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*The People of the Peoples Temple*

Collin Smith

HST H 555: Public History Honors Thesis

Dr. Kathryn Lasdow, Thesis Advisor

April 26, 2021

## INTRODUCTION:

In 1957, Hyacinth Thrash, a fifty-five-year-old black woman living in Indiana, thought she had found her church. She joined a religious organization in Indianapolis that seemed to be free from racism, with a mission to help the poor and the needy. The church, called the Peoples Temple, was led by a charismatic white man, Jim Jones. From 1956 to 1978, Reverend Jim Jones led the Peoples Temple congregation in Indianapolis, Indiana (1956-1965), then in Ukiah and San Francisco, California (1965-1977), and finally in Jonestown, Guyana (1977-1978). Thrash described the first time her sister, Zipporah, saw the Peoples Temple on television: “She came running in from the other room, shouting, ‘I’ve found my church!’ She saw the integrated choir on TV and Jim standing so handsome, and wanted to go.”<sup>1</sup> Zipporah enticed Hyacinth to join her. Hyacinth appreciated how the church aligned with the principles of the early Civil Rights Movement; she engaged in social work in her community while her pastor, Jones, became the director of the Indianapolis Human Rights Commission. She also believed in the church’s healing powers. In 1964, Thrash’s doctors found a cancerous tumor. When she was deemed cancer free by several doctors in the months following her diagnosis, she claimed she had been cured through faith healing in her church. For Hyacinth Thrash, and hundreds of other followers, the Peoples Temple was a central force in their life, and an organization on which they depended spiritually, socially, economically, and politically.

Yet, twenty-one years later and 2,947 miles away, Thrash awoke in Jonestown, Guyana to find that, while she slept, over 900 people died.<sup>2</sup> Among the dead was her sister, Zipporah. On

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<sup>1</sup> Catherine Thrash and Marian Towne, *The Onliest One Alive* (self published, 1995), 47.

<sup>2</sup> There is scholarly debate over whether Hyacinth Thrash fell asleep or passed out from exhaustion during the Jonestown Massacre. In Thrash’s autobiography, *The Onliest One Alive*, Thrash says she fell asleep (110). Therefore, this paper takes her at her word.

November 18, 1978, Peoples Temple members met a violent and news-making end when Jones and over 900 followers engaged in a murder/suicide by drinking Flavor Aid laced with cyanide. Called the Jonestown Massacre, this event represented the largest one-day loss of American civilian life prior to 9/11. The 918 human deaths in Guyana meant the metaphorical death of the community Thrash had dedicated herself to for over twenty years. When Thrash awoke and realized her community died, she recalled “I started screaming! I thought maybe I was dead too. I pinched myself. Was I alive? I couldn’t believe it.”<sup>3</sup> Thrash’s story gets to the heart of this thesis project, which examines the ideology of the Peoples Temple from a bottom-up perspective to asserts members’ agency over the development of the Peoples Temple organization and settlement in Jonestown.

I ask a series of historical research questions: How did the diversity in the Peoples Temple general membership compare to the diversity of the Peoples Temple’s leadership? How did the experience of a new recruit compare to that of a more established member? What parts of the Peoples Temple story are most predominant in retellings of the organization’s history? How do these works portray the victims of the massacre and the leader Jim Jones? How can artists create a narrative that is both compelling and historically accurate? Is fictionalization ever appropriate for historical interpretation, or should artists strive to maintain full historical accuracy? How do survivors or family of the victims feel about adaptations of the Peoples Temple story? And finally, how can a topic of this magnitude be handled in good taste and with proper respect?

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 111.

My research argues that many members of the Peoples Temple remained loyal to the organization for reasons beyond brainwashing or cult behavior. Rather, these members, including Hyacinth Thrash, Grace and Timothy Stoen, Deborah Layton, and many more, dedicated their lives to the organization because they shared a genuine belief in the Peoples Temple mission to end racial and economic inequality and bring about a socialist utopia. Peoples Temple leader Jim Jones capitalized on the social and moral connections of his membership to slowly radicalize the organization over its twenty-two-year history. Because of their love for their peers and their belief in the mission, many members became more dependent on the organization (and therefore on Jim Jones) as time went on. By the organization's demise in 1978, some members believed that the ultimate sacrifice—taking their own lives—served the greater good.

However, not all members responded positively to the evolution of the Peoples Temple. For example, Timothy and Grace Stoen became the most outspoken antagonist for the Peoples Temple community. In the early 1970s, The Stoens joined the Peoples Temple when Timothy became the church's primary lawyer. In 1972, Grace gave birth to a son, John Victor, over whom Jim Jones claimed paternity. Grace defected from the Peoples Temple in 1976 after witnessing the brutal beating of Peter Wotherspoon at the direction of Jim Jones.<sup>4</sup> After defecting, Grace began a legal battle with Jones and the Peoples Temple to regain custody of her son. Timothy defected in 1977 after the organization's move to Jonestown, Guyana. Their defections, coupled with their increased unease about Peoples Temple doctrine, instigated a rise in public scrutiny of the Peoples Temple and pushed members to radicalize the organization in its final year. Both Jones and general members claimed the case threatened the sanctity and strength of the

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<sup>4</sup> Jeannie Mills, *Six Years with God* (New York: A&W Publishers, INC., 1979), 48.

community.<sup>5</sup> This existential fear and paranoia caused mass murder and suicide to become what seemed to be the only way out for some of the organization's members.

To get to the heart of member-focused stories, such as the Stoens' custody battle, I have had to reexamine the historiography of the Jonestown Massacre. Much of the existing scholarship on the Peoples Temple has analyzed how Jim Jones alone controlled his congregation through tactics like sexual coercion, love bombing (or the use of excessive affection as a manipulation tactic), financial dependency, and the breakdown of relationships outside the Peoples Temple.<sup>6</sup> I explore first-hand accounts from members within the inner-circle of the Peoples Temple, including *The Onliest One Alive* by former Peoples Temple member Hyacinth Thrash, *Seductive Poison* by former Peoples Temple Planning Committee member Deborah Layton, *Marked for Death* by the organization's former lawyer Timothy Stoen, as well as assorted excerpts from other Peoples Temple primary sources and reflections. These sources illustrate how the decisions of Peoples Temple members influenced the organization's progression and development from its founding in 1956 to its end in 1978. The Peoples Temple evolved from a religious organization grounded in social work and a commitment to socialist ideology to one influenced by paranoia built on the relationship of Jim Jones and the Peoples Temple membership.

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<sup>5</sup> Carolyn Layton, Analysis Of Future Prospects, 1978, RYMUR 89-4286-X-3-e-32a – X-3-e-32e, The Jonestown Institute, San Diego State University.

<sup>6</sup> David A. Halperin, "Group Processes In Cult Affiliation And Recruitment," *Group* 6, 2 (Summer 1982), 13-24; James T. Richardson, "People's Temple and Jonestown: A Corrective Comparison and Critique," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 19, 3 (September 1980), 239-255; Thomas Robbins, "Constructing Cultist "Mind Control," *Sociological Analysis* 45, 3 (Autumn 1984): 241-256; Stuart W. Twemlow and George Hough, "The Cult Leader as Agent of a Psychotic Fantasy of Masochistic Group Death: The Revolutionary Suicide in Jonestown," *Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy* 24, 4 (January 2008), 222-239.

