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Remembering Jonestown through the Camp and the Postcolony:

A Multidirectional Reading of Fred D'Aguiar's *Children of Paradise*

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Abstract:

This paper explores the contribution of Fred D'Aguiar's novel *Children of Paradise* (2014) to the conflicted memorialization of the 1978 Jonestown tragedy, where over 900 American citizens lost their lives in the Amazonian interior of Guyana. I argue that in his fictional revisitation of the massacre, D'Aguiar explores Jonestown as a multidirectional site of memory. By placing the tragedy in a historical and conceptual continuum that encompasses different forms of subjugation, including colonialism and its legacy in the post-independence Caribbean, but also totalitarianism and the Nazi rule, the author gives Jonestown a global resonance that enlarges its significance, challenges understandings of it as a historical anomaly, and enhances the humanity of its victims, revealing linkages between seemingly disparate developments and memories. In my discussion I will draw on the theoretical insights provided by Michael Rothberg, Giorgio Agamben and Achille Mbembe, among others.

Keywords: multidirectional memory, memorial, grievability, camp, trickster, utopianism

In *Children of Paradise* (2014), Fred D'Aguiar revisits the 1978 Jonestown tragedy, in which over 900 American citizens lost their lives in the Amazonian interior of Guyana, where they lived in a commune led by Jim Jones, founder of a religious community known as the People's Temple. This novel is D'Aguiar's second take on the topic, which he first explored poetically in *Bill of Rights* (1998). That the author has shown a strong commitment to exploring sites of traumatic memory throughout his career is evinced by his two slavery novels, T*he Longest Memory* (1994) and *Feeding the Ghosts* (1997). In more recent works such as *Continental Shelf* (2009), which features an elegy to the young victims of the Virginia Tech shooting, and *Children of Paradise* (2014), the author has broadened the geographical breadth of his subject matter to include new sites of memory, or to revisit old ones with a more explicit transnational perspective,

reflecting his "multiple geographical identities" (Ledent 2016, 248) as a US-based, English-born writer of Guyanese descent, as well as the contemporary trend towards the "globaliz[ation] of memory claims" (Assman and Conrad 2010, 8).

Despite the scale of the human losses in Jonestown, regarded until 9/11 as the largest deliberate loss of American civilian life, the memorialization of its victims has been slow, and the construction of a shared memory of them has been particularly controversial, partly because the event has been variously understood as cult suicide, murder or murder-suicide, and because, given its transnational implications, it has not been claimed as part of a particular national experience. Since the aim of this paper is to explore the ways in which the novel *Children of Paradise* contributes to the conflicted memorialization of Jonestown, brief historical contextualization is necessary. In their response to the tragedy, both the U.S. and Guyana showed reluctance to become involved with the ordeal and assimilate it into their national memories. While the Guyanese government saw it as an American problem which brought shame to Guyana, for the U.S. it was an isolated event that had happened elsewhere in a remote location in the Amazonian forest.

A clear illustration of the disowning of the tragedy is the difficulties that arose in finding a space for the burial of the many unclaimed bodies. As Prime Minister Forbes Burnham demanded that they were immediately shipped out of Guyana, they were sent to the Dover Air Force Base in Delaware, where someone described them as an "'unintelligible mess'" (cited in Chidester 1988, 684). The fact that the bodies were bloated and blackened, due to their exposure to high temperatures and the darkening effect of the cyanide, hindered their identification and contributed to their dehumanization in popular perceptions. Their interment was seen as posing a "hygienic,

social and spiritual" threat as they could pollute the soil, encourage cult activity in the site, and even release evil spirits (Chidester 1988, 688-9), which led state authorities to suggest that the remains were cremated and the ashes scattered over the Atlantic. The problematic processing of the corpses showed the extent to which the Jonestown victims were "excluded both in life and in death" (684). In fact, about 80% of the Jonestown members were African-Americans who had seen in this organization the opportunities for integration and egalitarianism that post-civil rights America denied them. The black American religious community also distanced itself from the calamity, saying that suicide was inconsistent with the "life-affirming" values of black culture (2003, 42). The popular expression "drinking the Kool-Aid," originating in the tragedy, is one salient indication of the victims' stigmatization as "gullible" people who passively followed a mad messianic leader (Nair 2013, 83). The outsiderness and hopelessness that had caused them to join the People's Temple seemed to reassert itself after their death, compromising their grievability in both Guyana and the U.S.

