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Jonestown, Radicals, and Third Worldism: A Reexamination of Jim Jones and The Peoples Temple Through the Lens of the New Left

Kate Nuechterlein
Boston College, nuechter@bc.edu

JONESTOWN, RADICALS, AND THIRD WORLDISM: A REEXAMINATION OF JIM JONES AND THE PEOPLES TEMPLE THROUGH THE LENS OF THE NEW LEFT

KATE NUECHTERLEIN *

Abstract: In the 1960s and 70s, the charismatic Reverend Jim Jones spearheaded a religious, social, and political movement, the Peoples Temple. During a period of tumultuous social discord in the United States, Jones' focus on civil liberties, anti-racism, and solidarity with third world nations immediately attracted thousands of leftist followers. Jones founded the Temple in Indianapolis in 1955, relocated to Ukiah, California in 1963 and San Francisco in 1970, and eventually convinced a chunk of his followers to move to an agricultural commune in Guyana in 1977. On November 18th, 1978, Jones ultimately coerced and forced remaining members to commit "suicide." This paper examines the social and political nature of the Peoples Temple and argues that Jones weaponized his clout with leftist politicians and social activists to attract a primarily African American following. Legends of the New Left movement, such as Angela Davis and Harvey Milk, supported the Temple and Jones even after rumors of the Reverend's abuse emerged in San Francisco newspapers. This paper strives to demonstrate that Jones' followers were not loonies, but rather dedicated members of the New Left movement, who were committed to enacting social and political change in the U.S.

In November of 1978, twenty-eight-year-old Jackie Speier accompanied California Congressman Leo Ryan on an investigative expedition into the jungle of Guyana, a recently independent nation on the northern tip of South America.² In the weeks preceding the fact-finding mission, the Coalition of Concerned Relatives had urgently warned Congressman Ryan about the Peoples Temple, a San-Francisco-based religious organization that had mysteriously relocated to a Guyanese agricultural commune. Reverend Jim Jones, founder of the Peoples Temple and a self-proclaimed Messiah, unironically named the commune Jonestown. Congressman Ryan, after listening to the Coalition's increasingly disturbing reports of death, starvation, and psychological terror within Jonestown, wanted answers.

¹ Kate Nuechterlein is currently a junior in MCAS, majoring in history and minoring in international studies on the pre-law track. Outside the classroom, Kate is a staff writer for the magazine section of *The Heights* and a member of the BC women's club lacrosse team.

² Jackie Speier, "Surviving Jonestown," *Politico Magazine*, November 10, 2018, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2018/11/10/jonestown-massacre-first-person-speier-ryan-jones-222222/>

The plane landed in Georgetown, Guyana's capital city, on November 14, 1978. Three days later, Speier and Ryan arrived at Jonestown, where Reverend Jones warmly welcomed the congressional delegation. The Reverend provided Ryan and his team with a tour around the compound, flaunting its cabins, medical center, school, and the community's centerpiece: the Pavilion, where Temple members would regularly congregate. That night, the Temple members performed a show for the delegation, smiling and laughing as they sang and danced. Meanwhile, Jones rested comfortably on the stage beneath a sign that proclaimed: "Those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

Speier could never have fathomed that fewer than twenty-four hours later, those 900 people would be dead; Congressman Leo Ryan, shot at least forty-five times, would be dead; the Reverend Jim Jones, found with a gunshot wound to the head, would be dead. And Speier herself, shot five times, would be lying on the muddy floor of the Guyanese jungle, mustering up the faith to survive and one day tell the tale.

On November 18, 1978, over 900 members of Jim Jones' religious organization, the Peoples Temple, simultaneously ingested a "deadly, cyanide-laced cocktail," in the jungle of South America.³ While the world has speculated about the psychology of Jones' sinister manipulation since the massacre, few have situated the Peoples Temple in the era of leftist social movements to which it belongs.