Many members' dedication to the Peoples Temple stemmed from their belief in the group's social and economic mission. Therefore, my analysis explores how multiple contemporaneous movements and organizations influenced the causes the Peoples Temple members fought for. The Peoples Temple incorporated the philosophies of Father Divine's Peace Mission, the writings of Karl Marx, the Civil Rights Movement, and the writings of Black Panther Party founder Huey Newton to form a movement that justified ostracizing dissenting voices that members deemed capitalistic, racist, and invalid. As the group's ever-radicalizing ideologies pushed the organization further from mainstream society, it became more insular and paranoid. These sentiments and emotions reached their peak in the late 1970s, when 1,000 members chose to move halfway across the eastern hemisphere and fully sequester themselves within the Peoples Temple community in Jonestown, Guyana.<sup>7</sup>

My research paper is organized as follows: first, I analyze the historiography of the Peoples Temple to demonstrate how the historical narrative has expanded from an interpretation of the members as cultists to an interpretation in which they are shown as more complex historical actors—people dependent on the community, abused at the hands of Jim Jones, or genuinely committed to the stated goals of the organization. Then I place the Peoples Temple in its historical context and discuss how broader social and religious movements influenced the organization and affected the stated ideology of members. Next, I analyze the experiences of individual members as case studies, including Hyacinth Thrash, Deborah Layton, and Timothy and Grace Stoen, to explore the relationship between the Peoples Temple members and Jim

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<sup>7</sup> Timothy Carter, "Remembering the People of the Peoples Temple," (Speech, Bucknell University, Spring 2013), Youtube, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TU4e2b\\_TcDs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TU4e2b_TcDs); Thrash and Towne, *The Onliest One Alive*, 83; There is disagreement among former members regarding the amount of agency members had over moving to Guyana. While Carter states that "nobody forced [him] to go to Guyana," Thrash discusses how she never saw her own passport between Jones submitting an application for it and her entrance into Jonestown.

Jones. I uncover how members and Jones became increasingly codependent overtime and took on the characteristics of an abusive relationship. Finally, this project culminates in the production of a full-length theatrical script drawn from this research and grounded in public historical best practices.

## HISTORIOGRAPHY

In the immediate aftermath of the Jonestown Massacre in the late 1970s and early 1980s, information on the events in Jonestown was sparse. The American government performed few autopsies and none of the massacre's survivors had witnessed the murders or poisonings; survivors either escaped before the killings or hid. Therefore, the first wave of historians who studied the Peoples Temple and the Jonestown Massacre accepted the Federal government's assertion that the Jonestown Massacre was a mass suicide, and concluded that Jim Jones exacted total control over every member of the organization. This wave of writing, which persisted throughout the 1980s and 1990s, used terms like "brainwashing" and "mass madness" and focused fully on Jones's power.<sup>8</sup> Historian John Hall in his analysis of the historiography of the Peoples Temple, coins the term "atrocious tale," which describes an oversimplified perspective of the Jonestown Massacre where writers view the event as evil for evil's sake.<sup>9</sup> In my analysis, one of the most famous master narratives of the Peoples Temple, the biography of Jim Jones *Raven* by Tim Reiterman, could be considered one of Hall's "atrocious tales." For example, *Raven* contains the subtitle "The Untold Story of Rev. Jim Jones and His People," suggesting his interpretation that Jones had ownership over the Peoples Temple members. The earliest

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<sup>8</sup> D. Wilfred Abse, and Richard Barrett Ulman, "The Group Psychology of Mass Madness: Jonestown," *Political Psychology* 4, 4 (December 1983): 637-661; Halperin, "Group Processes," 13-24.

<sup>9</sup> John Hall, *Gone from the Promised Land* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1987), xxiii.



historiography of the Peoples Temple oversimplified Jones's role in influencing the actions of his followers.

Over time, as former Peoples Temple members published more accounts and as the FBI released more documents, the scholarship shifted away from the simplified explanations for the Jonestown Massacre. Since 2000, historical analysis has focused more on what attracted members to the Peoples Temple and how a racially and religiously diverse congregation could coexist in one organization. Scholars studied how Jim Jones's theology appealed to both theistic and atheistic members, and what caused the Peoples Temple to have a largely black general membership despite its white leader.<sup>10</sup> Though reliant on firsthand accounts and primary sources, nearly all analyses placed Jim Jones squarely at the center of the narrative at the expense of the membership's lived experiences.

Outside of historical scholarship, however, play and screenwriters have attempted to explore the Peoples Temple history in more complexity. Jonestown survivor Timothy Carter referenced the lack of focus on the Peoples Temple members while discussing a Peoples Temple play from 2005. He said “[the play was] the first thing that's ever been done where [Peoples Temple members] were portrayed as human beings.”<sup>11</sup> That play has only been produced two

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<sup>10</sup> Holly Folk, “Divine Materiality: Peoples Temple and Messianic Theologies of Incarnation and Reincarnation,” *Nova Religio* 22, 2; Stephan A. Kent, “House of Judah, the Northeast Kingdom Community, and 'the Jonestown Problem': Downplaying Child Physical Abuses and Ignoring Serious Evidence,” *International Journal of Cultic Studies* 1 (January 2010); Kristian D. Klippenstein, “Jones on Jesus: Who Is the Messiah?,” *International Journal of Cultic Studies* 5 (2015); Rebecca Moore, “The Erasure (and Re-inscription) of African Americans from the Jonestown Narrative,” *Communal Societies* 38, 2 (December 2018); Rebecca Moore, Anthony B. Pinn, and Mary R. Sawyer, *Peoples Temple and Black religion in America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004); Robin D. Willey, “Religion, Revisionists, and Revolutionary Suicide: A Marxist Framework for the Rise and Fall of Communal Religious Groups,” *International Journal of Cultic Studies* 4 (2013).

<sup>11</sup> Carter, “Remembering the People of the Peoples Temple,” 53:40, YouTube, [https://youtu.be/TU4e2b\\_TcDs?t=3220](https://youtu.be/TU4e2b_TcDs?t=3220).

times, once in 2006 and another time in 2011. Therefore, my thesis and public historical play build on the analysis of previous scholars to create a narrative of the Peoples Temple from a bottom-up perspective. By focusing on members' experiences and first-hand accounts, I build complex characters and decentralize the narrative away from Jim Jones. Rather than focusing on how members of the Peoples Temple viewed Jones specifically, the focus will be on how members of the Peoples Temple collectively viewed the organization and their role within it. This creates a more nuanced perspective on how the organization as a whole radicalized and progressed towards mass murder and suicide.