The eventual burial and memorialization of the dead in a mass grave in their native San Francisco has led to what could be metaphorically described as a "monument war," to use a term by art historian Kirk Savage (2009). After thirty-two years, a set of granite plaques with the names of all the dead at Jonestown was placed to mark the mass grave, promoted by the family of Jones. This official memorial was met with the opposition of the group of victims led by pastor Jynona Norwood, on the grounds that it disrespects the victims by carrying the name of the person who they regard as perpetrator of the massacre: "Norwood insisted emphatically that including the name of the man most responsible for the deaths in Jonestown is akin to placing Adolf Hitler's name on Holocaust memorials" (McGehee, 2018). This controversy culminated with a

lawsuit against the cemetery over the memorial plaques, whose eventual dismissal in 2014 has failed to settle the dispute, as becomes plain with the unveiling, after years of fundraising, of an alternative 'monument' during the 2018 Memorial Service led by Norwood. The new artifact is a portable memorial wall unfolded for the service, featuring all names except those of Jones and his circle and foregrounding the tragedy's most poignant victims: the children —276 died in the tragedy (Wooden 1981, 1).[1] The unveiling of the wall was significantly keynoted by Martin Luther King Jr., III, who expressed a warning about the need to protect vulnerable young lives (Jackson-Fosset 2018). The portable memorial wall, an apt metaphor for a memory without a site, sets itself in opposition to the narrative of the Jonestown events articulated in the official plaques, which frame Jones as just another victim in a group suicide.

The achievement of a shared vision about Jonestown is largely hindered by the disagreement over the designation of its leader as either victim or perpetrator. Dominick LaCapra explains that this distinction may be "problematic in certain cases," but an identification of these two positions "would seem to undercut the problems of agency and responsibility" (2001, 26). Whereas such identification is "most plausible in the case of self-sacrifice," LaCapra adds, it is more "dubious in the case of the sacrifice of another, whatever the bond between the sacrificer and sacrificed" (27), an argument applicable to Jones and his followers.

In addition to his personal connection to the tragedy as someone doubly "invested in the Guyanese and American landscapes," D'Aguiar's fictional reimagining of Jonestown dovetails with his view of history as a "site for instruction": "watching our

[1] The memorial wall can be viewed at *Jonestown Memorial: The Official Memorial and Wall Founded May 1979*, https://www.jones-town.org/.

present make mistakes, the same mistakes, the same amnesia […] why can't those crucibles […] be endlessly instructive? The more stories we have about it […] the more likely we are to get those lessons to be ever present" (Dickow 2014). The author's "fidelity" to histories of victimization (LaCapra 2001, 144) — as one may understand his revisitation of certain sites of trauma— because of their cautionary value for the present, is an important part of his mission as a writer. Stef Craps refers to the author's approach as "mid-mourning," a position half way between closure and melancholia: "D'Aguiar's relationship to history should be construed […] not as pathological attachment but as an assumption of ethico-political responsibility" (2013, 70). Thus, the function of memory is not just to provide lessons for the present, but also to offer a corrective for past injustice and present misconceptions, responding to "the duty to do justice, through memories" to others (Ricoeur 2004, 89). Even as D'Aguiar has not explicitly commented on the monument war over Jonestown, he has expressed his uneasiness about the mass burial: "In Oakland, CA, there is a mass grave for about two-thirds of Jonestown […] many of the kids are in double coffins because they were not claimed, not identified. What an erasure!" (Dickow 2014), and about the obliteration of the site in Guyana, with "no memorial to the place" (Kock 2014). The picture of events that he develops in both his earlier poetic treatment of Jonestown and his more expansive novelistic account portrays Jones as the perpetrator of murder or coerced suicide, offering a counter-narrative to the official discourse embodied in the contentious memorial plaques, and also a corrective to negative popular perceptions of the victims, whose humanity he strives to restore. The author deviates from the conciliatory approach found in the other significant novel about the same events, Wilson Harris's *Jonestown* (1996), which ends with a suggestion of an embrace between victim and perpetrator (Nair 2013, 92). *Bill of Rights*, in contrast, features such

lines as “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” (D’Aguiar 1998, 15). These poignantly show the Jonestown people succumbing to the victim-perpetrator dynamics that pervades the poem.

