

**Drinking the Kool-Aid after Jonestown:
The Creation of Mass Memory in an 'Un-American' Tragedy, 1978-2016**

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April 20th, 2016

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Acknowledgements:

I owe many thanks to everyone who helped me with this project. I would like to thank my thesis advisor, Professor Jones for always steering me in the right direction and giving us all great writing advice. I would also like to thank my seminar group for the encouragement along the way and for all of the helpful editing and work sessions. Finally, I would like to thank my friends and family for supporting me throughout this process and giving me feedback on my work.

Introduction: 1978

Her final moments on earth were approaching, but Annie Moore picked up her pen and wrote. Hundreds of people around her were already dead. Their bodies lay in the dirt, exposed. Despite this, Annie picked up her pen. Perhaps she sensed that if she did not write this letter, the truth of what the Peoples Temple was would die with her.

“I am 24 years of age right now and don’t expect to live through the end of this book. I thought I should at least make some attempt to let the world know what Jim Jones and the Peoples Temple is --OR WAS --all about. It seems that some people and perhaps the majority of people would like to destroy the best thing that ever happened to the 1,200 or so of us who have followed Jim.”¹ Annie’s letter depicted an idyllic scene of life in the Jonestown commune, describing it as “the most peaceful, loving community that ever existed.” Yet, she feared what the public would think of the Temple: “Someone who finds [this] will believe I am crazy or believe in the barbed wire that does NOT exist in Jonestown.”² Her last words read, “We died because you would not let us live in peace.”³

As she wrote this line, death was likely near. On November 18th, 1978 Annie Moore was one of the last people to die in Jonestown, Guyana. Her sister Carolyn died there too, along with her son Kimo. By the end of that day, nearly one thousand Americans were dead in a foreign country. Many had taken their lives, and others had been forced to die. It was an act of “revolutionary” cult suicide⁴. An act that the world would never understand, yet never forget. Though the entirety of what transpired will not ever be known, speculation has been unbounded. The aftermath of the suicides was no

¹ Rebecca Moore. *The Jonestown Letters: Correspondence of the Moore Family 1970-1985*. (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellin Press, 1986), 284-86.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ It was Jones himself who first referred to the suicides as “revolutionary”

less dramatic than the deaths themselves, and thus, the event that we now ominously call “Jonestown” serves as a noteworthy case study of the way Americans forge collective memories for tragedies that occur outside the bounds of conventional society.

The study of collective memory has been around for over fifty years and many rich theories have developed around the concept. Collective Memory can be most basically defined as bundles of memory schema that groups of people use to make sense of the past.⁵ Maurice Halbwachs, a student, and disciple of Emile Durkheim, established this field of study in his seminal book, *On Collective Memory*, published in 1950. In it, Halbwachs writes that memory structures are created by social groups such as the government or the media in an effort to mold popular perceptions.⁶ In applying Halbwachs’s theory of collective memory to Jonestown, it was the media that was responsible for molding the schema of the tragedy.

The concept of collective memory proved to be particularly resonant in the post-WWII era during which Halbwachs’s book was published. Countries were rebuilding and reflecting on the trauma of the Second World War. In this context, the discipline of memory began to grow and become a popular field of scholarly engagement. Initial forms of collective memory focused on the national state: recognizing important national events and tragedies.⁷ In the years following *On Collective Memory*, other historians extended and redefined the bounds of the study. New concepts emerged like, “vernacular memory” “counter-memory” and “public memory.”⁸ With such expansive and varied definitions of

⁵ Aaron Beim “The Cognitive Aspects of Collective Memory” *Symbolic Interaction* (2007): 7.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Beim, 13.

⁸ Wulf Kansteiner “Finding Meaning in Memory: A Methodological Critique of Memory Studies.” *History and Theory* (2002): 181.

collective memory, the phenomenon has been applied to events around the globe and has continued to grow in popularity.

Postmodern memory is one of the most contemporary strains of the study today. The notion was first formulated by Pierre Nora in the 1990s but has been added to since. Historian Wulf Kansteiner explains postmodern memory in his article “Finding Meaning in Memory: A Methodological Critique of Memory Studies.” According to Kansteiner, postmodern memory is all about the media. “The media culture of the late twentieth century spews out identities and representations of the past which have little relation to any shared traditions, life worlds, or political institutions other than the frantic pace of media consumption itself.”⁹ This chaos that Kansteiner describes undoubtedly marked the media coverage of the suicides. The frenetic desires to capitalize on the story created a narrative that has been seared into the American collective memory. Despite the rush to cover the story, the media’s actions were not as unconscious as Kansteiner makes them out to be. Outlets deliberately packaged the story of the massacre into an acceptable narrative of anomaly that did not threaten or question the existing American social order.

This paper will use Jonestown as a case study to examine how tragic events on the fringes of American social life are processed, interpreted and explained. The specific development and evolution of the tragedy’s memory have never before been so closely considered. This paper will differ from existing work by incorporating sociological and historical theory to frame and contextualize the trajectory of Jonestown’s memory. It will explore how the initial media reaction to the suicides generated an enduring collective memory that still exists to this day. It will reveal the changes in the media’s presentation of the memory, as well as how and why these changes occurred. Specifically, it will

⁹ Kansteiner, 183.

demonstrate that the aggregate understanding of Jonestown was carefully molded to maximize public interest and profits while minimizing reflection on American society. Though this aggregate understanding was intentionally shaped, it is fundamentally warped. Not only is it overly simplistic, but it is also immensely sensationalized. Yet, it is how most Americans understand the tragedy and how they explain it to younger generations. The positive side of life at Jonestown, the life of harmony and community that Annie spoke of so fondly in her letter was never seen; it died on November 18th with the 909 victims, and it is still concealed today.

Voices of contestation rarely make it outside of the domineering vesicle that is collective memory. Nevertheless, over the years, many forces have emerged against it. Scholars, survivors, and family members alike have sought to repudiate invalid perceptions, yet their voices rarely make it far. This paper will delve into the stories of these hidden voices through the lens of one family's Jonestown story.

In 1978, Rebecca Moore became an only child when her sisters Annie and Carolyn died in Guyana. She loved her sisters dearly and was shocked and offended by the hyperbolic media. It did not hesitate to dehumanize the victims and dishonor their families. In the wake of the calamity, she altered the course of her professional life and dedicated it to rectifying the memory of her sisters. Today, Moore is one of the most eminent scholars on Jonestown. She has deviated from the typical academic understanding of the subject and has taken an active stance against the dominant collective memory. For over thirty years she has fought to bring a more humane perspective to the American public—a mammoth task after the damage done by the media in the months following the deaths. This paper will use Moore's life story and her

academic journey to examine the nuances of one event's collective memory over a thirty-eight-year period. Chapter one will present an unbiased summary of the events leading up to Jonestown. It will provide a complete history of the Peoples Temple, as well as the lives of Annie and Carolyn. This will allow the reader to gain an understanding of the story, and therefore the opportunity to fully understand the complications with its memory. Chapter two will concentrate on the initial media coverage of Jonestown. It will reveal how the collective memory of Jonestown became skewed. The media systematically denied understanding and compassion—and instead embraced exploitative sensationalism. Chapter three will detail the long-term evolution of Jonestown's memory. It will use the career of Rebecca Moore and her scholarly associates to trace developments in this memory before turning to her specific quest. Moore has created a new and robust strain of understanding on the event: an oppositional memory, which has had a tenacious and enduring presence. The chapter will close by examining Moore's oppositional memory and her fight to establish it as a force in the greater study of the subject.

The forgotten lives of Annie and Carolyn Moore are emblematic of the failure of the American collective memory in an 'un-American' event. This thesis joins Moore in sharing their perspectives and adding their stories to the memory of Jonestown.

Chapter 1: The Peoples Temple is Built, and Destroyed, 1931-1978

May 1977: “I am writing from the most beautiful, friendly place in the world.”

August 1977: “I am finding life in the jungle very exciting along with being relaxing”

October 1977: “Greetings to you from the beautiful lush jungle land that I love so much!”

December 1977: “Hi! Greetings from the most gorgeous place I know of!”¹⁰

Carolyn and Annie Moore opened most letters to their family with cheery optimism. They wrote from the commune of Jonestown, Guyana to their family in San Francisco, California. Their sister, Rebecca Moore, recalls that she had never even heard of Guyana when her sisters announced their decision to move—she had to physically locate it on a map.¹¹ Annie and Carolyn expatriated to Jonestown in rural Guyana to be with their religious order, the Peoples Temple, and its beloved leader, Jim Jones. Their letters, which they sent faithfully to their family, depict a joyous and peaceful lifestyle of community, spiritualism and prosperity. Yet, only a year after making this move, both sisters were dead in a mass suicide that shocked the nation and became the news story of 1978.

Carolyn, Annie, and Rebecca were born to dutiful parents, John and Barbara Moore, and lived wholesome all-American lives. The three sisters grew up to be strong women—they inherited their parents’ deep sense of compassion and desire to make the world a better place. Alas, it was this deeply ingrained sense of morality that led Annie and Carolyn to Jonestown, and to their eventual deaths.¹²

¹⁰ Rebecca Moore. *The Jonestown Letters: Correspondence of the Moore Family 1970-1985*, 59-106.

¹¹ Moore, 169.

¹² Rebecca Moore. *A Sympathetic History of Jonestown: The Moore Family Involvement in the Peoples Temple*. (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1985),85.

Carolyn was the first sister to join the Peoples Temple. She was introduced to the organization in 1968 by her then-husband Larry Layton. Only a year later she had become a high-ranking member. She divorced her husband and became the mistress of Jim Jones. In 1975, she bore him a child named Kimo (formally Jim-John).¹³ Carolyn introduced her younger sister Annie to the religion and she too became a devoted follower. The rest of the family remained supportive of the girls; yet, they wondered what had led them to choose such a path. As Rebecca later resolved, “the history of the Moore family provides no answers, no reasons for Carolyn and Annie to choose to die with 900 others. And yet, we ransack the past, searching for clues that will let us understand.”¹⁴

In a fascinating letter from Guyana, Annie attempted to explain her decision to join the Temple to her family. She wrote, “You obviously think that the Peoples Temple is just another cult or religious fanatic place or something like that. Well. I’m kind of offended that you would think I would stoop so low as to join some weirdo group.”¹⁵ It is clear that she truly wanted her family to understand her radical decision. She went on to specify what attracted her to the religion: “The reason that the Temple is great is not just because Jim Jones can cough up cancers but because this is the largest group of people I have ever seen who are concerned about the world and are fighting for truth and justice...So anyway it’s the only place I have seen the real true Christianity being practiced.”¹⁶ Annie’s impassioned explanation reveals her dedication to social justice and the initial innocence of her participation.

¹³ Moore, 101.