## THE GUIDING IDEOLOGIES OF THE PEOPLES TEMPLE

In order to understand what drew prospective members to the Peoples Temple, one must understand the broader social, religious, and ideological influences on the Peoples Temple and Jim Jones. The story of the Peoples Temple synthesizes multiple movements and ideologies in the United States throughout the twentieth century, most notably Father Divine's Peace Mission, the writings of Karl Marx, and the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Panther Party. The Peoples Temple philosophy revolved around a desire for racial and economic equality, and the total infallibility of Jim Jones. Hyacinth Thrash, who remained in the Peoples Temple from 1956 to 1978, recalled how "Jim got followers because he convinced them he was the only white man who cared about blacks."<sup>12</sup> Jones often evoked a shared understanding of racist treatment and behavior to unify his congregation. For example, in one sermon from 1972, Jones discussed how, when facing racism, "We all say in here, we're all niggers, or we wouldn't be here, white, black, and brown, we're all niggers."<sup>13</sup> Dr. Hugh Fortson, former Peoples Temple member, described

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<sup>12</sup> Thrash and Towne, *The Onliest One Alive*, 88

<sup>13</sup> Jim Jones, "Tape Q1021" (Sermon, August 1972), The Jonestown Institute, San Diego State University.

how Jones would “end up saying that what we need to do as poor black and white people [is] pool our moneys [*sic*] together and work together [to] build a brand new society where there will be no more racism.”<sup>14</sup> In accordance with the racial philosophy, Jones also incorporated socialist and Marxist ideas. Theologian Kristian Klippenstein described Jones’s early commitment to the collective corporation of members as “a sort of Social Gospel ideology couched in black-worship styling and civil-rights concerns.”<sup>15</sup> However, as time went on, and Jones amassed more centralized control over the organization, the Peoples Temple ideology shifted more towards communism. Jonestown, Guyana was a communist settlement, with communal supply centers and labor contributing to the supply of food and the living accommodations, with Jones acting as the sole leader.<sup>16</sup> Jones claimed authority by stating “If you want the power, you’d better get the dynamo, and the dynamo is God, is love, and love is socialism and that will give you power. Peoples Temple, and Jonestown.”<sup>17</sup> Therefore, members were attracted to Jones’s message of socialism and salvation, even as these messages radicalized over time.

Peoples Temple ideology was also shaped by 20th-century religious movements, such as Father Divine’s Peace Mission. Throughout the early 1900s, Father Divine, whose given name was George Baker, attracted a following of congregants who believed that he was God.<sup>18</sup> Many Peace Mission members believed that Baker could “protect them from misfortune.”<sup>19</sup> Baker, who adopted the aliases “the Messenger,” “Reverend Major Jealous Divine,” and ultimately “Father

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<sup>14</sup> Cindy Davis, Hue Fortson, and Whitney Montgomery “Jim Jones Massacre Survivor tells His story,” uploaded October 27, 2017, The Cindy Davis Show, Houston, TX, Youtube video, 6:23, <https://youtu.be/H-VGMoopL9I?t=383>.

<sup>15</sup> Klippenstein, “Jones on Jesus,” 35.

<sup>16</sup> Willey, “Religion, Revisionists, and Revolutionary Suicide,” 54; Hall, “Gone from the Promised Land,” 235-236.

<sup>17</sup> Klippenstein, “Jones on Jesus,” 42.

<sup>18</sup> Keith V. Erickson, “Black Messiah: The Father Divine Peace Mission Movement,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 63, 4 (1977): 429.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 437.

Divine” to match his claimed divinity, created a movement which endeavored to provide followers spiritual fulfillment and secular support systems, like free banquets for members.<sup>20</sup> According to some scholars, Divine’s social work movement, named the Peace Mission by members, claimed up to 500,000 members.<sup>21</sup> Following legal troubles in New York, Divine’s movement moved to Philadelphia and boasted a membership of only 10,000 people at most.<sup>22</sup>

In ways similar to many of the members of the Peace Mission, some Peoples Temple members believed that their leader, Jim Jones, also had divine powers. Their beliefs about Jones’s divinity were represented through one song with the lyrics “Praise your God for Jesus has come/ Buddha has come/ Father has come.”<sup>23</sup> This parallels the perspective of one former follower of Father Divine, Ruth Boaz, who discussed how she used to tell people “‘without a shadow of a doubt’ that Father Divine was God.”<sup>24</sup> Jonestown Massacre survivor Hyacinth Thrash felt similarly about Jones, even after his death. Despite not believing in Jones’s godhood, Thrash did believe that Jones’s faith healing was responsible for healing her cancer, her broken leg, and her niece’s uterine tumor.<sup>25</sup> Even twenty-two years after the Jonestown Massacre when Thrash’s autobiography was published, she believed that Jones “could’ve been a prophet.”<sup>26</sup> Ironically, Thrash viewed Father Divine as the corrupting force which tainted Jones’s divine powers, as she thought Jones became focused on “power and riches” after his return from the Peace Mission.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Jill Watts, *God, Harlem U.S.A : The Father Divine Story* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 27, 48; Erickson, “Black Messiah,” 429-430.

<sup>21</sup> Watts, *God, Harlem U.S.A.*, 87; Erickson, “Black Messiah,” 429.

<sup>22</sup> Watts, *God, Harlem U.S.A.*, 166; Erickson, “Black Messiah,” 430.

<sup>23</sup> Jim Jones, “Tape Q956” (Sermon, September 30, 1973), The Jonestown Institute, San Diego State University.

<sup>24</sup> Ruth Boaz, “My 30 Years with Father Divine,” *Ebony* 20, 7 (May, 1965): 90.

<sup>25</sup> Thrash and Towne, *The Onliest One Alive*, 79.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 53

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, 57.

The Peoples Temple also embraced bureaucratic structure from Father Divine’s Peace Mission, which allowed some members to possess different levels of information about the inner-workings of the organization. Due to the size of their membership—the Peoples Temple membership peaked at 20,000 people, while the Peace Mission numbered well above 100,000—both organizations embraced bureaucracy more than most grass-roots religious groups of the time.<sup>28</sup> Father Divine’s movement had a loose structure, with Father Divine firmly at the top. Members of his innermost circle were called “Angels” (a term Jones adopted for the Peoples Temple as well), and Divine’s general residents lived in gendered housing and worked as part of the community.<sup>29</sup> Some members even donated their homes to the Peace Mission. Jones implemented a similar hierarchy in the Peoples Temple, which stratified general membership. For example, Hyacinth Thrash discussed how she and her sister moved to Ukiah, California to buy a house to create a retiree care home affiliated with the Peoples Temple.<sup>30</sup> Eventually (with the help of Timothy Stoen), Jones convinced Zipporah and Hyacinth to sign over their house to the Peoples Temple.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, the Peoples Temple bureaucracy allowed Jones to easily divide his organization based on what information they received. For example, inner circle member Deborah Layton recounts how she used pseudonyms to open multiple bank accounts for the Peoples Temple in multiple different countries at the behest of Jim Jones.<sup>32</sup> In contrast, Timothy Carter discussed how he and other Peoples Temple members sacrificed their own comfort to as to not waste Peoples Temple funds on any perceived luxuries, only to find out that the

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<sup>28</sup> C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, “Daddy Jones and Father Divine: The Cult as Political Religion,” in *Peoples Temple and Black Religion in America*, ed. Rebecca Moore, Anthony B. Pinn, and Mary R. Sawyer (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 40, ProQuest Ebook Central.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid; Watts, *God, Harlem U.S.A.*, 102.

<sup>30</sup> Thrash and Towne, *The Onliest One Alive*, 63-64.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 75-76.

<sup>32</sup> Deborah Layton, *Seductive Poison* (New York: Anchor Books, 1998), 92-93.

organization allegedly had \$23 million across multiple foreign bank accounts.<sup>33</sup> The fragmentation of information acted as a control tactic, allowing some members to amass financial fortunes, while others struggled to make ends meet because they believed that the organization was financially struggling.

