

Roundtable 2: Proceedings from the 2013 CEA Conference in Savannah, Georgia

People Not Like Us: Re-Imagining Jonestown & the Peoples Temple

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Marrow

"What is in the marrow is hard to take out of the bone." *Irish proverb*

Understand:

the flesh is not dots and dashes

has no patterns; is an insistent knock alarming

sleep into a corner trembling

face hidden.

Naked as August midnight

cover of make believe manages

absolutes clumsily

the work superfluous.

Perhaps the greatest threat to mankind is the inability to relate to one another; to make the connections my mom used to illustrate for my sisters and me in our youthful need to establish hierarchies among our elders and peers: that *even the preacher* had to use the bathroom

sometimes, that the Pope passed gas, and Grandmommy in all her pristine ladylike-ness woke up needing to wash her face too.

The manuscript *Marrow* visits the residents of the Jonestown Agricultural Project in Guyana, a socialist and spiritual community of American men, women, and children who are best known for being coerced into suicide by their spiritual leader, Jim Jones. And therefore as people not like us.

In my parents' descriptions of co-workers, handling of the Insurance Man and church business, dressing and driving, they suggested the fallacy of such a sentiment. That people are ultimately People—with all that comes with the title.

People are hard to trust; their pursuit of their personal interests can turn them deceitful or haughty or—not necessarily purposely—plain not nice. People want things; they hope, get hurt, eat too much of some things and too little of others. People are us.

The implications of Jonestown and my work on it, *Marrow*, suggest that they are like us. The borders that history has created surrounding the public, historic image of Jonestown often distill them to an event rather than a motivation most of us share—to negotiate perceived boundaries. The ones they perceived were racism, sexism, capitalism, how to prevent athlete's foot while working tirelessly on their utopia in the jungle and they managed them as best they could—which is all any of can hope to do.

Implications of the Jonestown Agricultural Project

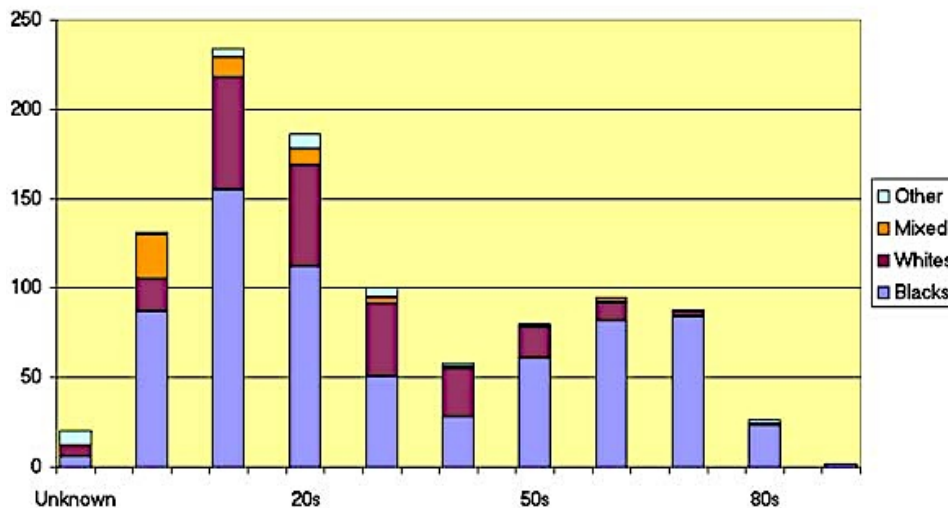
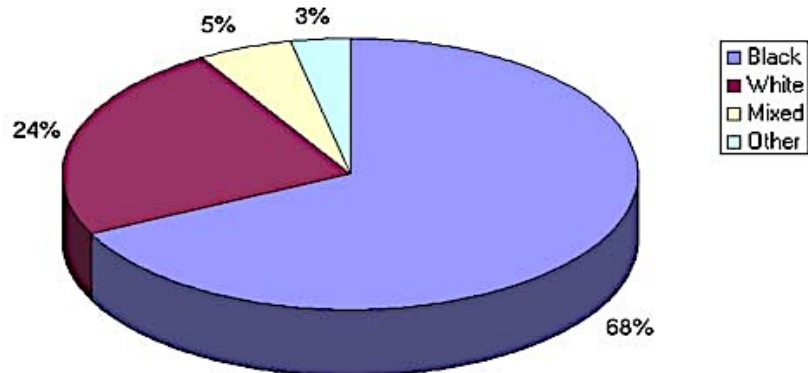
The population in Jonestown Guyana has often been maligned as poor and undereducated—almost as if to provide an easy excuse for how they could be “coerced;” a way of patting