¹⁴ Moore, *The Jonestown Letters*, 1.

¹⁵ Moore, 78.

¹⁶ Moore, 78.

“So whatever comes, all the treacherous lies that have been printed and publicized about us don’t really bother me because I am having a grand old time here.”¹⁷ This was Annie’s last letter to her sister. In it, she seemed content with her life, she wrote about the happiness that she felt everywhere in the commune. She spoke of playing her guitar, enjoying leisure time in the community’s swimming hole, and of her job as a community nurse. She said that she could never picture herself living anywhere else. Only a month later, Jonestown was gone. The FBI concluded that Annie was one of the last people to die. When it was all over, she was shot in the head. It was never formally determined if it was murder or suicide.¹⁸

This terrible tragedy that stripped the Moore family of two loving daughters and sisters had its roots in the state of Indiana. Jim Jones was born in 1931 in Crete, Indiana amidst the dearth of the Great Depression. He did not have an easy childhood. Not only did Jones grow up in poverty, but he also grew up as an outsider on the fringes of his small town society. As he later recalled to his followers “I didn’t have any love given to me—I didn’t know what the hell love was.”¹⁹ From an extremely young age, he immersed himself in the radical religious form of Pentecostalism, much to the shock and disdain of his family. In this era, Pentecostalism was seen as an extreme form of religious expression. It was most commonly practiced by the “disenfranchised and poor in spirit.”²⁰ Young Jim took on this radicalism himself. As his mother recalled, he would even preach and “shout obscenities in the street.”²¹ This religious dedication stemmed from Jones’s

¹⁷ Moore, 283.

¹⁸ Rebecca Moore. *In Defense of the Peoples Temple*. (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellin Press, 1988), 298.

¹⁹ “Biography: Jim Jones.” PBS.

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/biography/jonestown-bio-jones/>

²⁰ John R. Hall. *Gone From the Promise Land: Jonestown in American Cultural History*. (New Brunswick: Transaction Inc., 1987), 11.

²¹ Hall, 9.

frustration with his position in life: he found consolation in faith and connection with others who felt similarly rejected by the world. It was within this context that the origins of the Peoples Temple began to take shape.

Jones's religious fervor only expanded as he came of age. He moved to Richmond, where he met his future wife Marceline and began to attend the University of Indiana. He became a student pastor at a Methodist Church in 1952. In 1954, when he was only twenty-three, he opened his own church. Over the next few years, Jones's unique religious style began to emerge. His church was fundamentally focused on inclusion and social justice. Scholars have categorized Jones as a "radicalized Pentecostal preacher." Unlike many Pentecostals, Jones did not use tongues: his church and teachings focused most centrally on "discerning, healing, and prophesying."²² In fact, Jones eventually became well known for his powerful healing abilities. Followers flocked to his church because of them and many believed that he had healed them of their afflictions.

Racial equality was also a cornerstone of Jones's church. From his youth, Jones had connected and identified with neglected members of society. The economically depressed black community in the increasingly deindustrializing Indiana became the main source of his membership. The church itself was located in a heavily black area, and Jones would go door-to-door recruiting members there.²³ He became well respected in the black community, and the membership of his church swelled. In 1956 Jones's church had grown so much that he needed to find a new location. He built a larger church and named it the "Peoples Temple." Such a name brings to mind themes of inclusion and

²² Hall, 19.

²³ Julia Scheeres. *A Thousand Lives: The Untold Story of Hope, Deception and Survival at Jonestown*. (New York: Free press, Simon & Schuster, 2011), 7.

unity—yet, several decades later its primary association was death. The Peoples Temple was now fully established.

Meanwhile, Jones was ingratiating himself in local political and social communities. According to historian Julia Scheeres, by the late 1950s, “Jones appeared to be at the forefront of the Civil Rights Movement” and by 1961, he had begun to win the trust of the Indiana state government.²⁴ He was even appointed as the head of the Indianapolis Human Rights Commission.²⁵ Despite the power and esteem that Jones had secured for himself in Indiana, he began to believe that the Temple needed to move to a safer location. He told his congregation that he had visions of Chicago being bombed and that California would be a safer destination.²⁶ In 1965, Jim Jones and one hundred fifty of his followers made the move. They relocated to the Redwood Valley near San Francisco, California.²⁷ These followers were Jones’s core believers, and many of them would go on to follow him to Guyana.

After several years in California, the Temple began to flourish and its following burgeoned. It was in California that the Temple began to attract a base of young, white, educated followers—people like Carolyn and Annie Moore. This influx of members soon became self-perpetuating as these white youths recruited from their communities. As historian, John R. Hall describes, many of these followers were “aimless” and were drawn to the Temple because of “various strains of alienation that marked the counterculture and anti-war movement.”²⁸ It was not uncommon in this tumultuous era of

²⁴ Scheeres, 12.

²⁵ David Chidester, *Salvation and Suicide: An Interpretation of Jim Jones, The Peoples Temple, and Jonestown (Religion in North America)*. (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1988), 4.

²⁶ Chidester, 5.

²⁷ Scheeres, 14.

²⁸ Hall, 68.

social change, for young people to join radical social or religious movements. Hall believes that it was this new population of members that allowed the Temple to expand its public presence. Jones began to speak across the state. He even went on structured tours throughout the country to spread his preaching.²⁹ Jones's "charismatic organizational genius" and his publicity team became essential to the Temple's growth.³⁰ These tactics brought the Temple hundreds of new followers: both black and white. The makeup became incredibly diverse: black middle and upper class, black poor, white poor—everybody could find something they believed in within the Peoples Temple.³¹

With the expansive membership of the Temple, Jones began to build relationships with political and social leaders of California, just as he had done in Indiana. He established a close relationship with politician Harvey Milk and the mayor of San Francisco, George Moscone. Jones was also appointed to the chairmanship of the San Francisco Housing Authority Commission. He even met publically with the Vice President Walter Mondale, and First Lady, Rosalind Carter on several occasions.³²

In this climate of ascension and success for the Temple, the paranoia that Jones had demonstrated in Indiana came back to haunt the congregation in California. Jones once again believed the Temple members were not safe. He went as far as to stage threats against the Temple himself. Jones began to experiment with different ideas of group suicide. It was during this time that he conducted his first fake poisoning of Temple members.³³ In 1976, Jones announced to his congregation "I love socialism...and I'd be

²⁹ Chidester, 6.

³⁰ Hall, 74.

³¹ Hall, 72.

³² Jim Garaghty. "A Cult Worthy of Jonestown? Hey, Democrats Embraced Jim Jones!" *National Review*, December 18th, 2013.

³³ Jones called these fake poisonings "white nights" and he conducted several of them before the actual suicides.

willing to die to bring it about, but if I did, I'd take a thousand with me.”³⁴ Only two years later, this sinister idea would come to fruition—but it took a great disaster to propel the Temple toward such a desperate measure.

At this point, it was clear to the people of California the Peoples Temple had a dark underbelly. In the late 1970s rumors about the Temple and about Jones began to fly about the state uninhibited. Tales of members being drugged, abused, and manipulated put new pressures on the Temple. The press began to buzz about these rumors, most likely accelerating the Temple's flight to Guyana. In 1977, an article in *New West Magazine* entitled “Inside the Peoples Temple” revealed incriminating information about Jones. This article was grounded in interviews from former members. For example, two of Jones's former aides, Wayne Pietla and Jim Cobb, exposed the lies behind his healings. They revealed that they had been ordered to guard a bag containing “cancers” that were actually animal organs. Jones would use these “cancers” in healings pretending that sick followers had “passed” them. Cobb recalled: “If anyone tried to touch them, we were supposed to eat the cancers or demolish the guy.”³⁵ One couple, Elmer and Deanna Mertle, attested to the rumors of abuse. They revealed that Jones had seriously beaten their daughter and frequently practiced “corporal punishment” and “public humiliation” on members who strayed from his teachings. They also reported that they had given the church all of their money and property.³⁶ Another former follower named Micki Touchette who had been responsible for the Temple's finances, corroborated this notion. She revealed that it was not uncommon for Jones to collect upwards of \$15,000 from members in one weekend. Touchette and former other members

³⁴ Scheeres, 47.

³⁵ Marshall Kilduff and Phil Tracy. “Inside The Peoples Temple” *New West Magazine*. August, 1977.

³⁶ Ibid.

recalled being fearful for their lives when they announced their defections. Touchette recollected Jones saying, “Any college student who was going to leave the church would be killed. Not by Jones, but by some of his followers.”³⁷ The article concluded by imploring that Jim Jones be investigated by federal authorities. Only two months after this damning article was published, Jones fled the country forever. Shortly after, hundreds of his followers joined him in Guyana where they built a new life for themselves.

Annie and Carolyn were among the first members to make this exodus—a powerful symbol of their dedication to Jones and the Temple. Meanwhile, their family could do nothing but support them. John Moore later wrote, “It was clear to us that those youth whose parents affirmed them had a better chance of making it through those tough passages of their journey.” Therefore, he and Barbara continued to support and keep in contact with their newly expatriated daughters in the hopes that they would eventually come back to California. Nevertheless, they remained realistic. As John recalled, “For nine years, Barbara lived with the dread of catastrophic consequences. I assumed from the beginning that the time would come when everything hidden would be exposed. However, I never dreamed it would come about as it did...”³⁸

In the summer of 1977, flocks of Jones’s followers made the move to join him in Guyana. In preparation for this, hundreds of acres of farmland were cleared, small houses were built, and a sawmill was opened. Members predicted that the community would be entirely self-sufficient within a few years.³⁹ This required an enormous effort on the part

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Moore, *The Jonestown Letters*, 169.

³⁹ Scheeres, 75.

of the Temple members, and the community quickly got to work. Soon a plentiful agricultural community was blossoming.

From Carolyn and Annie's letters we can see that a harmonious community came to be built in Guyana—however, it was not free from the suspicion and fear that had plagued the members' lives in California and in Indiana. Throughout the years of 1977 and 1978, Carolyn and Annie wrote frequently to their Rebecca and to their parents. Their letters are unwavering in their optimism about life in Guyana, yet they betray the community's growing paranoia about government interference with their way of life. On one hand, the letters describe Jonestown as a utopian "paradise" and a "promise land".⁴⁰ On the other hand, it is clear that Annie and Carolyn lived in fear, believing that the U.S. government was out to destroy their thriving community. As Rebecca keenly observed at the time, "the letters that came from Guyana and the ones that John and Barbara wrote alternate between hyperbole and paranoia."⁴¹ A letter written by Carolyn in 1977 discusses C.I.A. interference with the commune. She wrote, "It is hard to find a rational explanation for the continual press harassment unless they have some greater concern, or are being paid or intimidated into continuing...we certainly would be hard to reach if the C.I.A. did have plans to de-stabilize and they know we would never stand for it."⁴²

During the year of 1977 Jim Jones's health and mental state began to decline rapidly. Jones began to abuse drugs more frequently and his paranoia took on new levels. During this time, he began to facilitate emergency drills, known as "white nights" in which he would gather all of his followers to tell them that their lives were at risk.⁴³ On

⁴⁰ Moore, *The Jonestown Letters*, 169.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Moore, *The Jonestown Letters*, 187.