Many members were attracted to the Peoples Temple because it allowed them to seek community and belonging through a blend of Christianity and socialism. For example, former Peoples Temple lawyer Timothy Stoen stated that he felt drawn to the organization as “the only way to fight effectively for total equality would be as part of a group.”<sup>34</sup> Similarly, Deborah Layton discussed how the aspect which drew her to the organization was being a member of “a respectable group . . . that was helping the needy, the poor, and the underprivileged.”<sup>35</sup> Members who joined because of their passion for social justice or a desire for faith healing would then hear socialist and communist ideas discussed in the context of the apostles, a blend of Christianity and socialism known as apostolic socialism.<sup>36</sup> Other members noticed that Jones used veiled Christian teachings to entice people to join. Jones would advertise healing services to the average Christian and then preach at them “relentlessly [about] his utopian socialist vision of total equality.”<sup>37</sup> These strategies worked. By 1978, many members of the Peoples Temple in Jonestown were able to repeat socialistic ideas when asked what they would do on the final White Night (a name for the Jonestown suicide drills). In a document entitled “What I Would Do If There Was a Final White Night,” fifteen general members of the Peoples Temple mentioned

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<sup>33</sup> Carter, “Remembering the People of the Peoples Temple,” [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TU4e2b\\_TcDs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TU4e2b_TcDs), 24:50.

<sup>34</sup> Timothy Stoen, *Marked for Death* (self published, 2015), 62.

<sup>35</sup> Layton, *Seductive Poison*, 51.

<sup>36</sup> Holly Folk, “Divine Materiality.”

<sup>37</sup> Stoen, *Marked for Death*, 93

socialism by name, some younger than sixteen years old.<sup>38</sup> Those who entered the Peoples Temple with socialistic tendencies were welcomed, while those who were not yet leftists became accustomed to the idea.

The Peoples Temple reputation as a diverse, interracial congregation helped motivate many people interested in racial equality to join and stay. Jones first built this reputation in his integrationist actions in Indianapolis, but these methods grew as time progressed. Both Hyacinth Thrash and Timothy Carter recalled offhand how Jim Jones became Indianapolis Human rights commissioner, which happened in 1961.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, Carter discussed how Jones integrated a hospital in Indianapolis, further building a reputation as a Civil Rights advocate.<sup>40</sup> Journalist Tim Reiterman, however, challenges this claim by asserting that Jones ended up in a black ward by clerical error and capitalized on the mistake to further his reputation.<sup>41</sup> Regardless, the group's reputation as an interracial organization grew. Peoples Temple assistant pastor Ross Case first became interested in the Peoples Temple in the 1950s, when he heard about how they acted upon Christian teachings through internationalist action.<sup>42</sup> Similarly, former member Jeannie Mills recounted her first experience with the Peoples Temple in 1970. She discussed how "instead of thinking about the puzzling miracles, I was recalling the beauty of black and white people living together without any barriers between them."<sup>43</sup> This trend of racial unity appealing to members continued into the last few years of the Peoples Temple. Timothy Stoen recalled how in 1977

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<sup>38</sup> Memo entitled "What I Would Do If There Was A Final White Night," by Rita Lenin (Rita Tupper) to Jim Jones, 1977 or 1978, The Jonestown Institute, San Diego State University.

<sup>39</sup> Thrash and Towne, *The Onliest One Alive*, 50; Letter entitled "Appointment of Jim Jones to Indianapolis Human Rights Commission," by Charles Boswell to Jim Jones, 1961, The Jonestown Institute, San Diego State University.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Tim Reiterman, *Raven* (New York: Penguin Press, 1982), 75-76.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 67; Jeff Guinn, *The Road to Jonestown* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018), 96-97

<sup>43</sup> Mills, *Six Years with God*, 127.

black Peoples Temple member Debbie Ijames Touchette chose to go to Jonestown because she hoped to never hear the “n-word” slur ever again.<sup>44</sup> Overall, The Peoples Temple synthesized multiple ideologies and movements as a means to entice new members and keep them devoted to the experience.

The ideology of the Peoples Temple also drew from the Civil Rights Movement, most notably Black Panther party founder Huey Newton’s concept of Revolutionary Suicide. The adaptation and distortion of this idea in Peoples Temple doctrine became the most explicit justification of mass murder and suicide in Jonestown. In his autobiography *Revolutionary Suicide*, Newton describes the action of revolutionary suicide as “when reactionary forces crush [revolutionaries], [they] must move against these forces, even at the risk of death.”<sup>26</sup> Essentially, to Newton, people who fight against their oppressors must accept the risk of death to be truly revolutionary. Jim Jones and many of his inner circle members misrepresented the meaning of revolutionary suicide while in Jonestown, eliding their experiences as members of a persecuted religious group as equivalent to the racist and oppressive treatment of Black Americans at the hands of the United States government. In one of the suicide drills, called White Nights, Jones referenced Huey Newton and then discussed his conception of Revolutionary Suicide as “an act of giving yourself – if it even sacrifices yourself – to bring down the corrupt racist capitalist system.”<sup>27</sup>

Many Peoples Temple members felt drawn to the concept of Revolutionary Suicide. Planning Commission member Carolyn Layton discussed in a memo how “If there were a good way to insure the deaths of everyone I would consider it about the best alternative in that all

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<sup>44</sup> Stoen, *Marked for Death*, 22.



would be spared who wanted to from live [*sic*].”<sup>45</sup> Despite not mentioning the term “revolutionary suicide,” Layton echoes Jones’s desire to kill everyone in Jonestown for a socialist cause. Similarly, in the memo titled “What I Would Do If There Was A Final White Night,” sixteen respondents express a desire to commit “revolutionary suicide” by name, with one being a fourteen-year-old child.<sup>46</sup> The term “revolutionary suicide” expanded beyond a buzzword Jones used, as multiple members of the Peoples Temple expressed desires to act on it. In an affidavit she submitted six months prior to the Jonestown Massacre, Deborah Layton described the how she viewed mass suicide in Jonestown, stating “There was constant talk of death... In Jonestown, the concept of mass suicide for socialism arose. Because our lives were so wretched anyway and because we were so afraid to contradict Rev. Jones, the concept was not challenged.”<sup>47</sup> Later on in her affidavit, Layton begs the United States government to act, as she believed the citizens of Jonestown were in danger.<sup>48</sup> Jim Jones adopted a term coined by a Black Panther about risking life to improve society, and distorted the term to become a justification for mass death, like the Jonestown Massacre. Some Peoples Temple members embraced it, whether because of a genuine commitment to the cause or by sheer exhaustion. The final words on the audio “death tape” documenting the Jonestown Massacre, often cited as the last words of the organization as a whole, were as follows: “We committed an act of revolutionary suicide protesting the conditions of an inhumane world.”<sup>49</sup>

## MEMBERS’ STORIES: INTRODUCTION

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<sup>45</sup> Carolyn Layton, *Analysis Of Future Prospects*, 1978.

<sup>46</sup> “What I Would Do If There Was A Final White Night,” by Rita Lenin (Rita Tupper).