In this paper I will be arguing that, in addition to singling out responsibility for the massacre, the novel confronts readers with the conditions that made it possible, presenting the commune as a totalitarian social organization despotically ruled by Jones with the complicity of the Guyanese government. This consideration challenges the image of Jonestown as an anomaly, and instead inserts it into a lineage of entangled histories, thus enlarging its significance and enhancing the human stature of the victims. In order to shed light on the ways in which D’Aguiar places Jonestown within a larger history of human subjugation and totalitarian oppression in his new novel, I will draw on Michael Rothberg’s theory of multidirectional memory, as well as on the insights provided by Giorgio Agamben and Achille Mbembe, among others. The multidirectional approach to memory proposed by Rothberg “juxtaposes two or more disturbing memories” (2009, 14) in order to “construct solidarity out of the specificities, overlaps and echoes of different historical experiences” (16), also having the potential to engender “new visions of justice” (5). The portrayal of the commune in the narrative, which has important points of contact with Agamben’s notion of the *camp* (1998), intersects with the troubled history of Guyana as a *postcolony* (Mbembe 1992) under Forbes Burnham, the country’s first president after independence who allegedly developed the most authoritarian regime in the postcolonial Anglophone Caribbean. Despite their distinctiveness, these two developments are both politically connected and conceptually related. Furthermore, the memory alliance between the configurations of

the camp and the postcolony is widened to include the archetype of Nazi rule as another form of subjugation. The novel's title is inspired in the eponymous film by Marcel Carné, a link that, as will be seen below, pushes the memories of Jonestown and postcolonial Guyana in yet another direction, that of the Nazi occupation of France. In the sections that follow, I will thus trace the "multidirectional move[s]" (Rothberg 2009, 133) made in D'Aguiar's depiction of Jonestown along the axes of the camp, the postcolony and Nazi rule.

Jonestown as Camp

In *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Giorgio Agamben identifies the camp as a political structure or matrix that may appear in different forms and spaces at different times in history, where individuals are stripped of rights and live under the rule without law of a sovereign power. The camp is "a piece of land placed outside the normal juridical order" (Agamben 1998, 169-70), where the "state of exception, a temporary suspension of the rule of law on the basis of a factual state of danger is […] given a permanent spatial arrangement" (169). Another key feature of the camp, which inevitably follows from the principle of exceptionality, is the blurring of boundaries "between exception and rule, licit and illicit" so that " 'everything is possible'," claims Agamben echoing Hannah Arendt's insights about totalitarian rule. The inhabitants of the camp are reduced to bare life, a liminal status between "*zoē/bios*," natural life and political life, "exclusion/inclusion" (8), as they are included through exclusion in the realm of the *polis*. In the portrayal of the Jonestown settlement in *Children of Paradise*, we find characteristics of the camp structure, which enables D'Aguiar to foster an understanding of the tragedy beyond images of passive followership, presenting the

commune members as individuals without rights under the yoke of an all-powerful leader.

The novel charts the decline of the settlement several months prior to the final demise, placing its dwellers at the mercy of their despotic leader, an unnamed preacher modelled on Jones. Through his sermons, the preacher cultivates an image of the community as a big family addressing his audience as "[his] children," to be acknowledged by them as their "Father" (D'Aguiar 2014, 62-66). In practical terms, membership in the commune amounts to an "inclusive exclusion" (Agamben 1998, 8), as the appearance of community hides a life without agency or rights. A revealing example of how the preacher exercises his sovereignty, "decid[ing] on the value or the nonvalue of life" (142), and rendering the licit and the illicit indistinguishable, is given when he orders an induced birth in an attempt to restore an appearance of normalcy and to "cheer the place" after the public beating of a young guard and the death of an old commune member, Miss Taylor (D'Aguiar 2014, 171). The preacher not only disregards the doctor's advice against this, since the baby's lungs are still not fully formed, but he covers up the mother's death in childbirth – "she was too weak for sedation and operation" (180) – and orders her to be buried in the hole under Miss Taylor's coffin. In a further exercise of limitless sovereignty, the preacher deletes the mother's name from all commune records, after destroying her passport and birth certificate, since all the vital records of commune members are kept in a safe deposit box (178). Speaking of the erasure of evidence or objective truth as characteristic of totalitarian domination. Arendt famously claimed that "the ideal subject of totalitarian rule is […] people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction […] and the distinction between true and false […] no longer exist" (2011, 141). The preacher often