ourselves on the back that
that would never be us. It's a
dangerous supposition of
course, because it makes us
vulnerable to just what we
think we're immune from. In

other words, when one supposes immunity, proper precaution is not taken.

So who *were* the residents of Jonestown? 1020 United States citizens, including men, women, and children—over 900 of whom died in the mass suicide.

They were mostly African American.



68% identified as
African American.
*(Black females made up
the majority of this
percentage—45% of this
population was African
American females).*

More than half of the population was under 30.

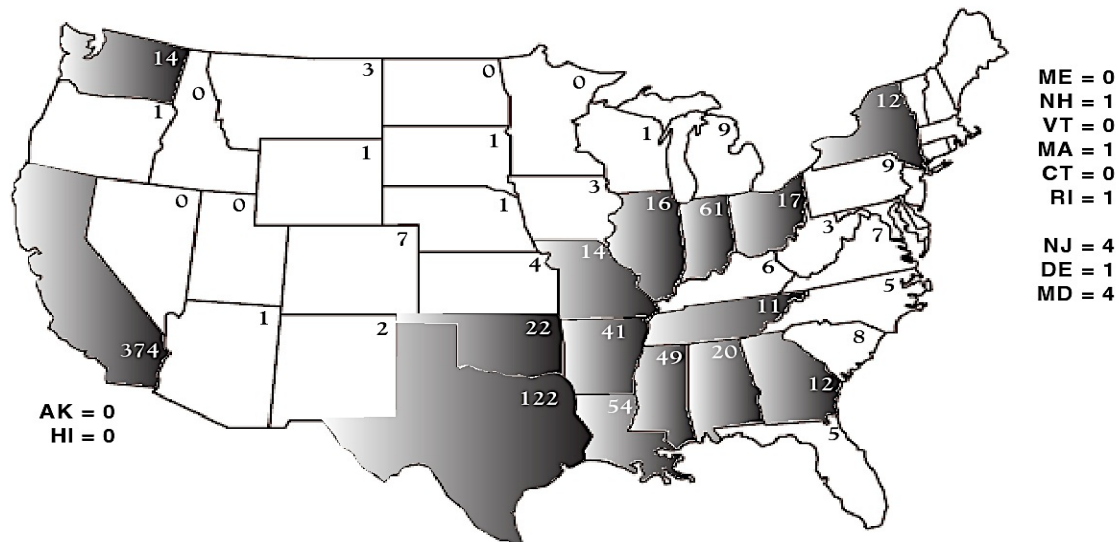
13% were **under** the age of 10.

23% were between **10 and 19** years old.

18% were in their **20s**.

The majority came from California or southern states.

345 came from Southern states (including Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Arkansas, Alabama, Georgia, and Tennessee), which is almost equal to the 374 that came from California.



They were predominately working class.

15% were in the **medical profession**.

10% did **clerical work** (from secretaries to bank tellers).

10% were **agricultural workers**.

7% were considered “**domestic workers**.”

4% worked in the **education field**.

4% were **custodial/maintenance workers**.

2% were involved with **finance professions**.

There were also **lawyers** and **agricultural workers** and **mechanics**.

A Cursory Timeline of Peoples Temple & Jonestown

1955 Jim Jones forms the Wings of Deliverance Church in Indianapolis. It later becomes the Peoples Temple.



Wings of Deliverance Church

1962 Jim Jones moves his family from Indiana to Brazil to explore a possible site for his ministry. Belo Horizonte had been listed by *Esquire* as one of the safest places to be in the event of a nuclear holocaust.