<sup>47</sup> Deborah Layton, *Affidavit of Deborah Layton Blakey*, June 1978, RYMUR 89-4286-B-2-d-3, The Jonestown Institute, San Diego State University.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> Jim Jones, “Tape Q042” (Audio Tape, November 18, 1978), The Jonestown Institute, San Diego State University.

Peoples Temple members joined the organization and stayed for a variety of reasons. When read together, their contrasting experiences within the same organization demonstrate “experiential pluralism,” a concept described by historian Holly Folk in her examination of Peoples Temple theology.<sup>50</sup> Experiential pluralism describes how a religious movement can be “intrinsically heterogeneous,” where different members hold different views on the same group experience, both secular and religious.<sup>51</sup> The following section examines the stories of Hyacinth Thrash, Deborah Layton, and the Stoen family to illustrate the radicalization of the Peoples Temple over their twenty-two year history from a bottom up perspective, using Holly Folk’s “experiential pluralist” lens as a way to asserts members’ particular roles in the organization’s development and settlement in Jonestown.

When we compare and contrast the experiences of Hyacinth, Deborah Layton, and the Stoen family, we see experiential pluralism at work in the group. For example, Hyacinth Thrash genuinely believed that Jim Jones cured her cancerous tumor and that he was a prophet.<sup>52</sup> In comparison, Deborah Layton recounted a conversation with Jones in which he quoted Karl Marx, saying that they needed to use socialist teachings to help those “drugged by the opiate of religion.”<sup>53</sup> The Stoen family also displays how non-religious members of the Peoples Temple could overlook or ignore certain religious aspects of the Peoples Temple. Timothy Stoen vigorously committed himself to the group for social and political reasons; he was unmoved by any of the divine miracles of the organization. Stoen did not believe in the faith healing, but it

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<sup>50</sup> Folk, “Divine Materiality,” 19.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Thrash and Towne, *The Onliest One Alive*, 79; Ibid, 53.

<sup>53</sup> Layton, *Seductive Poison*, 53; Karl Marx, *Critique of Hegel's 'Philosophy Of Right'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), 1.

did not bother him as it was, in his mind, “secondary” to the political goals of the organization.<sup>54</sup> Through differences in information and ideology, one person could believe that Jim Jones was a religious prophet while other people believed Jones was a socialist leader.

#### MEMBERS’ STORIES: HYACINTH THRASH

Hyacinth Thrash, born in Alabama in 1905, witnessed nearly the entire history of the Peoples Temple. She and her sister Zipporah were members from 1957 to the Jonestown Massacre in 1978. Hyacinth felt connected to the community of the church and its ideology, from Christian teachings to racial equality. Early on, Hyacinth's Christian beliefs aligned with Jones's teachings. For example, Hyacinth recalled how Jones would speak in tongues and, despite some finding it absurd, she defended the practice saying “Some folks think it’s foolishness, but I spoke in tongues when I come up out of the water on my second baptism [with Jim Jones]. It’s evidence of the Holy Ghost.”<sup>55</sup> Hyacinth also felt enthralled with Jones’s faith healings, feeling that his powers were similar to her own. In her view, “God laid his hand on mine when I was seven years old, but I just didn’t cultivate my gift [like Jones did].”<sup>56</sup> She admired healing services and felt like she saw him heal people with his own hands.<sup>57</sup>

However, Hyacinth did not blindly follow Jones, especially as he radicalized and moved away from Christianity in the 1960s and 1970s. She discussed how she refused to call him “Father” like many of the other members, stating that “Well, I knew he wasn’t God, ‘cause [*sic*] God is a Spirit, but you couldn’t tell him that.”<sup>58</sup> Hyacinth believed that the turning point, where Jones “got the wrong Spirit,” came with his first visit with Father Divine, which occurred in

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<sup>54</sup> Stoen, *Marked for Death*, 67.

<sup>55</sup> Thrash and Towne, *The Onliest One Alive*, 48-49.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*, 50.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid*, 100.

1959.<sup>59</sup> Thrash recalled how associate preacher Archie Ijames “pleaded with Jim not to visit Father Divine” and called him “crooked.”<sup>60</sup> After this, Hyacinth perceived Jones as greedier and claimed that when trying faith healing he “didn’t have the power any more.”<sup>61</sup> Despite this theological divide, Hyacinth remained in the Peoples Temple for another 19 years.

One of the reasons Hyacinth Thrash seemed to remain in the Peoples Temple was the interracial community she found there. She was drawn to the Peoples Temple when Jones and twelve other Peoples Temple members “came, held our hands, and had prayer,” which Hyacinth described as “wonderful.”<sup>62</sup> Furthermore, Hyacinth explained why she and Zipporah decided to follow Jones to California in the mid 1960s. The Thrash sisters wanted to purchase a care home for retirees in the Redwood Valley.<sup>63</sup> Essentially, the thing that brought them to California was community service. Community kept Hyacinth within the organization, despite the group’s increasing radicalization. For example, Hyacinth felt uncomfortable talking to Zipporah about any issues shew had, as “she really trusted in [sic] Jim.”<sup>64</sup> Also, Hyacinth recalled a story in Jonestown, where she connected with another member over their shared discontentment with Jones. Thrash said that she did not feel as if she was in danger and laughed with her friend about Jones’s seeming insanity.<sup>65</sup> Overall, the Peoples Temple meant more to Hyacinth than merely Jim Jones and his teachings. She joined and stayed because the group offered a community, to which she dedicated twenty years of her life to serving. Therefore, Hyacinth Thrash’s story is one example of the variety of membership experiences within the Peoples Temple. Her story

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid, 57; Jim Jones, *Pastor Jones Meets Rev. M. J. Divine* (Indianapolis: The Peoples Temple, 1959), RYMUR 89-4286-BB-17-O-1 – BB-17-O-33, The Jonestown Institute, San Diego State University, 4.

<sup>60</sup> Thrash and Towne, *The Onliest One Alive*, 57.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 63.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 64.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 68.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid, 102.

reveals that some members were drawn to the group because of Jones's religious teachings and that the community derived from the group held their interest, despite the group's radicalization in the 1970s.

#### MEMBERS' STORIES: DEBORAH LAYTON

In contrast, Deborah Layton saw the Peoples Temple as a social organization that “help[ed] the needy, the poor, and the underprivileged.”<sup>66</sup> She joined the organization in 1971, immediately after finishing her secondary education, at the recommendation of her brother Larry (who had joined in 1969).<sup>67</sup> In one conversation, Deborah's sister-in-law Carolyn described their rationale for participating in the Peoples Temple stating, “We are not really a church, but a socialist organization.”<sup>68</sup> By 1974, Deborah and Larry's mother also joined, making the Laytons' experience in the group largely a family affair. Deborah's close family ties to the Peoples Temple, grounded in their commitment to socialism, made defection particularly difficult as the group grew increasingly radical in the 1970s. When Deborah left the organization in 1978, she had trepidations surrounding how her family might be manipulated in response to her defection.<sup>69</sup> To leave the Peoples Temple was to leave all the social connections she made in her adult life.

Deborah's continued membership within the Peoples Temple was also shaped by the significant emotional and physical abuse that Jim Jones subjected her to, which warped her perspective of reality. The American Psychological Association defines gaslighting as the

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<sup>66</sup> Layton, *Seductive Poison*, 51.