resorts to deceptive strategies such as the manipulation of records or fake healings to maintain his absolute grasp over his followers and suppress any opposition. In a revealing scene early in the book, for example, he stages the resurrection of Trina, the child protagonist, who had fainted after being hit by Adam, a caged gorilla kept by the preacher as a pet. Trina's mother, Joyce, is forced to believe that her daughter is dead and when a woman questions the veracity of the event she is given away by her son and punished.

Other hallmarks of the setttlement as a camp include the workings of ideology and terror, the two pillars of totalitarian rule (Arendt 2011). To clarify the preacher's doctrine briefly, Jones professed an ideology of his own making, preaching a seductive hybrid called "apostolic socialism," a Christianity-inflected version of communism. He saw himself as a messianic leader, identifying with the figures of Moses, Jesus and Lenin, whose purpose was to liberate the oppressed and more vulnerable members of American society, particularly black people, women and the elderly (Wessinger 2000, 32-37). Apostolic socialism functions as Jonestown's official doctrine which, as is typical of a totalitarian organization, has effected the "complete transformation and control" of commune members (Gurian 2011, 7). In the novel, the children sleep in separate quarters to promote community ties, and the daily schedule is regulated by work and other communal activities, including the nightly sermons which leave the attendees "drained" and "emptied into mere echoes of themselves" (D'Aguiar 2014, 76). The preacher's doctrine is indistinguishable from the law and from reality, severely jeopardizing the membership's capability for independent thought and action. Terror is implemented though surveillance, its most visible example being the look-out towers and the guard-patrolled perimeter fence once meant to protect the community from the

wild creatures of the forest; as well as through the infliction of terrible punishments which do not spare children as shown by the mob beating of Ryan by other children for stealing bread from the bakery (103). Terror, Arendt explains, feeds on the "isolation" of people from each other and from the outside world, which maximizes their powerlessness (2011, 142-43). The isolation of the commune members stems not only from the site's remote location in a perilous woodland away from Guyana's capital, but from the discouragement of bonds between members in favor of loyalty to the group, and from their own outsiderness in American society. The preacher often reminds his followers, particularly when he fears defections, of "how far they have all come since their days scratching out a living in a country that throws away its people by the boatload: in wars, in prisons, in high homicide rates, in abject poverty, in ghettos" (D'Aguiar 2014, 337), so that the settlement should appear as "their last support" in a hostile world (Arendt 2011, 146). When Rose, one of the children, is asked by the preacher if she misses something about her former life, she answers that she "does not miss the gunshots in her ghetto and […] hiding under her bed when a battle rages between drug dealers and the police" (D'Aguiar 2014, 312). As D'Aguiar has put it elsewhere, these vulnerable Americans were "ripe pickings" (1998, 12) for Jones.

The deployment of the camp paradigm allows D'Aguiar to shift away from understandings of Jonestown as a historical anomaly and to dive into what is revealed as a rich site of interconnected histories. It is worth noting that in her ecocritical reading of the novel, Erin Fehskens identifies the settlement with the model of the Caribbean plantation. This is a plausible interpretation, given the intensive labour that takes place in the compound as well as its spatial configuration including the "preacher's white house" and "rows of dormitories" (D'Aguiar 2014, 3), a reflection of the hierarchy