⁴³ Scheeres, 94.

several of these occasions, suicide drills were practiced. Deborah Layton, a survivor, recalls that Jones told his followers after one such drill that “the time was not far off when it would become necessary for us to die by our own hands.”⁴⁴

This fear that Jones was increasingly externalizing onto his community was greatly augmented toward the end of 1978 when Congressman Leo Ryan became suspicious of the Jonestown community. Congressman Ryan, of California’s 11th district, was famous for what were known as his “fact-finding missions” in which he investigated local issues. Previously, he had taken a job as a teacher in a neighborhood plagued by race riots and had even gotten arrested to investigate the conditions in California jails.⁴⁵ Extremely concerned about their loved ones’ lives in the commune, numerous relatives of Temple members began to contact Ryan. They believed that there were members being held in Guyana against their will. With his reputation as an investigator, Ryan had no problem securing approval from the House Foreign Affairs Committee for his “mission” to South American. Ryan assembled a team of two congressional aides, nine journalists, and eighteen concerned relatives. They departed for Guyana on November 12, 1978.⁴⁶ This visit put immense stress on the already mentally deteriorating Jones—and eventually caused him to reach a breaking point. Despite the elaborate show that the Temple put on during Ryan’s visit, several members came forward to tell him that they wanted to leave the commune. By the time of his departure, a group of fourteen members made plans to leave with Ryan. His suspicion that people were living in Jonestown against their will had been confirmed. Before he left, Ryan promised the Temple’s lawyer, Charles Garry,

⁴⁴ “Affadavit of Deborah Layton Blakey.” *Alternative Considerations of Jonestown and Peoples Temple*. Jonestown Project: San Diego State University.

⁴⁵ “Biography: Leo Joseph Ryan.” PBS.

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/biography/jonestown-bio-leo-ryan/>

⁴⁶ Ibid.

that he would not write anything negative in his report about Jonestown. However, as Ryan and his team were boarding the runway strip they were ambushed and shot at by member Larry Layton, and moments later, by the Temple's Red Brigade Security Team. Congressman Ryan was shot over twenty times and became the first, and only congressman to die in the line of duty. Four others were killed including defector Patricia Parks, and nine were injured. Jones is assumed responsible for ordering this outburst of violence.⁴⁷

Not much is known about what happened next. Jones received news of the shootings and called a meeting of all Temple members. In that meeting he announced a final plan for mass suicide, armed with vats of poisoned flavor-aid.⁴⁸ A forty-four-minute recording of this meeting, known as the "death tape" was later found by the FBI.⁴⁹ In this tape, Jones urges his people to suicide. Experts who have analyzed the tape noticed slurring in Jones's speech as if he was high, and his autopsy later confirmed a long history of barbiturate drug usage.⁵⁰ Jones believed that the murder of the congressmen and his associates would result in an attack on the commune. He felt that revolutionary suicide was the only option. As he said: "We win when we go down."⁵¹

The flavor-aid was administered; many struggled and some even managed to escape. Suddenly all was quiet in the commune, and 909 people were dead. The story of the Peoples Temple was over, and its history was to be determined by the American media.

⁴⁷ Jonestown: The Life and Death of the Peoples Temple. PBS (film).

⁴⁸ The drink was flavor-aid, not Kool-Aid, despite popular perception today. Flavor-aid was a less expensive drink, hence why it was bought for the commune instead of the name brand.

⁴⁹ "The Jonestown Death Tape" FBI Archives No. Q 042. November 18th, 1978.
<https://archive.org/details/ptc1978-11-18.flac16>

⁵⁰ Scheeres, 226.

⁵¹ Scheeres, 228.

Chapter 2: An Understanding Shrouded, 1978-1985

“It just isn’t sinking in. I try to imagine Annie taking poison, helping children take poison. It doesn’t fit. The news media are going ape—much sensationalism, lies, slander, untruths. No one seems to speak for the Peoples Temple. No one speaks for the people who have died.”⁵² After the news about the deaths surfaced, Moore and her family grappled to understand what had led Annie and Carolyn to such a dire action. Moore kept a journal during this difficult time. Her feelings on the developing story are very telling of the media’s approach to the tragedy.

Both the media and the American public struggled to process the news of the suicides as well: Jonestown became the most written about event of 1978. Stories often crossed the line to become offensive to the deceased and their families. As Moore notes in her journal, little respect was paid to the victims. Even in their deaths, they were seen as pariahs to society. The bodies were initially frozen and shipped to Delaware—a state with virtually no connection to the Temple and far away from the victims’ family members.⁵³ Then, countless cemeteries refused to accept the bodies. Most of the victims ended up in mass graves. On top of that, only 7 autopsies were performed and 234 children, including Kimo, were never identified.⁵⁴

The media whirlwind began the moment word of the massacre reached the states. The rush to cover the story demonstrates more than the desire to inform the public. In the wake of this mass disaster, trusted American outlets scrambled to cover what they felt was the story of a lifetime. As Charles Sieb, a *Washington Post* reporter candidly recalled, “[Jonestown] was what we call in this business a hell of a story. And that was

⁵² Moore, *The Jonestown Letters*, 289.

⁵³ Rebecca Moore. *In Defense of the Peoples Temple*, 97.

⁵⁴ Moore, *In Defense of the Peoples Temple*, 107.

the way we covered it”⁵⁵ Indeed, reporters and their publications spared no time and no feelings in order to cash in. Many flocked to the scene of the event. Tim Cahill, a reporter for *Rolling Stone Magazine* who was sent to Guyana remembered that there were “literally hundreds of journalists from at least five continents in Georgetown. It was madness. Virulent lunacy.”⁵⁶ Dozens of alarming headlines from reporters visiting Guyana emerged daily. They were attention grabbing and wildly sensationalistic. And the American public ate it up.

At the time, nobody knew the lasting effect this media frenzy would have, but it ultimately came to make up the collective memory of Jonestown: a memory that despite its many flaws still persists today. American Sociologist Arthur G. Neal defines modern American society as a moral community in his book *National Trauma and Collective Memory: Extraordinary Events in the American Experience*. The moral community is a form of national identity that has been shaped over the centuries through major American events and tragedies. Neal believes that the three most formative events to the national moral community were the American Revolution, the Civil War, and World War II. “The epic struggles of the American Revolution, the trauma of the Civil War, and the heroic undertakings in winning World War II required extensive personal sacrifices and permanently changed the content of what it means to be an American. Taking an active approach toward mastery and control over events through the pooling of collective resources became embedded in national consciousness.” These events have shaped perceptions of national values and standards that in turn have formed moral expectations

⁵⁵ Moore, 83

⁵⁶ Tim Cahill, “In the Valley of the Shadow of Death: Guyana after the Jonestown Massacre,” *Rolling Stone Magazine*, January 25th, 1979.

for the country.⁵⁷ “In the social heritage of our nation, traumas are drawn upon in shaping collective identities, in setting national priorities, and in providing guidelines for what to do or not to do in any given case. We negotiate between the past and the future through our concern about historical repetitions. Serious disruptions of tranquility of everyday life tend to be remembered and to become embedded in collective perceptions of society as a moral community.”⁵⁸ Though Neal’s framework is extremely helpful for understanding the American reaction to Jonestown, the concept of the “moral community” can at times be problematic. It is clear that the American nation does not act nor respond to events as a single unit—there will always be dissenting opinions. Neal’s notion of the moral community is thus not a perfect representation. Within a specific event it is important to keep in mind that there will undoubtedly be reactions that stray from Neal’s model.

It is in the context of this moral community that mass tragedies are processed. According to Neal, “under conditions of national trauma, the moral underpinnings of society are subject to close scrutiny. Volcano-like disruptions call into question the qualities and attributes of social life.”⁵⁹ Neal claims “all collective traumas have some bearing on national identity, some create a sense of identity and some have fragmented effects.”⁶⁰ For instance, Neal discusses the tragedy of 9/11 (which occurred twenty-three years after Jonestown) and the uniting effect that it had on the American nation. The tragedy created “intense feelings of sadness and patriotism. . . the news media played upon the tragedy by elaborating on the experiences in New York and Washington and aboard the plane that crashed in Pennsylvania. Emphasis was placed on acts of heroism among

⁵⁷ Arthur G. Neal, *National Trauma & Collective Memory: Major Events in the American Century*, (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1998), 23.

⁵⁸ Neal, 35.

⁵⁹ Neal, 21.

⁶⁰ Neal, 29.

those who died as well as those who had survived.”⁶¹ 9/11 propelled major changes in the American psyche including a new understanding of foreign relations as well as a deep fear of terrorism, which Neal dubs a “culture of fear.”⁶² These responses ultimately had a unifying effect on the nation as it mobilized for war and banded together in grief. The national response to 9/11 serves as a model for the way tragedies within the moral community are processed. Because 9/11 fit inside of the bounds of American moral standards it had a significant impact on the country that is fully ingrained in the national conscience today.

The American response to Jonestown was nothing like the response to 9/11. Neal explicitly notes that Jonestown does not qualify as a national tragedy within his framework. He explains, “Disruptive events become national trauma only when the very institutional foundations of society are subjected to a challenge. For this reason, the criminal conduct of Richard Nixon as president was a national trauma in which crimes embedded in Olympic competition or the mass suicides in Guyana were not. Deviance and criminal conduct, wherever it occurs, is disturbing to a social system...it becomes a national trauma only when it shakes the basic structure of society.”⁶³ Even though the Temple grew straight out of American society and had been seen as an institution in San Francisco, Jonestown was never given the opportunity to reflect on society at large.⁶⁴ The suicides had real potential to damage the image of the American nation, but to neutralize this threat the event was cast as a freak occurrence. Catastrophes have the unique ability to crystallize the values that a society stands for as well as the values that it rejects. After

⁶¹ Neal, 178.

⁶² Neal, 192.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Marable Manning, “Black Professor Blasts Media’s Coverage of Jonestown,” *Sun Reporter*, December 28th, 1978.