<sup>67</sup> Layton, *Seductive Poison*, 31, 50; Rebecca Moore, *A Sympathetic History of Jonestown* (Lewison: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1985), xv.

<sup>68</sup> Layton, *Seductive Poison*, 85.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid*, 250-251.

manipulation of “another person into doubting his or her perceptions, experiences, or understanding of events.”<sup>70</sup> Deborah recalled being “yelled at, spit on, and humiliated” for hours at a time, because Jones considered her too close to her family.<sup>71</sup> Jones stated that he targeted her to boost her “inner strength” and that he did not want to “play favorites.” Deborah thanked him for being abused.<sup>72</sup> Over time, this abuse worsened. Deborah recounted how she was sexually harassed and then raped by Jones in his bus. She described how “fear and humiliation drowned out coherent thoughts.”<sup>73</sup> She recalled that Jones raped her on multiple occasions, later shaming her publicly in front of group leaders for having sex with him.<sup>74</sup>

Deborah Layton was not alone in her abuse. Annie Moore suffered a similar ritual when Jones forced her to publicly recount the reasons she “begged Jim for sex.” Similarly, in 1973, Jim Jones falsely accused Wayne Pietila of pedophilia during a Planning Commission meeting.<sup>75</sup> One might wonder why the Peoples Temple abuse victims found it difficult to escape Jim Jones. The California Office of Emergency Services domestic violence handbook states, “Victims usually do not have any place to go where they will be safe from the abuser. Because of the ongoing history of the abusive relationship, the abuser knows all of the victim’s options and can follow the victim there. It takes money, a support network, and time for detailed planning to ensure that a victim can escape.”<sup>76</sup> Escape can be particularly difficult for those who severed family ties as a sacrifice to the organization. For members who were financially or physically able to escape, defection often proved equally as dangerous as death. Overall, the toll of

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<sup>70</sup> “Gaslight,” Dictionary, American Psychological Association, <https://dictionary.apa.org/gaslight>.

<sup>71</sup> Layton, *Seductive Poison*, 64.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid, 73

<sup>74</sup> Ibid, 79-80.

<sup>75</sup> Reiterman, *Raven*, 222.

<sup>76</sup> The San Diego County District Attorney’s Office, *It Shouldn’t Hurt to Go Home* (San Diego: The San Diego County District Attorney’s Office, April 2019).

Deborah's psychological and physical abuse persisted well past Jim Jones's death. Following the Jonestown Massacre, she still questioned whether Jones could find a way to harm her beyond the grave. This parallels the experience of Hyacinth Thrash, as she recounted how another survivor expressed that he still feared Jones's powers after his death.<sup>77</sup>

#### MEMBERS' STORIES: THE STOEN FAMILY

Throughout the late 1960s, up-and-coming San Francisco lawyer Timothy Stoen was struck by the Peoples Temple's reputation as an influential social group. He recounted "a moment that would replay in [his] mind for years," when Jim Jones kissed an elderly black woman on the cheek at a picnic.<sup>78</sup> In 1969, Timothy Stoen joined the organization to serve as their lawyer, seeing them as his "personal agency for social justice."<sup>79</sup> During the late 1960s, Timothy courted and eventually proposed to Grace Grech, and the couple were married in 1970s at the Peoples Temple.<sup>80</sup> Grace Stoen never fully believed in the organization or in Jim Jones, telling her husband that she did not want to return to the organization. Yet with some convincing from Jones's wife Marceline, she decided to stay in the organization.<sup>81</sup> In 1971, Grace became pregnant with Timothy and Grace's son, John Victor, who was born on January 26, 1972.<sup>82</sup> Jim Jones claimed paternity of John Victor soon after the child's birth, and because Timothy Stoen "could not fathom a good person saying such a thing if it were not true," he signed a document verifying Jones's paternity.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Thrash and Towne, *The Onliest One Alive*, 113.

<sup>78</sup> Stoen, *Marked for Death*, 51

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>80</sup> Stoen, *Marked for Death*, 80; Hall, *Gone from the Promised Land*, 67.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 81; Hall, *Gone from the Promised Land*, 67.

<sup>82</sup> Hall, *Gone from the Promised Land*, 127.

<sup>83</sup> Stoen, *Marked for Death*, 85.

As the years went on, Stoen became Jones's collaborator in fighting for social justice and expanding Peoples Temple influence. Within three weeks of joining, Stoen encouraged Jones to change the name of his political leanings from apostolic socialism to simply "socialism", as Stoen felt that was more accurate.<sup>84</sup> More significantly, he played a major role in helping the group migrate to new areas in response to criticism from the media and government. In 1973, following the defection of eight college-aged Peoples Temple members and the rising paranoia in the organization caused by the Watergate Scandal, Stoen spearheaded the effort for the Peoples Temple to establish a "retreat" in Jonestown, Guyana.<sup>85</sup> The group finally relocated there in 1977, following years of preparation.<sup>86</sup> Even as things got more complicated with Jones, Timothy claimed to still believe in the group's mission. Though he defected in 1977, he wrote to Jones, "May the goals we share be realized in Jonestown."<sup>87</sup> Timothy Stoen did not merely join and become impassioned with the Peoples Temple, rather he became a central cog in the machine, making choices and providing expertise which made him one of the most powerful people in the organization.

Grace Stoen, on the other hand, did not share her husband's investment in the group, despite her significant involvement. Grace agreed with Jones's social positions, yet felt disgusted by his faith healing and his requests for money.<sup>88</sup> According to Timothy, after they were married by the Peoples Temple, Grace stated that she did not want to return to Peoples Temple.<sup>89</sup> However, Timothy recounted how Jonestown helped change Grace's mind, as a visit to the

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid, 100-102.

<sup>86</sup> Hall, *Gone from the Promised Land*, 204-206.

<sup>87</sup> Letter from Timothy Stoen to Jim Jones, November 17, 1977, RYMUR 89-4286-BB-31-a-44 – BB-31-a-45, The Jonestown Institute, San Diego State University.

<sup>88</sup> Guinn, *The Road to Jonestown*, 226; Reiterman, *Raven*, 109.

<sup>89</sup> Stoen, *Marked for Death*, 81.



prospective socialist utopia prompted her to become more involved in the organization.<sup>90</sup> Grace felt that she was “never under Jones’s spell.”<sup>91</sup>

Yet, the Peoples Temple community kept Grace committed to the cause. As her marriage with Timothy deteriorated, she found comfort in another Peoples Temple member, Walter Jones.<sup>92</sup> More significantly, Grace’s son John Victor, was raised communally, with Jim Jones claiming paternity. Both Grace Stoen and Carolyn Layton (one of Jones mistresses) raised him.<sup>93</sup> John Victor became an anchor for Grace Stoen, forcing her to remain connected with the organization.

Grace felt forced to leave John Victor behind when she defected in 1976, with one source stating that she feared Jones might kill John Victor if she tried to take him.<sup>94</sup> The custody battle over John Victor kept Grace within the orbit of the Peoples Temple, as she continued to fight for custody of her son until the day of the Jonestown Massacre.<sup>95</sup> John Victor Stoen was one of the 918 people who died in Guyana on November 18, 1978.<sup>96</sup> Grace Stoen was not brainwashed by Jim Jones; she invested herself in a cause she believed in and then remained tied to the organization through social and familial connections.