American collective memory chiefly perceives of Jonestown as one of the first and most horrifying cult-related tragedies, one that can now be viewed in tandem with religious groups like Branch Davidians and Heaven's Gate. Yet the Peoples Temple was not just a church, but rather an invitation to join a new social order, one that seemingly departed from the poisonous race and class divisions of Western materialism and capitalism.⁴ In the dozens of sermons that the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) recovered from the 1970s, Jones' rhetoric mimics the civil rights activists of his time, promising economic security and social equality—particularly for his black members. To recognize the draw of the Peoples Temple, it is imperative to first understand the social, economic, and racial underpinnings of the 1960s and 70s in the United States and what scholars have termed the New Left.

³ Russell Rickford, "These People are No Charles Mansons or Spaced-Out 'Moonies': Jonestown and African American Expatriation in the 1970s," in *Ideas in Unexpected Places: Reimagining Black Intellectual History*, edited by Brandon R. Bryd, Leslie M. Alexander, and Russell Rickford, (Northwestern University Press, 2022), 151.

⁴ Rickford, "These People are No Charles Mansons or Spaced-Out Moonies," 152.

Ideologically, the Peoples Temple embodied the socialist, radical endeavors of other New Left associations, and its shocking Guyana migration manifested Third Worldism. Although the Temple is viewed almost exclusively as a cult, Jones' organization must also be critically analyzed as a socio-political movement.

A Brief History of Jim Jones and the Peoples Temple

In 1931, James Warren Jones was born in Lynn, Indiana, a deeply segregated small town in the Midwest.⁵ Jones' father, who he would later describe as a 'KKK bandit,' was sympathetic to the Ku Klux Klan, which Jones resented.⁶ According to Jones in a 1953 article, "Mom's Help for Ragged Tramp Leads Son to Dedicate His Life to Others," his mother reinforced his philanthropic disposition by adopting animals and daydreaming that she would ultimately birth the Messiah. Yet even in early childhood, Jones seemingly resented the disparities in church teachings and the practices of the ministers, and occasionally played pranks on local churches he believed to be engaging in deceitful behavior. At seven or eight years old, Jones reportedly soiled the bible of a hypocritical minister with cow manure.

According to Speier, Jones' early status as an "outcast" and an "underdog" facilitated his desire to later "[be] recognized as someone greater."⁷ After moving to Indianapolis and attending Indiana University in the late 1940s and early 50s, Jones became particularly enchanted with the Methodist, Pentecostal social creed, which encouraged civil rights for all races. By the mid-1950s, Jones began hosting his own services and conducting his famous "healing" conventions, during which he supposedly extracted cancerous growths from the sick.⁸ Unlike most ministers at the time, Jones insisted on racially integrated crowds and asked black congregation members to sit in the front. His policies sparked intense outrage in Indianapolis, and in 1954, Jones founded his own church: Wings of Deliverance, later renamed as the Peoples Temple Full Gospel Church in 1955.

Due to its socialist, integrationist creed, the Peoples Temple immediately gained traction with minority groups and leftists in the U.S. In 1963, ostensibly fearing nuclear holocaust, Jones

⁵ Speier, "Surviving Jonestown."

⁶ David Chidester, *Salvation and suicide: Jim Jones, the Peoples Temple, and Jonestown* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 1-2.

⁷ Speier, "Surviving Jonestown."

⁸ David Chidester, *Salvation and suicide: Jim Jones, the Peoples Temple, and Jonestown* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 3-4.

moved the Peoples Temple to Ukiah, California, which he later claimed was “the farthest they could get from Indianapolis without falling into the ocean.”⁹ By 1970, the Peoples Temple relocated to the heart of San Francisco, a global hub of progressive movements. Soon, approximately three thousand to five thousand members comprised Jones’ congregation.¹⁰

While the Temple maintained an excellent reputation as a humanitarian church for most of its existence, accounts of Jones’ abusive behaviors trickled into the media during the mid-1970s. Temple defectors reported that “anyone who questioned or challenged Jones” was subject to “savage beatings” from Jones or the Temple guards.¹¹ Temple members worked twelve hours a day and six days a week, and were barred from dissenting from Jones’ fabricated legal system.

