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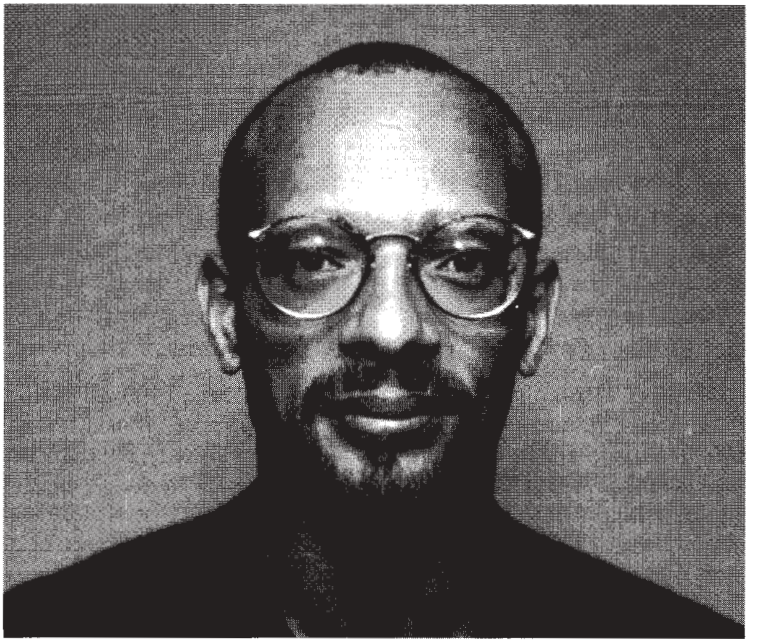

Made in Guyana

Lecture by

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MADE IN GUYANA

Fred D'Aguiar

Good evening ladies and gentlemen. My thanks to Ana María Coronel de Rodríguez, Director of the IDB Cultural Center, and to Anne Vena, Concerts and Lectures Coordinator, for this opportunity to address you all. I am happy and grateful to join a line of distinguished speakers hosted by this venerable institution. This program by the IDB brings culture, ethics and finance together and, in so doing, gives the IDB a socially responsible face.

My talk tonight is titled "Made in Guyana," and diverts a little from the invitation that read, "The Legacy of Jonestown." I am interested in how a Guyanese sensibility forms and what maintains it outside of Guyana. If Jonestown figures prominently in shaping my generation, so too do the annals of government and the chronicles of ordinary Guyanese.

Imagine you are about to experience the legendary British weather. Your first breath in London in 1960 is a meteorological miracle. You take in smog, which is namely a mixture of moisture, rising warm air, falling cold air, industrial pollutants and sleet. In other words, a cold, hard drizzle that is not quite snow and not quite rain, but a combination of the two, somewhere in between frozen and thawed.

Your first sight of gray English light is a painter's delight. English light has a certain quality of thickness, of having been thickened into a gravy by adding more atmospheric pressure than usual into the open cauldron of the sky, and perhaps drawing the sky down a little closer to the earth. English light is unstrained. Rather than falling through an atmosphere that might act like a strainer, or some kind of muslin cloth thrown like a veil into the space between earth and sky, English light falls and is dragged to the ground, looking like the flaps of a huge tent in the sky that the light has to peg down into the ground.

There are numerous gradations of this

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light. Life in England is like a soup kitchen with an extensive menu offering infinite varieties of soup served in bowls of light of varying thickness and grayness. As I said, this light is a painter's dream canvas. But for you, it is so dull on this day of your birth that your retina dilates completely. You resemble a nocturnal mammal with these large pupils. You need light, and lots of it. And the bigger the surface area of your pupils, the more light you are able to absorb into your anemic, photo-depleted body.

What do your Guyanese parents do? They are new to London and afraid of it. Rather than strip you naked and hold you up to the light so that your little body can sponge what meager brightness there is around you, they dress you in protective layers, wrap you in underwear, middle wear and outer wear. Rings of clothing embrace you until you are mummified against the damp of this English air and the almost dampened gray light. Only your face is exposed. Your ears and hands are in muffs. A scarf is wrapped and tied around your neck and very thick socks bind your feet. This is all for your own good.