## MEMBERS’ STORIES: CONCLUSION

These members’ stories recounted above illustrate how, despite red flags and negative experiences, members remained in the Peoples Temple until the end. The Thrashes, Laytons, and

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid, 110.

<sup>91</sup> “Grace Stoen's story: Never under Jones' spell,” *The Boston Globe*, November 18, 1979, 2.

<sup>92</sup> Stoen, *Marked for Death*, 110.

<sup>93</sup> Guinn, *The Road to Jonestown*, 301; Hall, *Gone from the Promised Land*, 128.

<sup>94</sup> Reiterman, *Raven*, 287; Guinn, *The Road to Jonestown*, 325.

<sup>95</sup> Hall, *Gone from the Promised Land*, 287.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

Stoens all believed in the organization they joined and committed themselves to. They had individual agency of their choices to join, stay, and defect. Overall, the Peoples Temple members consistently proved themselves to be more than merely followers of Jim Jones. Each story reveals that the reason members remained in the organization are more complex than a simply story of Jim Jones, the “mass manipulator.” Jonestown massacre survivor Timothy Carter, in a lecture at Bucknell University, criticized the narrative of brainwashing. He recounts the story that in September 1977 Jim Jones asked his followers whether they wanted to commit “revolutionary suicide.” Only three people raised their hand to say yes.<sup>97</sup> As such, Peoples Temple members were not simply brainwashed. They remained in the organization for a cause they believed in, for community, and for family.

## THEATRICAL METHODOLOGY

Throughout this project, I have used theatrical and playwriting strategies to frame my historical research and to produce a history of the Peoples Temple from the bottom up. To begin the playwriting process, I outlined the play as a whole and created a timeline of the Peoples Temple from its birth in 1956 to its end in 1978. From there, I wrote specific scenes, drawing from primary sources such as five autobiographies, two texts based in interviews from Peoples Temple survivors, and many letters, legal documents, diaries, and tapes created during the Peoples Temple’s lifespan. I strived to write scenes that felt authentic and forced a deep analysis of each primary source. I intended for my scenes to be shaped by the historical context of the source and the emotional and mental state of the historical actor.

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<sup>97</sup> Carter, “Remembering the People of the Peoples Temple,” [https://youtu.be/TU4e2b\\_TcDs?t=1189](https://youtu.be/TU4e2b_TcDs?t=1189).

I grounded my theatrical approach in the best practices of the public history field, drawing upon works such as public historian David Dean's "Theatre: A Neglected Side of Public History," historians David Kyvig and Myron Marty's *Nearby History*, historian Thomas Cauvin's *Public History a Textbook of Practice*, and public historian Nina Simon's *The Participatory Museum*.<sup>98</sup> Dean's "Theatre: A Neglected Side of Public History" played a major role in the early conception of this piece. Dean conducted a series of online audience survey's from after productions of Canadian historical play *Vinny*.<sup>99</sup> Dean reports that in his research, he observed that "the immediacy of the theatre was perhaps the most important achievement," as the physical proximity of the art to the audience metaphorically bridged the gap between the audience and the history.<sup>100</sup> This sentiment parallels the perspective of Peoples Temple survivor Timothy Carter, who expressed that "because of the nature of the stage, it's impossible for people to divorce themselves from the characters."<sup>101</sup> The effect of theatre where the audience relates to and connect with the people in front of them can help decentralize the perspectives of the audience. Rather than hyper focusing on Jim Jones, viewers may connect with the actors and characters in front of them and allow that to characterize their perspective of the Peoples Temple. However, Dean also expressed a drawback with theatre he observed in his survey. Only 7% of respondents found theatre "very trustworthy," with 53% of respondents admitting it depends on the work and the author.<sup>102</sup> Therefore, one of the main challenges I faced existed outside of the

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<sup>98</sup> Thomas Cauvin, *Public History A Textbook of Practice* (New York City, New York: Routledge, 2016); David Dean, "Theatre: A Neglected Site of Public History?," *The Public Historian* 34 (Summer 2012); David Kyvig and Myron Marty, *Nearby History: Exploring the Past Around You* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2010); Nina Simon, *The Participatory Museum* (Museum 2.0, 2010)

<sup>99</sup> David Dean, "Theatre: A Neglected Site of Public History," 30.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid, 34.

<sup>101</sup> Carter, "Remembering the People of the Peoples Temple," [https://youtu.be/TU4e2b\\_TcDs?t=3228](https://youtu.be/TU4e2b_TcDs?t=3228), 53:48.

<sup>102</sup> David Dean, "Theatre: A Neglected Site of Public History," 36.

theater, for audiences to trust my work I must prove to them I am worth trusting. That is why, in the annotated script, every scene contains explicit citations and historical context, allowing anyone working on or observing the piece at this stage to understand the historical methodology. Also, this issue will require contextualization if the show is produced next year. Potential solutions to prove the historic validity of my piece could be containing a description of the project in the program, having a QR code which links to a bibliography for the play and paper, or giving a director's speech which outlines the public historical aims of the project.

As the project continues, I intend to continue using historical methodology to ensure the full production adheres to the best practices of Public History. For example, in *The Participatory Museum*, public historian Nina Simon describes how people tend to like diverse forms of interactivity in social sites.<sup>103</sup> According to Simon, interaction exists on a scale from mostly individual to communal level, from consuming a piece of content to socially engaging with others.<sup>104</sup> In my proposal to the Suffolk University Theatre Department 2021-2022 season, I discussed potential avenues for immersion and interaction, like having the exterior of the theater being decorated like the audience are attending a Peoples Temple service. There could also be a talk back after performances to allow for audiences to engage in a social manner without compromising the play itself. While I want interaction to be a central part of the overall experience, I do not want interaction to compromise the theatricality of the experience. My perspective on this shared experience parallels historian Thomas Cauvin's perspective on "shared authority."<sup>105</sup> While he discusses this concept in the context of sharing authority with the communities whose stories are being told, his insights can also be adapted to guide the

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<sup>103</sup> Simon, *The Participatory Museum*, 8.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>105</sup> Cauvin, *Public History A Textbook of Practice*, 216.

interactivity. Cauvin discusses how “sharing authority does not mean historians should give up critical analysis of the past,” meaning that the historian should not cede all authority to those involved in the history.<sup>106</sup> I interpret this approach to mean that I must not sacrifice my historical insights or public historical vision in order to maximize interaction with the audience.

The play focuses on the accounts of surviving Peoples Temple members—the majority of whom were white. The majority of people in the upper ranks of the Peoples Temple were white and the vast majority of deaths during the Jonestown Massacre were black people, mostly black women.<sup>107</sup> I realized that the paucity of source material from surviving members of color could bias the play toward white perspectives. To combat this interpretive predicament, I foregrounded the surviving black perspectives, including Hyacinth Thrash’s autobiography and Odell Rhodes’s account of his escape from Jonestown. Also, I pieced together information from multiple sources referencing black members to try and create a coherent narrative. For example, while black defector Jim Cobb Jr. Never wrote an autobiography and stepped away from the public eye, historian Tim Reiterman managed to conduct an interview with in 1977, making the references to this interview in Reiterman's work *Raven* the closest record to a primary source on Cobb’s life that historian can access.<sup>108</sup> Also, I incorporate the analysis of black scholars, allowing their words and analyses to contextualize the Peoples Temple story within the play itself.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid, 221.