In an August 1977 article in *New West Magazine*, one of the first detailed exposures of the Temple, journalists Marshall Kilduff and Phil Tracy detailed how Jones forced members to write letters, admitting to crimes and “immoral acts” they did not commit.¹² To satisfy Jones, members sacrificed their most prized belongings—including watches and even houses—and effectively sold their lives to the Temple. The “healing” services were also fabricated displays of divinity; while Jones would purport to extract growths from members, his wife, Marceline, would lead a cancer patient into a private area and emerge with “small bits of meat” masquerading as growths.

As these testimonies surfaced, Jones grew increasingly paranoid of government intervention. In early 1977, Jones moved the Temple to Guyana, a developing nation on the border of Venezuela. In multiple sermons, Jones referred to Guyana as the “Promised Land,” and by September 1977, over 900 members inhabited the jungles of Jonestown.¹³ Of those living in Jonestown, 75% were black, 20% were white, and 5% were Asian, Hispanic, and Native American.¹⁴

Jones’ negative publicity peaked during the custody battle for John Victor Stoen, who was born in January 1972.¹⁵ While John Stoen’s birth certificate identifies him as the child of Timothy

⁹ Chidester, *Salvation and suicide*, 6.

¹⁰ Chidester, *Salvation and suicide*, 8.

¹¹ Deborah Roberts, “On Jonestown,” *Socialist Worker*, January 1, 1979, <https://www.proquest.com/hnp/np/docview/2408044092/4AB3F61C95E2406APO/1?accountid=9673>, Accessed December 19, 2022.

¹² Marshall Kilduff and Phil Tracy, “Inside Peoples Temple,” *New West Magazine*, August 1, 1977, <https://jonestown.sdsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/newWestart.pdf>, Accessed December 19, 2022.

¹³ Chidester, *Salvation and suicide*, 9-10.

¹⁴ Chidester, *Salvation and suicide*, 9-10.

¹⁵ “The Custody Battle for John Victor Stoen and Its Fallout,” *Alternative Considerations of Jonestown and Peoples Temple*, Accessed December 19, 2022, https://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=13841.

Stoen and Grace Stoen, Tim signed an affidavit in February 1972, claiming that John was in fact Jones' biological son. After Grace defected in 1976 and Tim the following year, the two began battling for custody of John, who was still a member of the Temple under Jones' close supervision. While the couple won custody in California, Jones and the toddler were already living in Jonestown and outside the jurisdiction of the American judicial system.

The Coalition of Concerned Relatives, including the Stoens, other defectors, and families of remaining Temple members, eventually published a flyer condemning Jones and demanding a federal investigation. The notice, which the Coalition distributed at various locations, included a jarring header—"This Nightmare Is Taking Place Right Now: Will You Help Us Free Our Families?"—with a sketch of an individual behind bars in Jonestown.¹⁶ Claiming that they "espouse[d] no political or religious viewpoint," these relatives detailed more abuses, including censoring of mail, prohibition of any long-distance phone calls, and Jones' infamous mock "mass suicide" sessions. The Coalition concluded the notice by urging readers to donate, pray, and write to the two people they believed held any power over Jones: Guyanese Prime Minister Forbes Burnham and U.S. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance.

Seeking to mollify the Stoens and the Coalition, Congressman Ryan traveled to Guyana in November 1978. But he would never return to the U.S.; the night after his arrival in Jonestown, Jones' henchmen shot and killed the California congressman as he attempted to bring terrified members home.¹⁷ That same day, Jones commanded his followers to commit suicide by drinking Flavor-Aid laced with cyanide, and Jones' crew forcefully injected any individual who refused the poison—including infants and pets. Jones then either shot himself or ordered another member to shoot him in the head.

