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Significant Books from the West Indies  
and the Caribbean Diaspora from 1980 to the Present:  
A Literary Round Table

Hena Maes-Jelinek (Liège)

I wish to present two books, both about the same event which took place in Guyana on 18 November 1978, when Jim Jones, an American sect leader who had founded a community in the Guyanese interior, forced about a thousand of his adherents, including 276 children, to drink a sweetened cyanide soup. Those who refused to drink the lethal potion were shot on the spot. Shiva Naipaul's journalistic account of the Jonestown tragedy in *Black and White* (1980) presents it as very much in keeping with the atmosphere prevailing in Guyana and therefore not surprising, though it must be pointed out that similar events have taken place in the United States, Canada, Japan, Switzerland and France, where the police, though informed of what was likely to happen, did nothing to prevent the sects' activities.

Fred D'Aguiar, a poet and novelist of Guyanese origin, has written a poetic sequence called *Bill of Rights* (1998) in which an anonymous narrator writes from Jonestown to a Rasta friend in Brixton. He seems to be one of the underprivileged for whom Jim Jones claimed he was creating his utopian community. He first describes the neophytes' enthusiasm and their dedication to Jones, then the slow degradation of the settlement and the way in which Jones himself changes from being a charismatic leader to a dictatorial, cruel tyrant. The massacre and its immediate aftermath are briefly but poignantly recorded early in the narrative:

Men, women and children queue before a pot  
More like a vat and drink or else are shot,

Their cries that could raise the dead, raise hair  
And a thousand flutes in a death air,

A thousand flutes piled on top  
Each other, like so many grains of rice.

[...]  
A thousand flutes for bullets  
A thousand souls for flutes  
A thousand bullets for souls

[...]  
Silence except for the baying of the blood  
Silence above the wind in the trees  
Silence as the river breaches its banks

Silence of us like fish in a tank  
 Silence in the lengthening plait of vines  
 Silence [...] (15–16)

After the tragedy, the narrator, one of the rare survivors, is completely stunned, spiritually numb, and goes to live in America, rejecting any kind of commitment, though he is haunted by the ghosts of Jonestown:

When I walk, It's over a thousand  
 Dead; so I stand on the spot  
 Staring at one place  
 Whose pattern, I pray, will not  
 Scramble into a town full of dead. (124)

\*

In the novel *Jonestown* (1996) by Wilson Harris (also from Guyana) the event is part of a larger historical context, evoking other holocausts in this century and analysing the motivations that lead to such massacres. It is also seen as a late manifestation of the extinction of peoples and settlements in Amerindian Central and South America (mainly the Maya) and even as analogous to the fate of Atlantis.

The narrative begins on the day of the massacre when the narrator, Francisco Bone (asking himself “why did I survive?”), witnesses Jonah (Jim) Jones making sure a woman he has shot is really killed, then being killed in turn by Bone’s friend (in a sense his double), Deacon, who avenges the victims. As young men, Bone and Deacon had gone to San Francisco thanks to a scholarship; this is where they met Jones and were fascinated by him. After the tragedy, Bone, suffering from partial amnesia, travels for seven years in the country before reaching New Amsterdam, and it is from there in 1985 that he starts with Mr Mageye (his former teacher, now Virgilian guide) his imaginative, ‘re-visionary’ journey into his and Deacon’s past.

As in Harris’s earlier novels, this is not a linear journey. Rather, events arise out of Bone’s unconscious into his consciousness as he writes a “dream-book” and re-interprets these events. The temporal scheme is therefore extremely fluid and actually inspired by the Maya conception of time, in which past, present and future merge and the past can be re-examined from the vantage point of the future:

*My Dream-book was a net of associations of ‘pasts’ and ‘presents’ and ‘futures’ in which one could trace an immense and subtle transference of Masks such as I had glimpsed in the Nether World, in Limbo Land [...] Its ramifications could never be absolutely seized but it brought into play a wholly different epic fiction from conventional European fiction, an epic net which embraced Europe as well – an epic net conversant with the European Conquest of the ancient Americas but antecedent to European models. (186, italics in the text)*

As this self-reflexive passage shows, Bone’s book (whose title, *Imagination Dead Imagine*, he borrows from Beckett) is also about the nature of fiction, which at some stage he calls “self-judgemental, self-confessional.” Indeed, its major theme is his gradual recognition of his (and every man’s) responsibility for “the holocaust that afflicts us all in a variety of overt or masked forms everywhere” (126). He acknowledges that, like Deacon, his motivation for adhering to Jones’s ideology was an unconscious desire for revenge, the source of violence and repeated wars. The characters also act out impulses embodied in archetypal figures: the predator (of whom Jones is only one version); the Furies, avenging goddesses who can nevertheless turn into saving virgins. But the saviour-child (the opposite of the authoritarian saviour people long for) is seen at the end to be inseparable from the predator archetype. However, the characters’ ambivalence is an obvious manifestation of the trickster archetype – originally the African spider god Anansi, then the beaten-down slave who escapes oppression by his cleverness, yet who can also evince a growing appetite for power. The “tricksters of spirit” (151) which Bone encounters in his quest are both victims and potential tyrants, shadowy figures in his inner self who confront him with a perpetually falling yet redeemable humanity.

But through his power of metamorphosis the trickster also impersonates Harris’s own art, which dismantles all frames and closures and weaves its metaphorical narratives through protean ‘convertible’ imagery. For Harris, both life and art are an endless “unfinished genesis of the imagination.” *Jonestown*, a symbiotic Old World/New World epic, in a setting that extends from the Guyanese heartland to the cosmos, is another impressive step in that creative process.