There are four seasons in England, compared with Guyana's two, but during your first two years in London, you see only one season—winter; the others are brief interludes. The sun is a remote object. Wordsworth's daffodils flourish somewhere on a window sill, but not the sill that belongs to your parents. Cruel April remains Eliotesque, bringing more of the same... freakish snows. By the time your parents set sail for Guyana, you are ready to begin again somewhere other than London. Ready to be unwrapped, ready to take deep breaths, ready to open your eyes without peeling them. Ready, in short, to live.

From 1962 to 1972, Guyana licks you into shape. The light is so sharp your eyes become hooded to protect the contents of your skull. There is a sky but it seems far away and vast, able to accommodate the sun and the moon at the same time. There is nothing between the sky and the top of your head so the light arrives unadulterated. Brash light. Big sky.

Watch me now. Terylene short sleeved shirt, khaki shorts and bare feet with my toes spread out. My two little toes in particular, short and stubby and tacked onto the outside corners of my feet, toes which I worried about losing—my childhood logic concluding that they might drop off from lack of use, from being cooped up in thick socks and shoes all day in London. Suddenly, unbound in Guyana, even these tiny toes regain their mobility and prehensile nature. I practice picking things up off the floor with my feet after seeing one of my aunts pick a cloth up off the floor while walking across the room.

Watch me roam the countryside with my older brother and cousins, looking for fruits like sappadilla, breadfruit, guinep, tamarind, downs, guava, stinking-toe, mangoes, and the young delicious hearts of coconut shoots; and alligators, and snakes to tease and run from, knowing always to run in a zig-zag since zig-zags cross those reptiles' eyes, otherwise they will catch you and gobble you up.

My tongue loosens from the English of *Grandmama* to *Granny,* from *How are you today?* to *What happening banna?* From the pruned vowels and consonants of metropolitan London, to the sprawling musical diphthongs of the Guyanese countryside. From London's clipped steps to conserve body heat, with its minimum of talk—not talk but rather tight-lipped speech —clipped and deliberate. Stiff upper lip, if you will. *Yes, please. No, thank you. No, thank you very much. Indeed.* Only speak when spoken to, answer when called, and do so without gestures, without much eye contact. From that to Guyana's big, open movements, loud, rapid-fire and wide-eyed, and lots of signing with the hands, as if words alone are never enough for what you have to say, and what your body must do about this and that, with this body and that body, and this thing and that thing, and here, there and everywhere all at once, and right now before time runs out and words go out of season.

The childhood romance with the place experiences a rude awakening when the adult intrigue of economic and political power and territorial imperatives spill out of the capital, Georgetown, and into his countryside idyll. A near civil war breaks out between the two principal races and is divided along political party lines. It leads to independence, and despite the staging of numerous elections, the repeated 'victory' of one party's venerable leader lets him install himself as head of state for the next twenty-five years. In economic terms, Guyana slides from an impoverished English outpost and subsidiary beneficiary of piecemeal English colonial development, to an IMF and World Bank indebted Third World country. From pride in achieving the highest literacy rate of all English-speaking countries in the region, Guyana slides to the bottom of the ratings table. There is a matching drain in the population as Guyanese flee to economically friendlier climates—New York, London, Toronto—though the real weather of these cities remains hostile.

If Guyana's politically murdered son, Walter Rodney, is to be believed, this 'underdevelopment', as he eloquently dubbed it, is not home grown. Rather than being a sudden manifestation of contemporary political corruption, economic ruin has its roots in a slave-owning economy. The former colonies are set up to fail, to remain dependent on the former mother countries by certain longstanding, inviolable, economic relations, such as ample foreign investment in the major industries that produce raw materials, like bauxite and sugar cane, but virtually no foreign investment in local plants to process these materials. Instead, they have to be sent abroad and reimported in a more refined state for domestic consumption. One example is sugar: the cane is cut in Guyana, the juice squeezed out of it and there the story ends domestically. Next it is exported in its raw state to London where, on the banks of the river Thames at the Tate & Lyle processing plant, the syrup is separated into its various purities and impurities, packaged and exported back to Guyana as neat cubes of sugar, molasses, even rum for Guyanese to enjoy if they can

afford it.