Before the September 11th terrorist attacks, the Jonestown Massacre was the largest single intentional incident of American civilian death.¹⁸ To the absolute bewilderment of U.S. officials, what had seemingly begun as an inclusive socio-religious initiative quickly transformed into one of the most infamous and nightmarish episodes in U.S. history.

¹⁶ "Concerned Relatives Flyer," The Jonestown Institute: *Alternative Considerations of Jonestown and Peoples Temple*, https://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=13078, Accessed June 28, 2023.

¹⁷ Speier, "Surviving Jonestown."

¹⁸ J Oliver Conroy. 2018. "An Apocalyptic Cult, 900 Dead: Remembering the Jonestown Massacre, 40 Years On." The Guardian. The Guardian. November 21, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/nov/17/an-apocalyptic-cult-900-dead-remembering-the-jonestown-massacre-40-years-on>.

The Peoples Temple and the New Left

Historian Van Gosse characterizes the New Left as the social “movement of movements” that swept across the U.S. from the early 1950s to 1975.¹⁹ According to Gosse, the trajectory of the New Left movement began with the nonviolent, mass protests against segregation in the Southeastern states, which eventually prompted the 1964 Civil Rights Act. The New Left also encompassed the efforts of women and the LGBTQ community to challenge institutionalized sexism and homophobia, as well as informal discriminatory social structures and practices. Perhaps most topically, Gosse emphasizes the stirrings of the antiwar movement, which skyrocketed during the U.S.’ involvement in Vietnam in the 60s and early 70s.

In conjunction with the antiwar movement, the New Left also produced a sense of Third Worldism, under which primarily black activists cultivated a sense of solidarity with the oppressed peoples of the developing world. In “The U.S. 1968: Third Worldism, Feminisms, and Liberalism,” author Judy Wu describes how the American antiwar movement spurred a deeper, cultural desire for assembly with “‘Third World’ peoples.”²⁰ She cites Che Guevara’s “two, three, many Vietnams” speech as a “rallying cry among anti-imperialist and antiwar activists globally,” eventually prompting “racialized” Americans to emphasize the “internal colonialism” plaguing the U.S during the Cold War.

It was under these circumstances that Temple members—primarily black Americans—followed Jones, abandoned their lives in the U.S., and moved to an agricultural commune in Guyana. While general speculation about the Peoples Temple has attributed this bizarre migration solely to Jones’ manipulation, it neglects how Third Worldism generated a sense of connection between oppressed Americans and the developing world. The domestic tumult of the 1960s and 70s provoked several prominent activists to travel to international destinations, including Eldridge Cleaver, Huey Newton, and Yuri Kochiyama.

In “‘These People are No Charles Mansons or Spaced Out ‘Moonies’’: Jonestown and African American Expatriation in the 1970s” from *Ideas in Unexpected Places*, historian Russell Rickford claims both extremes of the political spectrum have misinterpreted the Jonestown tragedy.²¹ Leftists viewed the episode as a product of a soulless, capitalist society, bred by long-

¹⁹ Van Gosse, *Rethinking the New Left: An Interpretative History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 2-3.

²⁰ Judy Tzu-Chun Wu, “The U.S. 1968: Third Worldism, Feminisms, and Liberalism,” *The American Historical Review* 123, no. 3 (2018): 711.

²¹ Rickford, “‘These People are No Charles Mansons or Spaced-Out Moonies,’” 152.

lasting racist and classist policy in America. Conservatives, on the other hand, perceived Jones and his cult as another communist, totalitarian regime of the Cold War. In addition, many African Americans characterized the incident as the culmination of white manipulation—one activist noted: “Black folks are still into the practice of following white folks.”²²

Rickford counters these simplified analyses: “The problem with such portrayals is that they mystified both the death *and* life of Jonestown. Seen as exemplars of the cultish and bizarre, members of the community seemed totally aberrant.”²³ As many survivors have affirmed, most Temple members were not insane, deviant, or far more susceptible to manipulation than the average person. Members were not “Charles Mansons” or “Spaced Out ‘Moonies.’” Instead, Jones’ victims were normal people—mostly those who suffered from race- or class-based oppression and craved not only a savior, but also a shared community.