Jonestown (and even more so after Waco) cults were officially rendered as evil and un-American. The Guyana story simply did not fit within the narrative of America as an exemplary nation, much less within Neal's conception of a moral community. Jonestown was therefore rejected as a legitimate American tragedy. Typical responses to calamity like grief and commemoration that marked the reaction to 9/11 were bypassed and supplanted by a vicious media circus that fed into American fascination with scandal.⁶⁵

In the first week, outlets struggled to get the story right. At first, the only news was the senator's assassination. When the news of the mass suicides finally did emerge, the details were hazy, it was estimated that only 300 people had died. Moore later recalled her reactions to the initial numbers. She and her family were hopeful. They did not believe that Annie and Carolyn, both peaceful and idealistic people, would have resorted to such a drastic measure. But as the days went on, their hope slowly depleted. On November 20th, Barbara Moore, wrote in her diary "I am hanging onto hope by a tenuous thread."⁶⁶

On Friday, November 26th, a week after the suicides, the final numbers emerged. The reason behind the erroneous estimation of deaths was that the victims were literally piled on top of one another. As they died they fell in a sort of circular formation so that parents lay on top of their children. It was the military's airlifting of the bodies that fully uncovered the scene.⁶⁷ By the time these numbers surfaced, the media barrage was fully underway, and the story of the year had reached unfathomable heights.

⁶⁵ Neal, 35

⁶⁶ Rebecca Moore. *In Defense of the Peoples Temple*. (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellin Press, 1988), 57.

⁶⁷ Tim Cahill, "In the Valley of the Shadow of Death: Guyana after the Jonestown Massacre," *Rolling Stone Magazine*, January 25th, 1979.

This chapter will discuss how the initial media reactions to the massacre had lasting implications on its memory. It will show how the media turned to hyperbole in order to draw in readers and maximize profits. The media went far beyond expected levels of sensationalism and drained the story for its every detail all the while disrespecting the victims and their families for the sake of monetary gain. Not only did the media exemplify corporate greed, but it also betrayed American trust by perpetuating a one-sided understanding of the massacre. It refused to show the Peoples Temple in a positive light and silenced voices that suggested there was more to the story. In these doings, the media was slowly building a skewed understanding. One that in turn forged a false collective memory of the tragedy through which Americans still understand the event today—nearly forty years later.

This chapter will rely on publications from the initial deluge of media coverage. It will begin by examining newspaper articles from well-established publications across the country such as the *Washington Post*, *The Wall St. Journal* and the *San Francisco Chronicle*. The study will then move on to focus on two mass-marketed paperbacks from Bantam Books and Berkley Publishing that came out within weeks of the suicides, as well as a CBS television series, which premiered in 1980. These sources will be used to show the excesses of media capitalization as well as the systematic manipulation of public opinion.

Once the facts regarding the deaths were set, the media wasted no time attempting to synthesize the entire story. The American public, especially people outside the state of California, saw the saga unraveling and became fascinated. According to Moore, it took her family several years, a trip to Guyana, and ceaseless investigation to figure out what

had actually happened to her sisters and her nephew.⁶⁸ The Moore family knew better than to trust every word put forth by the continually frothing media. The American public did not. As Moore later wrote, “If you were to believe the news reports about Jonestown in the week following the suicides, you might think that automatic weapon fire sprayed over everyone in the settlement and that whoever wasn’t shot was forcibly injected with poison. You might think that Jonestown was a concentration camp, surrounded by barbed wire with armed guards patrolling the perimeter. You might wonder why anyone would have wanted to live there.”⁶⁹

Jonestown was an unprecedented catastrophe. It was a foreign and absurd situation that people saw as distant from their own lives. In such a situation, it is easy to forget the humanity of those involved. It is easy to glom onto media coverage and to devour sensationalistic stories without understanding the exploitation behind the scenes. Media outlets were wise to this, and the publicity did not cease. In fact, a survey taken by the American Institute of Public Opinion’s Gallup Poll revealed that 98% of Americans were aware of the event. Children and adults everywhere had read the stories and seen the images. 96% of people with only a grade-school education had heard about the suicides. The report issued with the poll disclosed, “Few events in the entire forty-three-year history of the Gallup Poll have been known to such a high proportion of the U.S public, except such events as the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 and the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945.”⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Rebecca Moore. *In Defense of the Peoples Temple*, 47.

⁶⁹ Moore. *In Defense of the Peoples Temple*, 67.

⁷⁰ George Gallup, “98 Percent Say They Knew About Tragedy in Jonestown,” *The Hartford Courant*, December, 29th, 1978.

Beyond its initial discharge of facts, the media also attempted to interpret why this wild event had transpired. However, Jonestown was an event with absolutely no precedent in history, and thus, the eventual conclusion among the news media and citizens alike was that the massacre simply could not be understood. Attempting to explain the emergence of the Peoples Temple within the context of American society was a perilous endeavor. Reporters uniformly refrained from conflating the development of the Temple with problems in American society. Recalling Neal's conception of the "moral community," Jonestown could not be considered within the bounds of American society without calling major institutions into question. The Temple had always been a controversial group even when its members resided in California, yet over the years, it had accumulated significant power. Before the move to Guyana, Jones had become ingratiated with major political leaders and had held several important government positions. To explain this and the full story of the Temple to readers around the country would not have fared well for California and the nation's public image. Therefore, instead of analyzing the full story, the media took on the safe and profitable approach that the suicides were simply beyond explanation. Everyone, including the most influential news corporations, appeared to be stumped. An article from *Newsday* appearing nearly a month after the suicides concluded, "If a final analysis exists with respect to the attitudes that led to the people of Jonestown to destroy themselves, then I feel that this final analysis must be that there is no analysis, no true understanding by those of us left behind to argue the reason in behalf of those who chose to leave. The arguments in behalf of forced suicides and murders of brainwashing and charisma tend to pale before the myriad

of questions evoked by the unknown states of mind of those who chose to follow Jones.”⁷¹

Even the most well-known and respected journalists did not attempt to further understanding. Longtime San Francisco journalist Herb Caen attempted to tackle some of the major questions of the suicides in the epilogue of instant book “Suicide Cult” by Marshall Kilduff. Caen’s chapter illustrates the failure of even the best and most experienced journalists to come up with answers. Caen had been working in the field since the 1930s, yet his epilogue entitled “Why?” is a fruitless endeavor of explanation. In his epilogue, he goes over his interactions with Jones and the Temple searching for clues and answers yet finding nothing. He concludes his writing with defeat as he asserts, “The cause for which they died remains unspoken. Thus they died in vain, and that is the ultimate tragedy.”⁷²

Caen also discussed the media’s failure to aptly cover the story. He addresses the headline frenzy with the interesting observation that “the vocabulary of horror only stretches so far. In the case of Reverend Jim Jones and [the] Peoples Temple, the words—those ‘buzz’ words so dear to the heart of every newspaper headline-writer—soon ran out of steam and meaning. Bizarre and grotesque were followed by nightmare and shock. The unbelievable became all too real.”⁷³ This sentiment may well be an attempt to justify the media’s headlines, but it also helps to explain why many were so extreme. Caen was only discussing the media reaction in the two weeks after the massacre. Had he seen what came next, he may not have attempted such justification.

⁷¹ Ralph J. Keller, “Analyzing Events in Jonestown,” *Newsday*, Dec 11th 1979.

⁷² Herb Caen, “Why?” in *Suicide Cult: The Inside Story of the Peoples Temple Sect and the Massacre in Guyana*. (New York: Bantam Books, 1978), 201.

⁷³ Caen, 191.

After two weeks of feverish reporting on the story, the media storm only continued to grow. With such high levels of public interest, there was much more profit to be made. The inability to analyze the story combined with the intense pressures to publish new material caused reporters to turn to a more exposé style of writing in which new facts were constantly being presented and sensationalized. Each time a new detail emerged in the investigation, it was blasted from the newsstands. For example, the release of the so-called “death tape” by the FBI unleashed an intense wave of media interest. So too did the discovery that Jones had been in contact with the Soviet Union and that surviving members had attempted to send over one million dollars to the communist nation. Scores of articles from different sources reported these same facts over and over again. Headlines were often identical. One headline perfectly encapsulates the direction stories were heading: Leonard Downie Junior, a *Washington Post* writer, aptly observed on November 26th that “The Jonestown Story Grew Uglier with Each Chapter.”⁷⁴ Downie Jr. was right. Reporters did not hesitate to share the latest discoveries without consideration for the victims and their families. Stories ranged from the shocking to the outrageous to the downright horrifying. No details were spared. One particularly disturbing title read: “They Started With the Babies”⁷⁵ This is a prime example of the media exaggeration. The report is actually a broad overview of the suicides; it only mentions the babies in one sentence. The editors of the *Washington Post* clearly sought to engender shock and use it to draw readers to the story. The author of this particular article, Charles Krause, produced dozens of similarly misleading and melodramatic

⁷⁴ Leonard Downie Jr, “The Jonestown Story Grew Uglier With Each Chapter,” *Washington Post Foreign Service*, November 26th, 1978.

⁷⁵ Charles Krause. “They Started with the Babies” *The Washington Post*. November 21, 1978.

articles. He also wrote an instant paperback book that was printed and published only two weeks after the suicides.

It was not rare to see reporters and news outlets directly profiting from the horrors of the Guyana massacre. In fact, the media even awarded reporters for their coverage of the events. In 1979, the Press Club gave out six awards, out of a total of seventeen, for coverage of Jonestown. Two were appropriately awarded post-humorously to the reporters killed in the airstrip attack. More controversially, however, photographers and three reporters including Charles Krause, received awards. Krause stands out as one of many figures that benefitted greatly from the media swarm. He and another young reporter, Marshall Kilduff, released their own mass-market paperback books just weeks after the deaths. The books were published under the guise of informing the public. However, it is unlikely with the daily stream of newspaper articles and the mass public interest that the American people needed more information about the suicides. Though instant books had been around for decades, never before had they been written in the aftermath of such an immense loss. The books were lengthy, each about 200 pages and packed with juicy details and startling photographs. Even their titles were dramatized. Krause's book was called *Guyana Massacre: Eyewitness Account* and Kilduff's *Suicide Cult: The Inside Story of the Peoples Temple Sect and the Massacre in Guyana*. The books' synopses are even more revealing of this sensationalism. The back of Krause's work reads in all capital letters "NOTHING LIKE THIS HAS EVER HAPPENED BEFORE" while the back of Kilduff's asks "How could the power of love be twisted into the love of power?" Krause's book stands out as more obscene. Throughout the book, Krause maintains a sardonic and matter-of-fact tone that feels inappropriate to the

memory of the victims. For example, he shows a photograph of the deceased Jim Jones splayed out on the ground with the sarcastic caption “on the steps of his throne room, the leader lay dead.”⁷⁶ This brutally honest point of view is at times jarring. For example, in his descriptions of the suicides Krause negates the idea of death with dignity. As he wrote, “there was no beauty, no dignity in the aftermath of that white night. There was only death and its rot.”⁷⁷ Krause even goes into the horrific details of the decomposition of the bodies writing, “The decomposition of the bodies was awful. Limbs had fallen off. There were infestations of maggots. The smell of rotted flesh permeated the air.”⁷⁸ Krause fed into the American desire to hear every last gory detail of the story—a story that he had partially experienced firsthand, yet one that did not feel real to his millions of readers. But it is how they came to understand the story of the suicides; all they saw was the gore and the drama. Perhaps his ability to be so macabre came from his limited experience with the Peoples Temple. He had been in Venezuela working on a *Post* article when he was invited to join the Ryan party to write about their visit—only due to his proximity to Guyana. Before his invitation, Krause was unaware of the Temple’s existence. He was not as familiar with the intricacies of the Temple and was therefore able to report his stories with less sensitivity than others involved.