1965 Jim Jones moves his ministry from Indiana to Ukiah, California.

1971 Congregations are established in Los Angeles and San Francisco.

1974 The first Peoples Temple work crew goes to Guyana to begin building the settlement.



Members of the Planning Committee in Guyana, 1974

1977 Nearly 1000 members have migrated to Guyana.

1978 (November 15) Congressman Leo Ryan and a delegation go to Guyana to investigate claims of mistreatment at the settlement.



1978 (November 18) Congressman Leo Ryan and members of his party are shot as they try to leave. He and several others die. Residents are called together for an emergency “White Night.” Most die after being injected with, or willfully drinking, cyanide laced grape drink. Jim Jones and several of his intimates die of gunshot wounds.



What We Talk About in Our Cottage

I. Want

lack; not enough and claiming

more; a need met in tandem:

if all else fails. Because we can't live without it.

II. Will

Understand:

the flesh is not dots and dashes

has no patterns; is an insistent knock alarming

sleep from its corner trembling

face hidden.

III. Athlete's foot

cover of make believe manages

absolutes clumsily—

Crazy equals foolish, near-sighted;

laughable and common,

the work superfluous.

IV. Equality

state of sameness;

"Whether to order beans or wheat discussed."

8 August 1978 – Tuesday

like blood to blood

prick of a secreted safety pin

assumes kinship

dismissed for spats, bubble gum—

the dots and dashes of recess

turn then to now.

Originally appeared in *the jonestown report* October 2011 v13

When Chanda Said No

The angels were tired of standing over their harps
So they sat down and one plucked a chromatic strum
Just one strum

The earth did not shift
And boys in Adidas poured their legs into cutoffs
They loped the compound's lush periphery

No babies were born
The sun was in its full glory
No one shrank from its caress

The people sweat on porches
The flies made merry in the latrines
And the Learning Crew dashed about their breath like wind

An 11 year old chewed the drawstring of her shirt
A transistor spit, gurgled, wheezed some news
Some music might have happened too

Someone was probably peeing

A napping baby might have sneezed

A cornrow was unraveling.

The Twenty-Fifth

There was a day not long ago we were jagged and splintery;
shape of intention.

Sanding

is spiritual work.

Hands are the main organ by which they manipulate the environment.

Each has 27 bones.

Polishing—that's God's vanity.

Everything

deserves the attention of sheen.

In satisfied squeaks, rag to wood, we mind

to extract the same from boys and girls

gathered fidgety and patient at the same time
before the Big Grab.

Their fingertips are massive clumps of nerves
capable of feeling almost better than any other part of the human body.

Each fingertip can feel independently of the others.

They caress us first then with the carelessness of their age
we become our life's work of play.

Makeshift Daddy

I walk with my whole foot; heel then toe
School comes to me like a cadence; script
precise and sure. In ball games my body convicts my ma's friends.
At night they beg forgiveness cloaked in grateful tears.

The baby girl gods me makeshift daddy.

Fear and ego fail me.

I will get the girl,
write screenplays.
hang from the rim
refusing to move from recollection.

I do
every afternoon glistening in
post-puberty victory, flexed in the
tilling of heat for a sooner harvest.

Some nights dance
and lob my voice like fertilizer; shush
my brothers
until their turn
comes.

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6 June 1977 – Tuesday

His hair brushes my thigh; strokes

bright like citrus fruit flame orange red

I grab a handful.

Tidy our want to order.

Mama, the welfare lady, riot of

doubt mute between my fingers.

He's fine. And when he says

we're going to be, I believe.

I braid; he slicks in and out of promises.

Search sleep to see if they're real before

he gives them, sometimes, to

nights he can't get home.

Wear wounds and funk so we eat

good, make love good, *Baby*

he says

we found it all

husky-like I take

the gifts of the garden
lingering on his breath; hands bristle
against my belly rubbing
me like a wishing tree so he
can believe too.

Originally appeared in *the jonestown report*, November 2009 v11

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