Rickford also bridges the New Left and Third Worldism movements with the Peoples Temple: “Even before the Guyana exodus of the mid-1970s, Peoples Temple was linked to a host of New Left and Black Power formations, from the American Indian Movement to the Republic of New Africa to the Free Angela Davis Campaign.”²⁴ Given the prominence of movements aiming to combat both internal oppression within the U.S. and external oppression in colonized or formerly colonized nations at the time, it is unsurprising that Peoples Temple members felt a sense of affinity with the Guyanese.

Most importantly, it is unsurprising that those who joined Jones did not view their community as a cult. While Jones was a religious leader, he centered his sermons around New Left issues that other social movements were campaigning for at the time: the anti-war movement, racial equality, and socio-economic reform.²⁵ As his popularity skyrocketed, Jones de-emphasized the religious nature of the Temple and even taught members that socialism was God. Surrounded by movements demanding similar terms, Temple participants likely saw themselves as part of another revolutionary movement, one which shared the spirit of the American Indian Movement, Republic of New Africa, or the Angela Davis Campaign.

Jones, as former Temple member Deborah Layton recalls, harbored particular affection for Angela Davis, or the “one woman outside the Temple whom Father admired and constantly spoke

²² Rickford, ““These People are No Charles Mansons or Spaced-Out Moonies,”” 152.

²³ Rickford, ““These People are No Charles Mansons or Spaced-Out Moonies,”” 152.

²⁴ Rickford, ““These People are No Charles Mansons or Spaced-Out Moonies,”” 152-153.

²⁵ Deborah Layton, *Seductive Poison* (New York, New York: Anchor Books, 1998), 36-45.

of.”²⁶ When Layton mimicked Davis’ hair and acted out aggressively, Jones reprimanded her trivial imitation: “‘Having Angela Davis’s hair does not make you an outspoken radical of her intelligence. Read *If They Come in the Morning* and I expect a written analysis of her thesis next week.’”²⁷ By consistently preaching the works of a well-known, radical leader, Jones shrouded his followers in the belief that the work the Temple was doing was no different than that of the Angela Davis campaign.

Jones did not just support Davis—she supported him as well. Davis publicly and confidently endorsed Jones, the Peoples Temple, and the Jonestown agricultural commune in September 1977, during the “Six Day Siege” in Jonestown.²⁸ Due to the intense custody battle over John Stoen, a sharp increase in public suspicion and scrutiny plagued both Jones and his closest confidantes. In response, Jones and Temple guards initiated a blockade around Jonestown and convinced members that they faced imminent attack from the Guyana Defense Force.

As peculiar as the siege may have appeared to outsiders, and despite Jones’ obvious descent into paranoia, Davis contacted Jones on September 10, 1977, over a radio phone-patch. Addressing her “friend,” Jim Jones, as well as his followers, Davis proclaimed widespread support for Jones’ movement: “I can personally speak for the National Alliance Against Racism and Political Repression (NAARPR)...we are very deeply obligated to you for what you have done to further the fight for justice...to further the fight against racism.”²⁹ Additionally, Davis recognized the political legitimacy of the Temple and its struggles against racism and political oppression. To both Jones’ followers and the participants of the greater New Left movement, the Peoples Temple was akin to an organization like the NAARPR, and Jones to Davis.

Davis continued her address, further validating both the Temple and Jones’ insistence of a giant scheme against him: “I know...there is a conspiracy...When you are attacked, it is because of your progressive stand...We know you are going to win, and, in the final analysis, we are all going to win.” Davis declares “we,” tying herself and Jones to the same side of history. Davis’ speech likely further convinced the public—especially leftist activists—that Jones’ operation was not only legitimate, but a necessary machination of the greater New Left movement.

²⁶ Layton, *Seductive Poison*, 55.