where a white elite rules over a black majority. Through its links to the camp and the plantation, the settlement brings echoes of the Black-Jewish connection, placing itself, to use Rothberg's argument, "on a conceptual continuum with colonialism […] anti-black racism" and the "Nazi genocide," and offering a suggestion of "the unexpected debt of totalitarianism to colonialism" (2009, 23). Colonialism also manifests itself in the narrative through its legacy in postcolonial times. In another key multidirectional move," which will be the focus of the next section, the settlement is embedded within a critical period of the history of postcolonial Guyana, as the chronicle of life in the commune is interspersed with glimpses into the authoritarian rule of an unnamed president based on Forbes Burnham. Even though Burnham did not turn Guyana into a camp, in his exercise of power he became increasingly authoritarian and was complicit with Jones. It is important to note that Jonestown, formally called the People's Temple Agricultural Project, was supported by Guyana's government, who sympathized with Jones' venture and allowed him to relocate his organization from San Francisco to the Guyanese interior, furnishing him with a politically congenial refuge far away from the scrutiny of American authorities (*Alternative Considerations*, 2014). In underscoring the Burnham-Jones liaison, the novel not only challenges Guyana's dissociation from the tragedy showing that Jonestown and Guyana are implicated in each other's histories, but also draws our attention to the postcolony as another regime of domination.

Jonestown and the postcolony

Achille Mbembe identifies the "authoritarian mode" as part of the "postcolonial historical trajectory" (1992, 25). He writes that the official façade of postcolonial nation-building could mask a regime of domination and violence, where

> the state considered itself simultaneously as indistinguishable from society and as the upholder of the law and the keeper of the truth. The state was embodied in a single person: the President. He alone controlled the law and could, on his own, grant or abolish liberties. (5)

Another prominent feature of the postcolony is corruption, which manifests itself through “bribery, collecting taxes and levies” (22). Although Mbembe writes from an African context, his insights are also applicable to certain developments in the post-independence Caribbean. To give some historical context to this aspect of the novel, Burnham governed Guyana for almost three decades and “in the process developed the most authoritarian regime in the postcolonial Anglophone Caribbean” (Hinds 2008, 63), entrenching himself in power through “rigged elections and the undermining of civil liberties” (37). The authoritarian drift of Guyana’s postcolonial politics intensified after the “Declaration of Sophia” in 1974, which identified the figures of party and state with one another (37), reaching another decisive moment with the referendum held on July 1978 to implement constitutional changes aiming to perpetuate the president’s rule. Although attempts to boycott this referendum were unsuccessful, it marked an increase in opposition to the government from political and civic organizations (43).

While these turbulent events are not explicitly dramatized in the novel, despite its 1978 setting, the text captures the atmosphere of repression, hardship and corruption existing in Guyana at this time, bringing reverberations of the Jonestown camp into the Guyanese postcolony. The following description of the streets of Georgetown at night suggests a certain degree of exceptionality in the implementation of the law: “Army jeeps patrol with searchlights that they direct down dark alleys and at pedestrians who shield their faces and answer questions about their destinations and sometimes are

searched at gunpoint and relieved of a sizable portion of any currency found on them, which the locals refer to as being taxed" (D'Aguiar 2014, 28). This quote illustrates the subjection of citizens to intense surveillance and an arbitrary and abusive use of power. Opposition to the government, which may manifest itself as opposition to the commune, is severely punished: consider, for example, the character of Captain Aubrey, who loses his boat license and is badly beaten by some government thugs for his romantic involvement with Joyce. Conversely, the use of commune members as paramilitary forces to control socio-political unrest in the capital is suggested when someone reports that "the government hires them to break our demonstrations" (320). As in the commune, where only the preacher's white house and key buildings are lit at night, in the capital there is a shortage of energy and the streets "present a tableau of shadows interspersed with islands of luminosity" (28). During one of the visits that commune and government representatives pay each other, an army driver informs the commune's guards that "things are tough in the city. People cannot find work. Basic supplies like flour, sugar, milk, and rice are hard to come by" (104). These visits reveal a system of bribes, payments of large amounts of money and gold bars to the Guyanese authorities, which guarantee the government's connivance with Jones, as the army driver tells the seemingly unsuspecting guards: "How can all this happen [...] and not have anyone in the government or the police bother them from one end of the month to the other" (105).