Ironically, these books did not achieve the success that the publishers and reporters had expected. The books had only “average” sales causing many book buyers to return the works back to the publishers.⁷⁹ This lack of success was likely due to the

⁷⁶ Charles Krause. *Guyana Massacre: The Eyewitness Account*. (New York: Berkeley Publishing Company, 1978), 117.

⁷⁷ Krause, 151.

⁷⁸ Krause, 150.

⁷⁹“Instant Books on Massacre No Bonanza: Publishers Disappointed over Sales of 2 Guyana Chronicles.” *Los Angeles Times*, January 6th, 1979.

oversaturation of stories in the media. There was no need to delve into a two-hundred-page book when the same information could be accessed instantly at the newsstand or on television. The books additionally came under some scrutiny for their attempts to profit off of tragedy. Despite this, Krause and Kilduff came out as major beneficiaries. They earned more than just money from the books and their overall coverage of the deaths—they gained careers. Both were young men at the time of the massacre. Their convenient involvement in the Jonestown story made them critical to the reporting and thus established the legitimacy of their careers. In fact, both men are still well-known reporters today. Kilduff is still best known for his coverage of the massacre.⁸⁰

Perhaps even more shocking than the hastily written instant books, was the TV series based on the suicides that premiered in April of 1980. From the CBS network came “Guyana Tragedy: The Story of Jim Jones” also known as the “Mad Messiah” a dramatization of the Jonestown saga. The series was loosely based on Krause’s book, which resulted in a large payout both to the *Washington Post* and to Krause. Because the show was based on Krause’s book, it was bound to be melodramatic (as one can discern from the title “Mad Messiah”). The show follows Jones’s life story depicting his childhood and ultimately tracing his journey to madness. It portrays him as a pure and idealistic young man who gradually descends into evil as he confronts his newly gained power and the impossibility of his humanitarian goals. The film opens with an intense scene—a white night drill. Jones’s voice blares over the loudspeakers of the settlement. He urges his followers to drink the flavor-aid, telling them, “The mercenaries are here they’ve come to kill us.” People run around the encampment screaming in frantic

⁸⁰ “Marshall Kilduff” En Academic, 2014. <http://en.academic.ru/dic.nsf/enwiki/11702489>

pandemonium. Jones is shot at and collapses to the ground: more screams ring out. Then all is silent. Suddenly, Jones stands up and announces that it was just a loyalty test. He hushes his followers and tells them to go to sleep. As his followers walk away, Jones ominously reminds them that though they are safe this time “[but] we must always be prepared” because “the next white alert might be a real attack.”⁸¹ This opening scene accurately sets the stage for the rest of the film and captures its histrionic tone. It is overly emotional and overly sexualized. A major focus of the series is Jones’s extramarital affairs.⁸² In the process of this over-dramatization, the series makes many untrue assumptions about the Peoples Temple, which were then reflected in the collective memory of Jonestown. As Wulf Kansteiner affirms in “Finding Meaning in Memory” postmodern collective memory is a “multimedia collage” of sources like books, television, and news, some of which are more potent than others in firmly implanting memory schema. Television in fact, is one of the most powerful devices in molding memory because it allows the audiences to not only witness the events but also to experience them.⁸³ It is unfortunate that one of the most overdramatized presentations of the events was also the most resonant and formative to Jonestown’s collective memory.

It is interesting that the series chooses to focus so specifically on the life of Jim Jones. The film announces at its opening, “The film you are about to see is a dramatization of the life of Jim Jones: this is his story.”⁸⁴ In choosing to focus on Jim Jones, a mysterious and controversial figure, instead of focusing on the members of the

⁸¹ “Guyana Tragedy: The Story of Jim Jones.” CBS, 3:09:19. April, 1980.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l992U04zC4w>

⁸² Carolyn Moore was not Jones’s only mistress, he was know to have several. In addition, he was also known to occasionally force other Temple members (including Deborah Layton) to have sex with him.

⁸³ Beim, 14.

⁸⁴ “Guyana Tragedy: The Story of Jim Jones.” CBS, 3:09:19. April, 1980.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l992U04zC4w>

Temple, the CBS television network chose profitability over respectful remembrance of the victims. The film does not focus on the people of Jonestown and the Temple whatsoever. It is simply a foray into the creation of a “madman”—something that was bound to draw the most views from the public.

When it came to dissecting the persona of Jones there were two archetypal approaches taken by the media. The first stance, as taken by this film, was that Jones was a man with good intentions who was slowly overwhelmed by evilness and insanity. The second view was that Jones was born evil and that all of his actions throughout his life were a reflection of his darkness. Analyses of Jones continually resorted to these two paradigms. There was no middle ground. Both understandings make for highly dramatic stories and compelling TV. It is indeed fascinating to watch the character of Jones unravel throughout the three-hour film. This perhaps is the most fitting storyline for a TV series. Jones delivers as a dynamic and emotionally complex character. Unlike the instant books, the show gained widespread acclaim and popularity. The actor who played Jones even received an Emmy award for outstanding lead actor in a limited series.⁸⁵

In the aftermath of the suicides, critiques of the media coverage were scarce. Most were consigned to the alternative press. The black community and the black press provided the only sturdy source of criticism. Blacks had made up the majority of the Peoples Temple, and so the community was highly invested in the media coverage. One article entitled “Black Professor Blasts Media’s Coverage of Jonestown” discusses a conflict between an influential black newspaper editor, Carlton Goodlett, and a black leader, Terry Francois. Goodlett had stated, “Any condemnation of the Peoples Temple

⁸⁵ Don Franks, (1996). *Entertainment Awards: A Music, Cinema, Theatre and Broadcasting Reference, 1928 Through 1993*. (McFarland & Co Inc. Pub), 56.

had to be balanced by the congregation's positive activities.”⁸⁶ However, the black community and Terry Francois did not feel that Goodlett had lived up to this standard in his reporting. In an act of protest, they picketed his house. This shows just how divisive the media coverage was. It pitted two powerful black leaders with the same goals against one another. The article also discusses the black community's objection to the overall concealment of the Temple's good works and influence in California. Temple members had helped to elect many powerful San Francisco officials, including the mayor George Moscone. Additionally, the Temple supported many social justice causes and conducted massive charity efforts. In the aftermath of the suicides, to highlight this connection would have been an embarrassment to San Francisco and to the country. But, by hiding central aspects of the Temple's history from public view, its memory became increasingly one-dimensional and increasingly fictitious. The black community saw this concealment occurring and became frustrated. Yet, they could not air their complaints in the mainstream media. Their opinions were relegated to exclusively black publications, but they were nevertheless consistent and convincing in their rhetoric. Referring back to Neal's model, we can see a flaw in his conception of the moral community. Though Neal does not account for dissension in his book, this banding together of the black community in support of the Peoples Temple reveals the limits of the moral community framework. In any given event there will always be groups that differ from the norm. Though most of the American public saw suicides and the Peoples Temple as they were portrayed in the media, the black community in San Francisco knew better and was able to vocalize their opposition on a small scale.

⁸⁶ Marable Manning, “Black Professor Blasts Media's Coverage of Jonestown,” *Sun Reporter*, December 28th, 1978.

Not only were alternative voices obscured, but those who contradicted the traditional media's opinions on the event were portrayed as crazy. A key example of this is B. Althea Orsot, a survivor who was famously quoted for saying that she wished she had died with the rest of the Temple members at Jonestown (she was in Georgetown visiting the dentist during the time of the suicides and therefore avoided death). In the wake of the suicides, a number of articles were written about this peculiar woman. These articles exoticized Orsot, taking her sensational quotes without allowing for the full story. She later recalled that "interviewers reported the facts as I gave them, but at the same time, they seasoned the interviews to make me look brainwashed, unbalanced, ridiculous, and without human dignity. Given another chance, I'd choose to speak to no one."⁸⁷ It was not until years later that she could truly express her point of view.

The reporting in the immediate aftermath of the massacre had heavy ramifications. The one-sidedness of the stories and the concealment of the positive sides of the Temple resulted in the building of a false narrative of the story that was all the public knew of the disaster. They knew of the hundreds of rotting bodies, of the deranged cult leader, and of the Kool-Aid.⁸⁸ This narrative never dug beyond the drama. It was a collage of distorted headlines—a patchwork of oblivion.

Rebecca Moore has dedicated her life to fighting against this collective memory. Moore created the idea of a "canon" surrounding the understanding of Jonestown. In 2000, Moore wrote an enlightening article on this canon that was published in *Nova Religio*. It is titled, "Is the Canon on Jonestown Closed?" Moore begins the article by

⁸⁷ B. Althea Orsot "Together We Stood, Divided We Fell." in *The Need for a Second Look at Jonestown* ed. Rebecca Moore and Fielding McGehee, (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellin Press, 1989), 103.

⁸⁸ The American public believed that the victims had consumed Kool-Aid, however, it was actually flavor-aid that was used.

declaring, “The popular understanding of what happened in Jonestown Guyana on 18 November 1978 has not changed significantly in two decades...In effect the canon concerning Jonestown is closed.” She goes on to discuss the media-propagated version of the story noting that the “publically accepted history of Jonestown exists which appears almost unalterable in existence.” Moore attributes the strength of the canon to the “wide gap [that] exists between popular literature and scholarly analyses.”⁸⁹ Because of this gap, most Americans are only familiar with the popular literature from newspaper articles, books, and television, which as we have just seen throughout the chapter, only promoted provincial understanding. This canon is deeply frustrating to Moore, who as a scholar of religion, and as a sister to Annie and Carolyn, has worked persistently to alter these contrived perceptions.

Before November of 1978, Moore had never seen her life going in this direction. She had initially majored in communications and planned to write children’s books. As she remembers, her life “took a different direction” and she “didn’t author the short stories or novels [she] thought [she] would.” Instead, she wrote numerous books about Jonestown and even received her Ph.D. in religion in 1991. In her book, *In Defense of the Peoples Temple*, Moore discusses her ultimate goal in her writings. She believes that “the falsehoods” about Jonestown have been “set in concrete...my purpose in writing this book, and others, is to begin chipping away at the concrete.”⁹⁰ She attempts to justify her life’s work asking the question, “Does it matter if mistakes are made in the pursuit of a

⁸⁹ Rebecca Moore, “Is the Canon on Jonestown Closed?” *Nova Religio*, October 2000, 8.