²⁷ Layton, *Seductive Poison*, 56.

²⁸ “Angela Davis and the Six Day Siege,” *The Jonestown Institute: Alternative Considerations of Jonestown and the Peoples Temple*, Accessed December 16, 2022, https://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=19021.

²⁹ “Angela Davis and the Six Day Siege.”

Jones was similarly aware that he was not the only leftist figure subject to national scrutiny or unfavorable allegations. The Peoples Temple did not occur in a vacuum—Jones operated at a time when conservatives incessantly criticized revolutionaries like Angela Davis, Eldridge Cleaver, and, most notably, Martin Luther King Jr. In order to exonerate himself and his regime and rebuff any investigations, Jones drew an intentional comparison between himself and King, declaring that he had fallen victim to a similar smear campaign. After Kilduff and Tracy released their Temple exposé in mid-1977, Jones publicly dismissed their statements in a statement addressed to San Francisco, entitled “What’s Behind The Attacks On Peoples Temple?”:

We are not really surprised at the charges that have been made against us. Movements for fundamental social change have always been subject to sophisticated and well-coordinated attempts to discredit their goals and destroy their leaders. Dr. Martin Luther King was the object of an unrelenting campaign to discredit the civil rights movement.³⁰

As declassified FBI documents have now revealed, King was indeed targeted in an “unrelenting campaign” to weaken the civil rights movement in the 1960s.³¹ Just as Jones linked himself to Davis, the Temple only stood to gain by claiming that any negative press was a continuation of the same maneuvers used to annihilate King’s reputation. The New Left, therefore, consistently served as a convenient shield against any evidence that threatened Jones or his cult.

The American public may have also perceived Jones, like other prominent radical activists at the time, as a flawed individual whose dedication to social progress ultimately overshadowed his human misgivings. Eldridge Cleaver—a Black Panther Party (BPP) leader during the 1970s—genuinely advanced the Black Power initiative while still vocalizing offensive opinions and engaging in illegal activity.³² Sentenced in 1954, Cleaver served nine years in prison for marijuana dealing, assault with intent to kill, and attempt to rape.³³ After his release in 1966, Cleaver joined the BPP and quickly rose to fame for his autobiography, *Soul on Ice*, a national bestseller and foundational piece of literature in the Black Power Movement. As a fervent radical, Cleaver also played a key role in the Third Worldism movement by frequently travelling to several developing

³⁰ “Peoples Temple statement in response to *New West* article,” *The Jonestown Institute: Alternative Considerations of Jonestown and the Peoples Temple*, https://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=14014, Accessed June 28, 2023.

³¹ Sam Briger, “Documentary Exposes How The FBI Tried To Destroy MLK With Wiretaps, Blackmail,” *National Public Radio*, January 18, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/01/18/956741992/documentary-exposes-how-the-fbi-tried-to-destroy-mlk-with-wiretaps-blackmail>, Accessed June 28, 2023.

³² Judy Tzu-Chun Wu, *Radicals on the Road: Internationalism, Orientalism, and Feminism during the Vietnam Era* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), 107.

³³ Wu, *Radicals on the Road*, 113-114.

nations and establishing networks alongside prominent international leaders—notably Frantz Fanon, Che Guevara, Fidel Castro, Ho Chi Minh, and Mao Tse-tung.³⁴

However, support for Cleaver was not unanimous across the U.S., even among certain leftist circles. For example, some activists questioned a passage in Cleaver’s *Soul on Ice* in which he describes his rape of a white woman as “an insurrectionary act” and states that it “delighted” him that he was “defying and trampling across the white man’s law” and “defiling his women.”³⁵ Due to his graphic admission and support of sexual violence against women, Cleaver’s fight for equality and progressivism lacked an intersectional approach.