Rather than an aberrant occurrence in Guyanese soil, therefore, Jonestown appears as a ramification of the "kleptocratic" governance that characterizes many postcolonies (Comaroff 2007, 133), one that does not serve but acts against the interest of its citizens. Further evidence of injustice and exploitation is furnished by the way the government deals with environmental issues and their impact on the indigenous peoples

inhabiting the forest. In addition to allowing foreign logging companies to bring about deforestation, the government neglects the complaints of the indigenous communities about the river pollution caused by the commune's pig farm, a commercial venture deploying communal labour. Soon after an indigenous delegation visits the commune to inform the preacher that the pig waste being thrown into the river is killing the fish as well as causing sickness and bad smell, and to suggest a more ecological way of waste disposure, the preacher arranges a bribe on the phone with the minister of interior to prevent a government inspection of the farm (D'Aguiar 2014, 123-125). This unempathetic response to the indigenous people's complaints stems from his perception of the Guyanese interior as a geographical emptiness in need of development, "they have owned all this land for centuries and done nothing with it" (126). These events place both leaders within the discourse of imperial domination, engaged in the exploitation of natural resources at the expense of their people and thus giving continuity to practices associated with the colonial era.

Further illustration of the persistence of colonial structures is given in a revealing scene that shows the reception offered to the American delegation visiting Georgetown to inquire about the commune. Key imperial tropes are introduced through the visit to the capital's botanic gardens, somehow analogous to the zoo-like commune's gorilla. This spatial remnant of British rule features the iconic Rafflesia, a gigantic flower discovered in the forests of Java and Sumatra and named for an important colonial administrator, which during the nineteenth century became a symbol of "British scientific and colonial expansion into Southeast Asia" (Barnard 2015, 149). The development of botanic science, of which the discovery of the Rafflesia was a part, was linked to the need to "rationalize and systematize the non-Western world so that it

could be exploited" (152). The Rafflesia and botanic gardens, now turned touristic attractions, function in the narrative as a metonym for the maintenance of colonial structures in postcolonial Guyana and, more explicitly, the reference to the idiosyncratic stench released by the botanic wonders "to the delight of the delegation, who reach for cameras and handkerchiefs to cover their noses and mouths" (D'Aguiar 2014, 319), is suggestive of the corruption behind the facade of Guyanese politics and Jonestown. The delegation's visit becomes an opportunity for the president's regime to give a show of strength and normalcy. The guests are treated to the local cuisine, rum and to a display of limbo dance, the latter showing, to quote Mbembe, how in the postcolony "bodies have been used to entertain the powerful in ceremonies and official parades … Power thus has colonized the dances," which have lost their ritual significance (1992, 20). On their walk around the streets of the capital looking for truthful testimonies about life in the commune, what the delegation finds are "praise singers" (21), government sympathizers trained to speak well of the settlement.

A more tenuous, but nevertheless revealing link between Jonestown and Guyana is the notion of failed utopianism. *Children of Paradise* charts the last stage in the development of the People's Temple project in its Guyana location, where the totalitarian derivation was strongly felt. While, as the title of the novel suggests, the settlement was meant to deliver on the preacher's promise of paradise on earth to his vulnerable followers – "he guides them along a lane that they cannot see […] the lane will take them to paradise" (D'Aguiar 2014, 168) – it nevertheless illustrates the compulsion towards totalitarianism that has been associated with utopian enterprises (Todorov 2011, 604). As a postcolonial project of nation-building, Burnham's Guyana could serve to exemplify what Bill Ashcroft describes as postcolonial utopianism

which, rather than an actual utopian "place," refers to "the spirit of hope […] that lies at the heat of postcolonial liberation" (2017, 5). However, Ashcroft adds, the dream of a better future for the new nation,

> appeared to come to an abrupt halt once the goal of [anti-colonial] activism was reached and the sombre realities of post-independence political life began to be felt. The utopian nationalist dreams of the anti-colonial liberation struggles were doomed to disappointment, bound, as the newly independent states were, to the political structures of the colonial state, and a political system largely incompatible with cultural realities. (2017, 5)