⁹⁰ Rebecca Moore. *In Defense of the Peoples Temple*. (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellin Press, 1988), 86.

‘hell of a story?’” Moore answers her own question decisively: “It has to matter because the truth of what happened, and why, has been obscured, perhaps permanently.”⁹¹

For years after the suicides, the media was able to feed off of the public’s fascination without ever making progress in understanding or humanizing the story. The first few weeks of media coverage had set a precedent of sensationalism and denial that could not be broken. The story was packaged into a freak occurrence that somehow had no bearing on the nation that produced it. In this way, the media removed any and all responsibility from the national conscience and thus allowed for shameless and full-fledged exposé. The headlines effectively captivated the attention of the American public at an unseen level. This ability to so easily gain readers by the revelation of new salacious facts and an enticing story of evil allowed the media to bleed the story for its every last gory detail. And in the process, the media knowingly denied the public the right to fully understand. Consequently, the same collective memory that was established about Jonestown thirty-eight years ago is still in full force today despite the efforts of Moore and other scholars who have tirelessly continued in their attempts to bring truth to the story, and more importantly, to the forgotten lives.

Chapter 3: Evolutions and Altercations, 1985-2016

In 1985, Moore made her first big move against the canon by publishing an important work, *A Sympathetic History of Jonestown: The Moore Family Involvement in the Peoples Temple*. She began her career with her own story. This book provided one of the first un-sensationalized accounts of the suicides. Throughout it, Moore removes the focus of the story from Jim Jones and places it on the victims. Moore was done with giving the villain of the story attention—there were other sides of event that needed to be

⁹¹ Ibid.

heard. In her introduction, Moore addresses the saturation of popular books on Jonestown admitting, “People have asked what more could possibly be written about Peoples Temple or Jonestown.” Despite this saturation, she believes that there is much more work to be done in uncovering and humanizing the story. Moore believes that “as distance from the horrors of the event allows historians to analyze what happened dispassionately; as scholars begin to realize the significance of both Jonestown and of the Peoples Temple movement, more books, and better books, are sure to come.”⁹² At this time, the academic work on the subject was still limited, but Moore had faith that it would increase and that she would play a major role in this effort. At the end of her introduction, she declares, “A sympathetic history hasn’t yet been published...this book differs from other books in that it is a history of the believers, rather than of the non-believers or the ex-believers. Although we never belonged, we have tried to tell the story of Peoples Temple members. It hasn’t been heard before.”⁹³

Moore faced a major obstacle in finding a publisher to work with, due to the controversial nature of the story she was telling. Many major publishing companies denied her. Finally, she came across the Edwin M. Mellin Press, an independent press for scholarly publications.⁹⁴ Throughout the 1980s and early 90s, the Edwin M. Mellin published five of Moore’s books. However because these books were scholarly and analytical, and because Edwin M. Mellin was a relatively obscure publishing company, Moore’s work did not attract much public attention. During these years, Moore remained one of the few academic and sympathetic voices on the subject. In contrast, the exposé

⁹² Moore. *A Sympathetic History of Jonestown: The Moore Family Involvement in the Peoples Temple*, 3.

⁹³ Moore, 5.

⁹⁴ “Publish with Edwin Mellen Press” Last Updated February 2016.
<http://mellenpress.com/newreasons.cfm>

genre of books continued steadily throughout the eighties, with the most being published in 1981.⁹⁵ Juicy publications emerged each year with dramatic names like *Potpourri with a Taste of Cult*, *Peoples Temple*, *Peoples Tomb* and *Our Father Who Art in Hell*. These works carried on the same narrative of sensationalism, allowing the collective memory that Americans had constructed surrounding Jonestown to remain frozen in time. By the 1990s publications had slowed to a mere one or two books a year, and the topic had faded from public discussion. The event was over a decade in the past, and nothing remotely similar had happened since.

On April 19th, 1993, seventy-six members of the Branch Davidian religious sect in Waco, Texas, died in a fire after a fifty-one day siege by the ATF. As the siege escalated and the compound was set on fire, the leader of the Davidians, David Koresh chose to stay inside the compound and die with his closest followers, including twenty-four children, instead of surrendering to the government.⁹⁶ It was in this action—revolutionary death for the sake of religion—that Americans found their long-missing link to the Guyana suicides. Suddenly, the subject of Jonestown reemerged in full force, and a torrent of new media attention returned to revisit the tragedy. This attention resulted in additions to the collective memory on Jonestown that centered on the danger of cults. A memory that once again benefitted the media and excluded the victims.

This chapter will examine the renewed discussion of the Guyana suicides after the deaths at Waco and the subsequent changes in its collective memory. It will show how comparison studies served to further tarnish the memory of Jonestown through its severe

⁹⁵ “Alternative Considerations of Jonestown & Peoples Temple” Last Updated 2016.

http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=31910

⁹⁶ “Waco: The Inside Story” *PBS Frontline*, 2014. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/waco/>

characterization as a dangerous cult. The chapter will then turn to the ensuing rebirth of historical discourse on the massacre and elucidate the unfortunate gap between the established collective memories and the newly established historical memory. It will move on to discuss the rise of Moore's oppositional historical memory, which calls for memorialization of the victims and a more humane perspective. Moore has been the central arbiter of this oppositional memory, and she has fought fiercely for it. The chapter will close by examining a significant scholarly debate between Rebecca Moore and a fellow academic, Thomas Robbins. Such a debate not only shows Moore's dedication to bolstering the oppositional memory of Jonestown, but it also reveals the many nuances of memory, even within the historical field. This episode will both underscore the persistent complications within the memory of Jonestown and call attention to those who have begun the fight to rectify it.

This chapter will employ a vast body of sources from the past thirty-eight years, mostly focusing on the period between 1993 and 2005 during which the renewed discussion of Jonestown took place. It will use articles from the aftermath of the Waco suicides, books and publications from serious historical scholars, and finally, articles written by Rebecca Moore and scholar Thomas Robbins as they engaged in their three-year debate.

The Branch Davidian sect had, like the Peoples Temple, been outcast by society and subject to significant public criticism and media harassment. Even before the revolutionary deaths many surface parallels could be drawn between the two religious organizations. They were both "dangerous" cult groups whose actions had ostracized them from mainstream society. Yet in reality, there were profound differences, both

religious and social, between what came to be known as “Waco” and Jonestown. The press, however, did not need to dig so deep to reach a good story, and immediately branded them as similar events. “Another Jonestown” quickly became a popular media catchphrase. The Guyana suicides had previously been so anomalous that their defiance of reason had come to be accepted. The events at Waco presented a sliver of similarity and an opportunity to ‘rationalize’ an unsettled tragedy. The media’s answer to Jonestown, and to Waco seemed to lie in the danger of cults, something that was distant enough from average American life to make sense without challenging the integrity of any societal institutions—but still enticing enough to attract readers. Major differences between the “cults” were consequently overlooked and the catastrophes were seen only in their broadest strokes. In the media’s eyes, and therefore in the eyes of the American public, these religions were now considered perilous cults that had successfully manipulated and “brainwashed” their followers to dedication: a dedication even more powerful than life itself. It was these simple parallels alone that propelled an onslaught of sensational comparison studies. These ‘studies’ were a convenient marketing tool to hone in on a popular topic from a new angle (though serious scholarly comparison studies did follow later). An article by journalist Tim Reiterman entitled “NEWS ANALYSIS: Parallel Roads led to Jonestown and Waco Cults: Similar forces shaped Jim Jones and David Koresh into the violent, power-mad “messiahs” who doomed their followers to death” is a particularly dramatic example. Reiterman writes, “This time it was fire. Last time it was cyanide...though separated by nearly 15 years and thousands of miles, Jonestown, Guyana and Waco, Texas, were the tragic culminations of hauntingly similar events shaped by two eccentric preachers who pretended to be more than mortal.”⁹⁷ The

⁹⁷ Tim Reiterman. “NEWS ANALYSIS: Parallel Roads led to Jonestown and Waco Cults: Similar forces

article recounts various similarities between the two leaders, such as their difficult childhoods, their media scrutiny, their control over their followers etc. Yet, it fails to address any of their differences. Reiterman's article was followed by hundreds of others that scrutinized Jones and Koresh attempting to unpack their lives, and their religions to find explanations. Just like the first wave of media coverage at Jonestown, the attention surrounded the cult leaders and overlooked the victims.

Though the drama of the media had not changed since 1978, the collective memory of Guyana finally began to shift—but it was not for the better. The most prominent theme of this new coverage was the danger of cults. Waco resurrected a fear in the American people that had been voraciously swept to the side in 1978: cults had the potential to threaten the American society. Now that there was a counterpart to Jonestown, cults, and their suicides were no longer the stuff of freak occurrences. The idea of cults was enough to scare mothers around America, but it was importantly not enough to collapse the social order or to seriously rock the “moral community.” Cults were not a part of acceptable society. They were a threat indeed, but one that was recklessly overplayed for the sake of provocation. The word cult now accompanied every article. Many of these pieces attempted to raise fears about future incidents. A 1993 article proclaimed that “Power Play becomes a Deadly Game with Cults: A Cult Awareness Network Says the Waco Debacle was a Repeat of the Jonestown Disaster 15 years ago.”⁹⁸ The article discussed the rise of the anti-cult movement, which was calling for further education on cults. The president of the Cult Awareness Network, Patricia

shaped Jim Jones and David Koresh into the violent, power-mad “messiahs” who doomed their followers to death.” *Los Angeles Times*. April 24th 1993.

⁹⁸ “Power Play becomes a Deadly Game with Cults: A Cult Awareness Network Says the Waco Debacle was a Repeat of the Jonestown Disaster 15 years ago.” *Orlando Sentinel*, November 7th 1993.

Ryan (daughter of slain congressman Leo Ryan), was quoted saying, “Children must be educated so that they can recognize manipulation and learn to ask questions. Education is needed on college campuses, where many cults do recruiting.”⁹⁹ Such calls for cult awareness were ultimately harmful to the already unfortunate memory of Jonestown. These calls had the effect of othering the victims and making their religious involvements seem either overly idealistic and foolish, or sinister.

The fear of cults now officially came to mark the memory of the Guyana tragedy. One article that perfectly, yet tragically, encapsulates this shift is entitled “Jonestown Lives on as a Reminder of Cults’ Dangerous Religion.”¹⁰⁰ The rebirth of Jonestown discussions in the media had further soured the misfortune’s memory. It was now up to scholars and academics like Rebecca Moore to help change this.