<sup>107</sup> Rebecca Moore, “The Erasure (and Re-inscription) of African Americans from the Jonestown Narrative,” *Communal Societies* 38, 2 (December 2018): 167, 170.

<sup>108</sup> Reiterman, *Raven*, 119-129.

<sup>109</sup> C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, “Daddy Jones and Father Divine: The Cult as Political Religion,” in *Peoples Temple and Black Religion in America*, ed. Rebecca Moore, Anthony B. Pinn, and Mary R. Sawyer (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 40, ProQuest Ebook Central; As the work expands in anticipation of a production in Spring 2022, I intend to significantly increase representation of people of color as outlined.

The play's dialogue is drawn almost entirely from primary source documentation or secondary accounts of conversations. This helps me limit the fictionalization of dialogue and protects against writing misinformed accounts of how historical actors might have behaved. When I must fictionalize dialogue, I do so to introduce a scene (with actors acting as narrators) or to contextualize a conversation recounted by a historical actor. For example, no comprehensive interview with Grace Stoen exists. Therefore, all scenes recounting her story piece together snippets about her life from the autobiographies and interviews of other survivors (including her ex-husband Timothy Stoen).<sup>110</sup>

As for the scenes chosen for the play, my objective was to combine the significant events in the history of the Peoples Temple with smaller moments and personal perspectives. For example, the story of the first major defection in Peoples Temple history can be partially told via two characters going to grab lunch. This allows me to humanize these characters as they live out the banal, daily tasks familiar to the audience. In addition, I sought to separate the play's perspective entirely from the story of Jim Jones. In multiple accounts of the Peoples Temple, from biographies to TV miniseries to plays, Jim Jones always plays the role of a central and major character.<sup>111</sup> In the only other play on the Peoples Temple, *The Peoples Temple* by Leigh Fondakowski, the character of Jim Jones cuts off lines of dialogue with his sermons and is represented by a pair of sunglasses, which other characters wear, causing them to embody Jim

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<sup>110</sup> Stoen, *Marked for Death*, 125-127; Mills, *Six Years with God*, 47-48; Reiterman, *Raven*, 286-287; Hall, *Gone from the Promised Land*, 180-181.

<sup>111</sup> Reiterman, *Raven*; Guinn, *Road to Jonestown*; Leigh Fondakowski, *The Peoples Temple* (Minneapolis: The Guthrie Theater, 2006); *Heaven Down Here*, written and composed by Andrew Jamieson,, First Congregational Church of Oakland, CA, recorded June 28, 2014, Youtube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=coeGH1ZXFCA&t=3286s>; *Guyana Tragedy*, directed by William Graham, written by Ernest Tidyman, featuring Powers Booth, James Earl Jones, and Veronica Cartwright, aired January 5, 1982, on CBS, Youtube.

Jones.<sup>112</sup> In my play, however, Jones acts more as a force outside of the central narrative. To prohibit Jones from taking total control of scenes, he is only allowed speak if contextualizing scenes or when invited to speak by other actors. While I do not want to imply that Jim Jones was insignificant in the Peoples Temple, his story has been told enough, often at the expense of the stories of the victims and survivors.

## CONCLUSION

The Jonestown Massacre was the largest intentional killing of American civilians in a single day prior to the September 11, 2001 attacks.<sup>113</sup> In the 20 years since the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks, the tragedy became a cultural touchstone and one of the most infamous events in American History. Yet our cultural memory of the Jonestown Massacre remains shrouded in salacious stories of cult behavior and suicide. We continue to flippantly use the phrase “drinking the Kool-Aid,” referring to the cyanide-laced Flavor Aid drank at Jonestown, but we refrain from discussing 9/11 in such casual terms. Former Peoples Temple member Mickey Touchette considered the “drinking the Kool-Aid” phrase as “insulting, disrespectful, and slurs the memories of our loved ones.”<sup>114</sup> The 9/11 tragedy has received multiple theatrical and filmic treatments, including an acclaimed musical on Broadway, *Come from Away*. But the Jonestown Massacre chamber opera *Heaven Down Here* has only twenty views on YouTube, at the time this paper was written.<sup>115</sup> This demonstrates public historians still have a long way to go to ensure

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<sup>112</sup> Fondakowski, *The Peoples Temple*, 12.

<sup>113</sup> J Oliver Conroy, “An apocalyptic cult, 900 dead: remembering the Jonestown massacre, 40 years on,” *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/nov/17/an-apocalyptic-cult-900-dead-remembering-the-jonestown-massacre-40-years-on>.

<sup>114</sup> Mickey Touchette, “Eradicating an Expression, One Step at a Time,” *Alternative Considerations of Jonestown & Peoples Temple*, San Diego State University, last modified on November 15th, 2013, [https://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page\\_id=29423](https://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=29423).

<sup>115</sup> *Heaven Down Here*, Andrew Jamieson, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=coeGH1ZXFCA&t=3286s\\_](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=coeGH1ZXFCA&t=3286s_)

that the Jonestown Massacre is treated fairly and evaluated in its complexity in our cultural interpretations.

Studying the historical complexity of the Peoples Temple members' experiences dispels any illusion that their stories are nothing more than "atrocious tales" wrought by a charismatic leader who controlled his servile congregants.<sup>116</sup> My research and theatrical interpretation of the Peoples Temple incorporates scholarship on multiple social and religious movements, and examines primary source records detailing the lives of scores of members. As you have read, this thesis argued Peoples Temple members remained in the organization despite the radicalization of the organization due to family, community, and a genuine belief in the organization's mission. This paper also discussed the historiography of the Peoples Temple, where academic articles and mass media alike have attributed the Peoples Temple's history solely to the excessive authority of leader Jim Jones at the expense of the members of the organization. Finally, this paper outlined the theatrical aspect of this project and the future aspirations for the play within and outside of academia.

Though Hyacinth Thrash, the Laytons, and the Stoens are but a small part of this narrative, their stories push back against common narrative propagated in pop culture and in traditional historical writing that Peoples Temple members were mad, "brainwashed sheep" who followed their leader to death in mass suicide.<sup>117</sup> While this research paper could only delve into the stories of three families in depth, the theatrical work that accompanies this thesis incorporates more than thirty historical actors and attempts to combat this master narrative. Presuming this

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<sup>116</sup> Hall, *Gone from the Promised*, xxiii

<sup>117</sup> Wilfred, and Ulman. "The Group Psychology of Mass Madness: Jonestown." ; *Guyana Tragedy*, on CBS, Youtube; Halperin, "Group Processes," 13-24; *Heaven Down Here*, Andrew Jamieson, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=coeGH1ZXFCA&t=3286s>.



play is selected by the Suffolk University Theatre department for their 2021-2022 season, it will only continue to grow and include more stories. If produced in the Spring of 2022, I intend for the play to become a full-length production.

My hope is that the play can expand beyond the bounds of traditional academic history and become accessible to theatre companies around the world through the New Play Exchange. The members of the Peoples Temple deserve for their stories to be told to as wide an audience as possible. This project brings us one step closer to an accurate and respectful examination of the people of the Peoples Temple.

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