As hopeful subjects in an independent nation, the Guyanese could be evoked by the titular children of paradise in Ashcroft's sense. Burnham's declaration of Guyana as "a cooperative socialist republic" with links to Cuba and the People's Republic of China (Premdas 1978, 133) signalled the desire to effect a profound transformation in the country's structures after independence. And yet, as we have seen, the novel foregrounds the failure in achieving this ideal, caused by the authoritarianism of the new regime, economic hardship, and the continuing burden of the colonial legacy. The latter is particularly visible in the ongoing interracial conflict between the African and the East Indian sectors of the population inherited from colonial times, when East Indian workers were brought as indentured labour to replace the black slaves on the plantations after the abolition of slavery. Far from achieving an interracial political alliance, the post-independence political system remained divided along racial lines through the Afro-Guyanese PNC and the Indo-Guyanese PPP. The postcolonial history of Guyana has in fact been described as a "cycle of racial oppression" in which the two

predominant groups have struggled to reach power and dominate each other (Gibson 2003). The novel foregrounds the country's dysfunctional politics by offering a glimpse into one phase of this cycle when one of the parties is desperately attempting to perpetuate itself in power.

Les Enfants du Paradis

The novel's titular phrase does not simply stand as an ironic reminder of Jonestown, and in a broader sense post-independence Guyana, as failed utopias where the initial "promises [were] gradually lost in the process itself" (Arendt 2011, 139). It also places them, and Jonestown in particular, in the context of a larger history of victimization and totalitarian domination. For this title, D'Aguiar has acknowledged the influence of Marcel Carné's 1945 film *Les Enfants du Paradis* (Dickow 2014), which has been interpreted as a political allegory of France's plight during the Occupation. Carné directed this film against the backdrop of Nazi rule, when the country had become a police state dominated by an absolute power and collaborated with anti-semitic crimes (Turk 1989). The association of the novel with Carné's film has various implications. It somewhat relates Jonestown to the paradigmatic traumatic event of the twentieth century, the Holocaust, recalling the idea of the camp and bringing echoes of the final solution to the forced suicide – Jewish children, like those at Jonestown, were not spared. In establishing this connection, the narrative illustrates Rothberg's argument that "the Holocaust has enabled the articulation of other histories of victimization at the same time that it has been declared 'unique' among human-perpetrated horrors" (2009, 6).

The film connection also reinforces the more general theme of the subjugation of life under totalitarian control. Garance, the film's female protagonist an0d a symbol of

"France's prewar autonomy" (Turk 1989, 246), becomes, through her stifling relationship with the Count, a representation of how "even independent and defiant French persons were obliged to acquiesce before an increasingly totalitarian government" (249). At the same time, however, the film celebrates creativity as a space of freedom and dignity in an oppressive system, and this theme becomes instrumental to the narrative's resolution, allowing D'Aguiar to introduce an element of resistance into the story. It is important to clarify that the actual "children of paradise" in the film's title are the occupants of *le paradis*, the uppermost and least expensive gallery in the Theatre des Funambules, which was operative in the Parisian Boulevard du Temple in the 19th century, where the story is set. Carné deploys this motif to represent how the French "sought relief in plays and movies" and "enjoyed a state of integrity denied them since France's fall to Germany" (251-2). The films that Carné produced during the Occupation against the odds of censorship, scarcity and the persecution of his Jewish crew members, were in themselves an example of cultural resistance and an assertion of the country's undefeated spirit through the arts.

The resort to creativity and the imagination as a source of dignified liberation in the face of defeat is a fundamental way in which Carné's film resonates in D'Aguiar's novel, providing a remarkable illustration of the "productive intercultural dynamic of multidirectional memory" (Rothberg 2009, 5). Even if effective resistance is impossible in the settlement, the idea of it is linked with different forms of creative expression such as the figure of the trickster and the Anansi stories that Captain Aubrey tells Trina on their boat trips to the capital, as well as with music and performance. Joyce instils in Trina the empowering spirit of Anansi, "Whatever remains of that trickster spider, Joyce hopes it helps Trina find her way alone, if need be [….] 'Trina […] Remember the