The renewal of coverage on the massacre was not all bad. It importantly brought scholarly attention back to the subject. After Waco, the field of “new religious movements” from both a religious and historical perspective, became a much more desirable topic of investigation, and a significant amount of scholarly work began to accumulate as historians forged a new historical memory on the subject of Jonestown. Amos Funkenstein, a distinguished historian who devoted much of his career to the study of Holocaust memory, wrote about historical memory in an article entitled “Collective Memory and Historical Consciousness.” According to Funkenstein, historical memory is importantly distinct from collective memory as it is “an academic memory defined by

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Richard C. Paddock. “Jonestown Lives on as a Reminder of Cults’ Dangers Religion: After 15 years of grieving victims’ relatives plan to erect a memorial to the hundreds who died. *Los Angeles Times*, November 19th, 1993.

historians.”¹⁰¹ He notes that “the historian demands that we ignore the present and its meanings as much as possible, avoid anachronisms and the tendency to project our concepts on people of the past. Collective memory, by contrast, is...shallow in terms of chronology; it is completely topocentric. In the collective memory of the past, people, events, and historical institutions serve as prototypes and are not recognized for their uniqueness. They are links in an ongoing past.”¹⁰² This explains why the media was so quick to equate Waco and Guyana without seriously considering the uniqueness of the events. Funkenstein also explains that historians are able to challenge collective memory because “[their] craft leads them to deviate from or to question accepted values.”¹⁰³ Despite the historians’ insight, Funkenstein recognizes the inability of their perspectives to make it to the mainstream. He writes that only “on rare occasions the historian comes out against the distorted and even damaging images of the past; even more rarely he succeeds in creating a new discourse beyond its professional sphere.”¹⁰⁴ As Funkenstein so matter-of-factly articulates, an immense challenge lay ahead for Rebecca Moore and other like-minded scholars. Some of the most prominent scholars of Jonestown’s historical memory include John R. Hall, Judith Weightman, and more recently, Julia Scheeres.¹⁰⁵ These scholars have told the full story of Jonestown from Jones’s childhood to the last moments of life in Guyana. They have attempted to reveal the story without unnecessary drama and without biases for or against the Peoples Temple.

Within this larger category of historical memory, Rebecca Moore has been forging her own more radical path. Throughout the past thirty-one years, she has been

¹⁰¹ Amos Funkenstein. “Collective Memory and Historical Conscious.” *History and Memory*. (1989): 9.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Funkenstein, 10.

¹⁰⁵ Moore, *A Sympathetic History of Jonestown*, preface.

slowly building an oppositional memory that aims to bring sympathy and commemoration to the previously disregarded victims. Oppositional memory is a strain of counter-memory. Renowned historian Natalie Zemon Davis and her colleague Randolph Starn discuss counter-memory in their Introduction to the 1989 issue of the *Memory and Counter-Memory* Journal. Zemon Davis and Starn believe that, “Memory, like credit, [is] expansive; [it is] extended, and often overextended on faith; but [it] can be periodically checked against the record and called into account too.”¹⁰⁶ Hence, “Memory operates under the pressure of challenges and alternatives. A private fetish or a public injunction to forget—a decree of amnesty would be an instance of a politics of forgetting—are forms of counter-memory.”¹⁰⁷ Counter-memory can thus be classified as any form of memory that runs against traditional forms of commemoration.

Oppositional memory is a more specific type of counter-memory that addresses particular groups of people. Historian Chris Healy has defined oppositional memory as the memory of the forgotten.¹⁰⁸ As he explains it, oppositional memory seeks to give voice to “marginalized, silenced and privatized” groups, like those who died in Guyana.¹⁰⁹ Therefore, Moore’s oppositional counter-memory aims to jilt the established memory of Jonestown and to supplant it with a more sympathetic form that focuses on the victims.

In explaining her own place in the literature of the suicides, Moore believes that there is “a large and unfortunate gap [in] the literature of Jonestown concerning Peoples

¹⁰⁶ Natalie Zemon Davis and Randolph Starn, “Introduction.” Special Issue: *Memory and Counter Memory*. (1989): 2.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Chris Healy, “Community Based History,” in *Written Into History: Celebrating Fifty Years of The Melbourne Historical Journal* ed. Keir Wotherspoon and Erik Ropers (Melbourne: The Melbourne Historical Journal, 2012), 255.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

Temple” that does not represent the perspectives and stories of the faithful believers.¹¹⁰ Her oppositional memory is centered on building an understanding of the 900 neglected lives and looking at their involvement and experiences from a compassionate perspective. It ultimately intends to bring discussions of the suicides into society’s ‘moral community.’ Public memorial and empathy, both of which Moore strives to achieve, are major indications that a given event is within the realm of the ‘moral community.’ Moore’s ambitions are far more biased than those of the established historical memory of Jonestown, yet they are necessary to balance out the excesses of distanced and sensationalized conjectures on the subject. Though she has dozens of books arguing for a more humane perspective, one of the most powerful ways that Moore contributes to her oppositional memory is by sharing her personal story and by humanizing the lives of her own sisters. Her most personal work is *The Jonestown Letters: Correspondence of the Moore Family: 1970-1985* in which she shares the letters written by Annie and Carolyn with the world. The book is solely comprised of the letters. There is no historical interjection or analysis. Their letters and their life stories speak for themselves. In her preface, Moore writes, “As an editor, I have decided to not exclude any of the mundane details which either provide information about life in the Peoples Temple and in Jonestown, or about my sisters and my family. It is just as important to know Annie’s feelings about grades and justice, and nursing, and sex, as it is to understand her feelings on Jim Jones. Her opinions on these other subjects create a portrait of a person who happened to belong to Peoples Temple. Similarly, Carolyn’s description of the agricultural project and of the groups plans for the future are included along with her opinions about Richard Nixon and anecdotes about her son Kimo. Everything goes

¹¹⁰ Rebecca Moore, *The Jonestown Letters: Correspondence of the Moore Family 1970-1985*. Xiv.

together to make a picture of Carolyn and the Peoples Temple.”¹¹¹ In publishing their letters, Moore is finally giving a voice to her sisters, and through them, a voice to the hundreds of victims. She is allowing their stories to debunk the “common vision” of the Peoples Temple. A vision that “focused on the bizarre and upon the leader, Jim Jones...A view which ultimately denied the humanity of over 900 individuals.”

Moore has not been alone in her attempts to establish this new memory. Other historians have made significant contributions to the oppositional memory of Jonestown as well. One of the most important works of oppositional memory is *Dear People: Remembering Jonestown*. It was written by Denise Stephenson, a colleague of Rebecca Moore who became interested in the Peoples Temple through their friendship. This was one of the first books to truly reveal how the victims had lived beyond the media headlines. *Dear People* is a work memorializing the victims and celebrating their lives. As the book’s preface recalls, when we remember Jonestown “for the most part, we remember that a lot of people died. We do not remember—we may never have known—how they lived.”¹¹² The work is full of journal entries and letters from Temple members. It even includes several pages of photographs showing members at happy occasions. There are photographs of members gathered together in service, relaxing together, working together, and even dancing together. Life as a member of the Peoples Temple was not all sinister. There are also many personal histories of Temple members who died that serve to humanize their stories and display their relatability. Many of these documents have an upbeat tone. They speak of hard work, religious dedication, and the desire to fight for social justice. For example, a letter written in 1978 by a member named

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ed. Denise Stephenson. *Dear People: Remembering Jonestown*, (San Francisco, California: California Historical Society Press, 2005). xi.

David Betts Jackson declared that “[Jonestown] was the best place for us. I’m telling you it was the best place [that] ever was...I want Jonestown to be cared for because it cared for me. When I came here it was just getting started. I been fooling around the Unites States for a hundred years and it didn’t do a thing for me.” In contrast to this glowing letter, many other documents also speak of the difficulties that the Temple members experienced while in Guyana. A letter by member Christine Miller reveals a less happy side to life in Guyana. She wrote, “I am not too happy now, as you may know, maybe because I do not have the peace I expected...it is hard to show [love] here for it seems when you do you get your ass kicked. Some enjoy cursing, beating and knocking others around. I am against this.”¹¹³ *Dear People* shows the victims as real people—not as cautionary tales or wasted lives. It portrays the way life in the commune was actually lived. It shows the joy that many experienced in Guyana as well as the hardships that were at times overwhelming. Above all, the book treats the victims with respect and carefully considers their stories for the first time. The major reason that these documents had been obscured for so long was because they showed a positive side of life at Jonestown, something that was essentially not previously permissible to showcase. Not surprisingly, the Edwin M. Mellin Press published this book. However, this also meant that *Dear People* would likely not reach a large audience. Despite the small audience that *Dear People* has reached, its publication was a pivotal moment for Moore’s oppositional memory. It showed that she was not alone in her mission thus legitimizing the presence of oppositional memory within the study of Jonestown.

As a scholar with such a personal connection, and such a specific campaign, Moore has been heavily critical of many works on the subject that do not align with her

¹¹³ Stephenson, 90.

understanding of the suicides. This criticism has at times pitted her against other scholars. For example, between 2000 and 2003 Moore was involved in a fascinating debate with scholar Thomas Robbins. The late Thomas Robbins was a sociologist of new religious movements who often focused on comparative studies between different groups. Through the exchange of several articles, these two scholars argued over minor details with a fierce passion and determination. Their debate is emblematic of Moore's tenacity, and her dedication as a scholar and a sister.

The debate began in 2000 with Moore's article for *Nova Religio* "Is the Canon on Jonestown Closed?" In this article, Moore reviews the existing literature on the massacre with the belief that, "Two decades of scholarly reflection upon events of that day seemed to have little impact on conventional wisdom about Jonestown...this poses a serious problem for historians and other researchers who may not consider the canon quite as fixed as the public does and who are, indeed, still in the process of recovering and writing the historical record."¹¹⁴ Moore deems that this canon is "impervious to critique either by scholarly analysis's or conspiracy theorists" and that "its strength rests on the lack of consensus among its critics."¹¹⁵ Essentially historical scholarship is not a united front. It is a vast and differentiated field with historians constantly espousing different points of view. Historians are already disadvantaged by the limits of their audience, and this disadvantage of dissemination is compounded when their messages do not coordinate. This is quite a charge for Moore to make yet she supports it up by discussing various discrepancies between major works on Jonestown. Though these historians all share the same broad intent of bringing reality back to the narrative of the tragedy, it is in the

¹¹⁴ Rebecca Moore. "Is the Canon On Jonestown Closed?" *Nova Religio* (October 2000): 7.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

details of their analyses where they differ, and thus where they fall short of establishing a viable historical memory with the ability to contest the erroneous collective memory. Throughout her article, Moore reviews and critiques the ‘waves’ of scholarly research. Her criticisms of other historians are unbounded. Her message takes precedence above all—even over her relationship with other scholars and therefore her career. Her tone when discussing many of these works is cutting and at times even derisive. Her debate with Thomas Robbins is consequently ignited when she disagrees with his comparative study of Waco and Jonestown. Throughout her article, Moore shows an overall distaste for the genre of comparison studies. Her major disagreement with a work written by Robbins comes down to the actual cause of the suicides and the comparison of these causes to the deaths at Waco. Robbins believed that “endogenous factors” meaning internal factors within Jonestown lead to the suicides, as opposed to “exogenous” (external) factors which led to the suicides at Waco. Moore takes issue with this classification and writes: “The view that primarily endogenous factors influenced the actions of members of the Peoples Temple ignores the existence of a bitter conflict between [the] Peoples Temple and its enemies.” Moore also continues on to call out a contradiction between another one of Robbins’ works in which he wrote that the suicides had been caused by a “[overreaction] to a minor provocation.” It is clear that Moore resents any implications that the destruction of the Peoples Temple was solely self inflicted and brought on by internal divisions, as well as the idea that the suicides were an overreaction. Through this critique of Robbins’s work Moore fights to remedy very specific yet very important details that had the potential to alter the historical memory of Jonestown and further tarnish the victims in it.