This essay does not seek to draw comparisons between the two vastly different men, who operated under *drastically* different circumstances and objectives. Cleaver’s prominence in the New Left social arena rather suggests that many radicals—despite significant controversy—remained popular because of their dedication to their respective causes. Despite Jones’ earlier abuses of power (for example, raping young women in the Temple), his supporters may have forgiven such behavior due to what appeared to be his genuine dedication to social change.

Indeed, Jones pioneered one of the first integrated churches in Indianapolis, a church that committed to helping the impoverished and black communities after moving to California. Even Layton, who testifies to the manifold horrors of Jones’ regime, recounts the significant humanitarian work she engaged in as a Temple member. While stationed in northern California, Peoples Temple members acted as “students, city employees, professors, health care workers, social workers, or attorneys” in local communities.³⁶ From dusk until dawn, Layton reports that she and the other college-aged members “canvassed homes, housing projects, and even condemned buildings where the world’s forgotten and forsaken had sought shelter.”³⁷ As Layton and several other survivors have argued, Jones’ movement was not all psychological manipulation and false “healing” services.

The Peoples Temple was not hollow. Members undoubtedly sacrificed time, money, and effort to help those who needed it—whether that was impoverished families or victims of abuse. Unfortunately, the dedication to humanitarian labor prevented many Americans—members or

³⁴ Wu, *Radicals on the Road*, 116.

³⁵ “‘He was a symbol’: Eldridge Cleaver dies at 62,” *CNN*, May 1, 1998, <http://www.cnn.com/US/9805/01/cleaver.late.obit/>, Accessed December 19, 2022.

³⁶ Layton, *Seductive Poison*, 60.

³⁷ Layton, *Seductive Poison*, 59.

not—from noticing the warning signs. By operating alongside controversial and high-profile civil rights activists, Jones evaded the scrutiny needed to prevent the Jonestown Massacre.

“Guyana Was No Random Destination”: Exodus and the Third World

On October 8, 1973, the Peoples Temple Board of Directors passed a resolution to organize and establish a “Branch Church and Agricultural Mission in Guyana.”³⁸ The resolution, which included future negotiations with Guyanese officials and bank accounts, provides insight into why Jones chose a Guyanese destination. Temple officials appreciated the nation’s proximity to the U.S., its English-speaking population, its economy as a “so-called underdeveloped nation,” and its generous agricultural policies that would furnish a Temple settlement. In 1974, a small portion of the Temple migrated to Guyana and set up the agricultural commune that would later house almost a thousand members in 1977.

Prior to October 8, Jones had considered Grenada or Cuba as the foreign destination for the Temple and conducted extensive negotiations with Grenadian officials in the early 1970s. Both Guyana and Grenada represented socialist democracies with majority non-white populations and an escape from the oppressive policies of the white, capitalist U.S. Yet because the Temple formed a mutually beneficial relationship with Forbes Burnham, the Guyanese President who also established diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union and Cuba, Jones settled on Guyana.³⁹

In 1977, the Peoples Temple released its “Agricultural Project Progress Report,” which attempted to persuade other Temple members to join by presenting Jonestown as a utopian society.⁴⁰ The report discusses how Guyana achieved independence from Britain in 1966 and had “Caribbean cultural roots,” with a primarily “black and East Indian” ethnic makeup. Now that the country was “free from an oppressive heritage of slavery and colonialism,” the report underscored how Jonestown would aid Guyana in managing and developing its natural resources, and strengthen its leadership of the “community of non-aligned nations pursuing a socialistic course.”

³⁸ “Resolution to Establish Agricultural Mission,” *The Jonestown Institute: Alternative Considerations of Jonestown and Peoples Temple*, Accessed December 19, 2022, https://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=13068.

³⁹ “Forbes Burnham,” *Britannica Encyclopedia*, Accessed December 19, 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Forbes-Burnham>.

⁴⁰ “People’s Temple Agricultural Project Progress Report—Summer 1977,” *The Jonestown Institute: Alternative Considerations of Jonestown and Peoples Temple*, Accessed December 19, 2022 https://jonestown.sdsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/04-10-AgBkltSum77_sm.pdf.