Captain's stories? The spider always escapes from trouble'" (D'Aguiar 2014, 153). Brought from West Africa by the slaves, the spider is characterized by her "ingenuity, particularly when used to trick more powerful creatures […] provid[ing] inspiration and hope for the generations of enslaved peoples that lived in the Caribbean under colonial control" (Darroch 2009, 95-96). Trina compares Ryan with Anansi when he manages to outwit the night guards and steal the bread that he shares with the other children (D'Aguiar 2014, 85), and she becomes a trickster herself as the ringleader of an attempted escape from the compound. When the commune's fatal end seems imminent, Trina organizes a children's parade as a subterfuge to escape downriver, a rebellion masquerading as carnivalesque performance. In the march, led by Trina playing her flute and Adam disguised as a king, we find echoes of the Boulevard du Temple's artistic ambiance recreated in Carné's film, with its "showmen […] puppet, acrobat and pantomime playhouses" (Turk 1989, 223): "Gymnasts and acrobats, jugglers and dancers, and characters from cartoons, Halloween, Day of the Dead, and Carnival troop behind Adam and Trina and occasionally break rank to tumble or display an elaborate dance move" (D'Aguiar 2014, 344). Although Captain Aubrey's boat and canoes driven by indigenous people are awaiting the runaway children and some adults at the pier, the attempted escape is frustrated by the commune's guards, and the next time we meet the children they are being forced to line up before the poison vats (317).

As the novel reaches its close, D'Aguiar chooses not to alter the community's fate, historically sealed, in what can be seen as the ultimate expression of their status as bare life, existing in a space of exception "in which whether or not atrocities are committed depends not on law but on the civility and ethical sense of [those] who […] act as sovereign" (Agamben 1998, 174). And yet the queuing scene, the novel's last, is

rendered contrapuntally to create a space for a private flight through the imagination. The progress of the queueing for the poisoned Flavour Aid, focalized through Trina, is narrated in counterpoint with an alternative scene of freedom featuring Captain Aubrey telling Anansi stories to the runaway children in his boat, an image of what could have happened but did not. Trina is thus endowed with another trickster trait, that of the "psychic explorer and adventurer" (Hynes 1993, 208) who is able to challenge the existing order by "glimps[ing]" "imaginative alternatives" (213). The effect of Trina's first person focalization and the contrapuntal technique offering an alternative ending is to allow the children to preserve a sense of agency and dignity in the midst of their impending death. Like Carné, D'Aguiar features resistance and liberation through the creative spirit in his rendition of Jonestown.

D'Aguiar's portrayal of Jonestown in *Children of Paradise* brings recognition to the Jonestown people by disturbing the equation between perpetrator and victim, and by offering a humanized portrait of the victims that challenges their association with images of abjection and passive followership. The novel creates a space for a memory without a physical site, and in so doing it could function as a "portable" or "textual monument," to use Ann Rigney's terms, "work[ing] alongside other memorial forms" (2004, 369) as part of the dynamics of remembrance about Jonestown. This paper has argued that a fundamental contribution of this novel to the memorialization of Jonestown as one of the atrocities of the twentieth century is its multidirectional approach, whereby the tragedy achieves a metonymic significance and becomes emblematic of a larger human experience. In this rendition, Jonestown appears as neither a specifically American or Caribbean tragedy, nor an anomaly that took place in a nationally liminal space, but rather as the result of complex historical forces and

interconnected histories, subsumed in my analysis under the exceptional spaces of the camp and the postcolony. By digging Jonestown as a “site of multidirectional memory” (Rothberg 2009, 28) and placing it in a historical and conceptual continuum that encompasses different forms of subjugation – colonialism and its legacy in the post-independence Caribbean, but also totalitarianism and Nazi rule – the author gives the tragedy a wider resonance that enlarges its significance and enhances the humanity of its victims, revealing linkages between seemingly disparate developments and memories. Even when the narrative makes the commune’s and Guyana’s leadership accountable for the regime of terror reigning in the compound and its fatal outcome, it also gestures towards a sense of collective responsibility by inscribing these events in a more universal history. As a site of instruction for the present, the novel warns us about the “totalitarian temptation” which may arise when democracies fail to provide people with a space “where they find community, duty and higher purpose” (Taylor 2011, xxx).

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