All this is a million miles away from the imagination of a child who treats the earth like a parent, a mother, and the big sky like a father. Both are cherished by that child. His mind is formed by observing the behavior of the two; he models his thinking on them. From the earth he learns engagement and emotional involvement: clay and sand are passions, delicate flowers and trees teach him compassion. The sting-swinging marabunta cajoles him into a respectful fear. The sky instructs him in distance and detachment—cool reflection and contemplation. There is a shell pond next to the house that is inviting under the midday sun. The pond reflects the sky or the sky holds the pond in the palm of its hand. He studies the cold water, loving the way light plays in it and, after a long look, he dives in, rips through the seal of that sky, kicks his way to the bottom of the pond or the top of the sky, and surfaces with a shell in his grip. While he catches his breath he examines the shell. Then he throws it back in and dives after it hoping to catch it before it touches the floor of the pond again.

He loves Guyana's rain—huge, dust-raising drops so wide apart you can almost count them, like change spilled from a purse, then a massive torrent that welds those coins together and stings when it hits bare skin. Nevertheless, he turns his face up to the heavens and opens his mouth wide and drinks the rain. If there is no thunder and lightning, and especially if the sun is shining at the same time as it is raining, he and his cousins kick off their skimpy clothes (they are all children), run naked into the fields of rain and sing, *Rain a fall, sun a shine, jumbie a holler in a bush* (*Jumbie* is a spirit or ghost). During these downpours, earth and sky—the detached, contemplative head of the sky and the bleeding, intense heart of the earth—are reunited by the snakes and ladders of rainfall. With the sun shining through the rain you can see things (and sense things if you believe in a sixth sense) sliding down to earth and things climbing up to the sky in a two-way traffic. Things like waves of light, ribbons of water vapors, strata of odors, sound waves, pressure waves, birds caught in the open by surprise, a solitary donkey tied to a post in the middle of the yard and braying for someone, anyone to untie it and lead it into the barn. When this busy highway of traffic between earth and sky comes to an end, the air is scrubbed clean, the light basks like a freshened animal, the land is struck clear.

Politics tries to keep the earth and the sky permanently apart. Politics divorces town from country. Politics reduces you to a tribe, locality, interest, at the expense of your global humanity, or so it seems to the child. You are in one place, one house, a few square miles of fields and sky, but you are at the same time in every place where every child who is allowed to wallow in innocence lives. You are one child and every child. But politics says no, you are so-and-so's child on such-and-such street where this tribe lives and not that tribe. Your humanity is sacrificed in preference

of partisan politics. Your childhood is ruined by a creeping and encroaching deprivation: trees are cut down, wild land is cleared for agriculture, forests are decimated by loggers, rivers are poisoned by mineral excavators. All this in the name of progress, which is the other name for politics when politics needs an easy disguise.

There is a calypso the children loved to sing as they fetched water from the village standpipe: "Oh Lord, me bucket got a hole in the center, and if you think I telling lie, push you finger." It was never an anthem of poverty, never meant to literally lament the futility of trying to be productive with a bucket that was not up to the task. But that's how we saw it even as the older, wiser children understood that the bucket, with the artistry of its centrally located aperture, represented female genitalia, and the males were being invited by the saucy female persona to explore her sex with their proverbial fingers! In this instance a finger is not a finger even if a rose is a rose is a rose! The calypso is an example of how the gaudy and bawdy shadowed and doubled up with the desperate and needy. How one thing can really mean another, given calypso's skillful use of allegory, metaphor and metonymy.

Guyana's countryside teaches a child that the only boundary is the sea in front and the railway line beyond the backdam. Landscape becomes a cathedral and altar. While the tongue utters a demotic tune, the body moves as if in benediction, *through*, rather than over the land, absorbing nature's graces and information, paying homage to its marvels. Guyana's foremost novelist, Wilson Harris, portrays nature not as a passive backdrop or pretty scenery, but as a force governing the way we see. Our perception changes in any prolonged encounter with Guyana's bush interior, rivers and savannah. In this sense Wilson Harris is firmly within the tradition of Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelly and Keats, the Romantics of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries who argued in their poems that nature was a force we can benefit from by knowing about. The difference between Wilson Harris' vision, and that of the Romantics, is that nature, in a Wilson Harris novel, not only instructs us in its many contradictory truths, it also alters *how* we perceive those truths. Wilson Harris' encounter with nature changes his diction: not just what he has to say, but how he says it changes too. As an example of this altered perception—of form and content changing inexorably—here is a passage from Harris' most recent novel entitled *Jonestown*, which is loosely based around the memories of two survivors of the Jonestown mass suicides in Guyana twenty years ago:

"When music and unspoken prayer animate language, all proportionalities of being and non-being, genesis and history, are subject to a revisionary focus.

