their sanity. In 2012, Forbes christened it a ‘top annoying cliché’ used by



business leaders ... most speakers use the idiom without batting an eye, but there are a select few who grasp its gravity” (2021, 51-2). Of course, Montell notes,

“most of the [Jonestown] victims, including more than three hundred children, met their fate after consuming a lethal concoction of cyanide and trace amounts of tranquilizers, which were mixed into vats of grape flavored juice made from the powdered fruit concentrate Flavor-Aid. ‘Drinking the Kool-Aid’ is a metaphor derived from this tragedy. Our culture erroneously remembers the elixir as Kool-Aid, not Flavor-Aid due to the former status as a genericized trademark ... but Jonestownians died by the cheaper shelf-brand version, which they ingested—most orally, some by injection, and many against their will—under extreme pressure from Jones” (2021, 54).

Although a number of studies of Jonestown and the events of 18 November 1978 exist, Montell’s is one of the latest to interrogate both Jones’s linguistic methods of control and the way that we implicitly characterize Jonestown victims today through “drinking the Kool-Aid.” As one of the greatest American tragedies, it is crucial to consider the way the mythology of Jonestown functions today.

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