In 2003, Thomas Robbins published his response to Moore's critique entitled "Comparing Incidents of Extreme 'Cult Violence' which was also published in *Nova Religio*. Robbins maintains that Moore "misconstrued" his "cryptic statements."¹¹⁶ Robbins opens his article with a bold and discourteous statement: "I am flattered to be considered by Rebecca Moore to be a major voice on the interpretation of the Jonestown tragedy. I confess that I have never done any significant research on Jonestown. I even recall that, when discussing the tragedy with colleagues in 1978-9 I occasionally slipped into referring to the site of the violence as Jonesberg or Jonesville."¹¹⁷ His flippant tone about such a serious subject betrays his irritation with Moore's critique. He ultimately renders her criticisms as a "partial misreading" and then launches into a defense of his argument. He holds by his statement of endogenous factors writing that, "The contribution to the horrendous outcome made by endogenous factors and internal tension was *relatively* greater at Jonestown compared to Waco." He then continues on to defend that, "This comparative inference was not intended to deny that the sustained (and probably destabilizing) effect of the Concerned Relatives campaign against Jonestown (and other external pressures) were factors which must be taken into account to comprehend the ultimate tragedy. Nevertheless, the enemies of Jonestown did not inflict physical violence or raise the specter of such violence against Jonestown. The extreme violence of the Jonestown residents responses to Congressman Ryan's unarmed party implies in my view a greater internal tension and fragility operative at the Guyana settlement compared to Mount Carmel where the Davidians (influenced of course by their messianic and Adventist worldview) responded to menacing expeditions set upon

¹¹⁶ Thomas Robbins. "Comparing Incidents of Extreme 'Cult Violence': A Comment on "Is the Canon on Jonestown Closed?" *Nova Religio* (2003), 365.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

them.”¹¹⁸ Robbins makes his justification by minimizing the finality and force of his initial argument. He makes his point abundantly obvious so as to make it seem that Moore’s disagreement with him was the result of an imprecise analysis. For example, he reiterates that, “A careful reading of the passage, particularly of the last two sentences, should make it clear that what was intended was a comparative inference which did not deny that the exogenous factor of a bitter and persistent oppositions from the Concerned Relatives, and others played a significant role in the development of the Jonestown tragedy. To say that Mr. X is taller than Mr. Y does not imply that Mr. Y is a shrimp.”¹¹⁹ He proceeds to repeat his point throughout the article restating his sole intent of comparison, and continually implying that Moore’s misunderstanding was due to a lack of “careful reading.” Toward the end of Robbins’ article, he further clarifies his point by discussing the health of the Jonestown and Waco communities before their demises. As he elucidates, “Mount Carmel was not a declining or failing group. In contrast, Jonestown was facing ‘economic and organizational failure’ ... Jones himself was increasingly drug-addicted and psychologically disoriented as well as physically debilitated. ... In Jonestown, Jim Jones was the patriarch of a dysfunctional family—dysfunctional because no one wanted to acknowledge the mental illness of their beloved and idealized Dad. This was not the case with David Koresh, who unlike Jones was not perceived as deranged or gravely flawed by his close associates and subleaders.” This delineation is helpful in clarifying Robbins’s comparative point, though disrespectful in its tone toward Jones’ followers and victims. His initial comparison, the subject of Moore original critique spurring this debate did not intend to impel further judgment on the deaths. Robbins was

¹¹⁸ Robbins, 367.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

attempting to make a “relative” rather than an “absolute” distinction about the nature of the suicides.¹²⁰ But, after being faced with Moore’s exacting criticism Robbins clearly felt comfortable resorting to a harsh elaboration. Robbins continues on to wrap up his article with some closing thoughts. He dedicates a significant amount of this conclusion to the justification of comparison studies. Despite Moore’s obvious disapproval of them, Robbins believes that there is “a need for systematic comparative studies of violence involving religious groups.”¹²¹ Robbins finalizes his paper by summarizing his argument and attempting to make peace with Moore. He does this by agreeing with her construction of the canon, writing that she “rightly deploras” it.¹²² This agreement reveals the complex nature of Jonestown’s memory among historians. Though most historians of the massacre and new religious movements agree on broad concepts, it is their disagreement over specifics that result in the weakness of Jonestown’s historical memory.

Overall, Robbins’s response article clearly proves his point as well as the minutia of his and Moore’s disagreement, but it does so with an insensitive tone. Not surprisingly, Moore felt compelled to respond with celerity. Not even a month later, Moore came out with her final response. Her response, like Robbins’s carries a biting tone. She first addresses Robbins’s denial of expertise on Jonestown writing that “[she] would have been remiss to have excluded his comparative studies...to have neglected any [major] writers would have been derelict.”¹²³ She continues to clarify her side of the story. She states “I am not sure how I could have made it clearer that I was examining comparative studies of Waco and Jonestown. I used the expression ‘comparative studies’ nine times in

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Robbins, 371.

¹²² Robbins, 373.

¹²³ Rebecca Moore. “A Response to Thomas Robbins’s Comment” *Nova Religio* (2003), 376.

the essay, and placed Dr. Robbins's work in the section titled 'Comparison Studies.' Moore then goes on to repudiate Robbins's accusation of her misreading of his response. She is forceful in her disagreement writing "I take exception to the assertion Dr. Robbins makes that I have either misread or, more seriously, deliberately misread his writings to construct a 'theoretical straw man' I deny both of these suggestions vehemently." Moore then reviews alternative endogenous versus exogenous theories contrasting them to Robbins's and concluding that "[her] reading and representation" was indeed "fair and accurate."¹²⁴ Moore's response is much more concise than Robbins' as she simply feels the need to defend the contested statements and not to elaborate on theory. Interestingly, despite her obvious exasperation with Robbins, Moore also ends her article on an agreeable note. She states that, "We may ultimately disagree, as Dr. Robbins and I do, on the relative weight of these factors in the particular case of Jonestown, but I think we agree that the either/or perspective [endogenous vs. exogenous] does not serve." Despite the strongly held views of each historian and their not-so-subtle jabs at one another, the scholars finally conclude their debate civilly; Robbins did not issue another response as he had already made his point clear.

This debate is important in the history of Jonestown's memory for a number of reasons. It firstly shows Moore's undying dedication to her cause and her willingness to risk her own name for it. Beyond this, however, the debate shows that the contest for the memory of Jonestown occurs on all levels. Whether it is a dispute with the media or with a fellow scholar, setting the facts straight and humanizing the victims, is of the utmost importance to Moore. It finally, and most gravely shows the inability of scholars to rally around one understanding of the tragedy. Ironically, this was one of Moore's major

¹²⁴ Moore, 377.

complaints in her “canon” article: a complaint, which she then went on to embody. This shortcoming harkens back to the confusion of 1978 when the subject of the suicides seemed too complicated to interpret. Though significant strides have been made since that time, elements of this initial reaction still ring true in that there may always be irreconcilable differences in interpretation. While Moore aims to unify the historical analysis on Jonestown, her oppositional memory may be too specific for the majority of scholars to adopt. Her pursuit is complicated, and thus, it is still in progress. She might have had the last word in the debate with Robbins, yet she undoubtedly has many more important contests to win over the memory of Jonestown.

Conclusion: 2016

This thesis has sought to present the development of one event’s mass memory, and the implications it has created. From providing a complete understanding of the events leading to Jonestown to tracing the trajectory of its collective memory, this paper has exposed the lost voices of the tragedy. It has reviewed the struggle over the event’s memory from 1978 into today and has shown the continuing challenges in the academic field. The treatment of the event in the days and weeks following the deaths set an unfortunate paradigm of understanding that despite decades of impassioned effort remains unbroken.

No fringe disaster has ever occurred on the same scale as Jonestown, yet tragedies on the outskirts of society happen every day. Using Jonestown as a case study in fringe tragedy, it is clear that empathy and humanity are elusive in events that stray from American values. In the many years that have now elapsed since both Waco and Jonestown, the widespread regard of cults has morphed from fear to fascination. But,

their mass memory has remained tightly cemented. Younger generations do not know about Jonestown, many have never even heard of the settlement, no less the suicides. With such young and increasingly open minds to inform, the way the event is portrayed in the media is increasingly important.

Jonestown re-emerges every now and again in the news and in pop-culture. Most recently there have been reports of a new anthology television series whose first season will focus on the suicides. The series will be produced by esteemed actor Jake Gyllenhaal and will likely draw millions of young viewers. According to a *Variety Magazine* interview, the series will focus on Jim Jones. In the interview, Gyllenhaal explains, “Jim Jones is a complex character—one who has found his way into the collective unconscious. We want to focus on the undeniable magnetism of zealots and the danger of that kind of charisma.”¹²⁵

This series threatens to jeopardize the future of Jonestown’s memory. Once again the memory of the victims will be dismissed. They will be shown as brainwashed cult followers, not as the diverse, accomplished and passionate people that they were. The focus of this television show is representative of the way that we still think about and understand Jonestown in 2016. It is all about the intrigue, the drama, and the madness—anything but the humanity of the people who were actually involved.

Each time the subject of Jonestown re-emerges in popular discussion there is opportunity to amend its memory, and there is hope that the media will take a new approach to the story. Looking forward, in this age of increased acceptance, it is more likely than ever that the story of Jonestown and the Peoples Temple will be freed from

¹²⁵ Elizabeth Wagmeister, “Jake Gyllenhaal Developing Cult Anthology Series for A&E” *Variety.com*, January 6th 2016. <http://variety.com/2016/tv/news/jake-gyllenhaal-anthology-series-for-ae-1201673357/>

the confines of its outdated collective memory. There is hope that one day Jonestown will be seen in terms of the Annies and Carolyns of the story, the dedicated believers and innocent victims who have been sidelined for far too long.

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