"The Wilderness comes into its own as extra-human territory which unsettles the hubris of a human-centered cosmos that has mired the globe since the Enlightenment.

"The inter-relationships between the

sciences and the arts—that ancient humanity may have sought to nourish within its crises and difficulties—address diminutive survivors of holocausts... all over again in startling ways...

"The net of music. Was it the same net? Was it an old net? Was it a new net? Such are the paradoxes of musical chords that compose a net in the language of fiction.

"Was it possible that a deeply sprung chord of music is unique and untranslatable fiction, and therefore both old and new? Was it possible that the strange density of the net—arising from the universal Wilderness unconscious into the subconscious and the conscious—was of quantum linkage and differentiation, and thus what was old was new, what was young was ancient, Virgin was child, child was ancient mother of humanity in the live fossil nursery of language?" *(Jonestown.* London: Faber, 1997, pp. 97-98.)

Clearly we have abandoned the territory of the calypso in this passage. The tone here is vatic, sublime, mythical and intercultural. There are three main variables: music, the Wilderness (notice the capitalization to denote a named character), and a variation on Freud and Jung's concepts of the world. Gerald Manley Hopkins' theory of Sprung Rhythm is hinted at also alongside the theory of quantum mechanics. The main idea here is that the opportunity for a reassessment of our present stance and past actions is presented to us as an act of contemplation. Rather than staging it in purely individual and private terms, Wilson Harris sees it as a process that can only take place in conjunction with nature's guidance and is therefore available to us all. The Wilderness, in this case the Guyanese interior, contradicts the notion of a man-made world subject to human will and contrivance. Harris does not deny our powerful capacity to destroy each other and every other species, and the earth along with ourselves —that is self-evident since nuclear fission, deforestation, and environmental pollution —what Harris argues is that the solution to the cycle of destruction cannot be found in this man-made world, but in the very Wilderness humanity is ignoring or else trying to reduce to rubble.

The music to which he refers provides the basis or platform for a liberating language to evolve and convert the terms of our spoken, written language from its present binaries (good/bad, right/wrong, white/black) into something more complex and productive. The model of the unconscious as both individual (Freudian) and communal (Jungian) recuperates the connection between the individual and the group, and the community with buried histories. If nothing is lost, then strategies for renewal and survival lie dormant and need merely to be uncovered. To accept Harris' view, we will have to abandon a linear view of history for a cyclical one, and see those binary opposites not as mutually exclusive, but as co-joined, with each displaying aspects of the other; that is, good tinged with bad, right infringing on aspects of wrong, and white as meaningless without black, a relationship between the two notions akin to the relativity theory.

The Wilderness holds more reality for humanity than the artificial material alternative with which most societies have become enamored. Harris argues that the poetic imagination should lead science and not the other way round. Close encounters with the Wilderness helped Harris to remake language to fit his vision.

All this is good news for Guyana. It possesses every racial group under the sun and everything in between. Guyana's land mass is huge compared to its population; some 600,000 people in a country nearly as big as England, Scotland and Wales, which is home to sixty million. There now exists a level of democracy that approximates Western models and is a far cry from its recent history. Independent international observers have confirmed that Janet Jagan's government won in a fair election. Guyana is still poor, struggling for foreign exchange and a decent gross domestic product, but so is every other country in the region without oil or a developed tourist industry. There is no price tag to be put on democracy. Clearly it needs to be protected against despotic forces in Guyana reminiscent of the old regime. There is a military to be placated and a vocal minority in the city determined to hold onto the privileges gained by an association with the former government. Some minor acts of terrorism have occurred. But this is not the Guyana of the late 1950s, '60s and '70s—what some of us like to refer to as "Martin Carter's Guyana," since it was his poetry that typified the conflict against the British, and then the power struggle between the two principle parties of the PNC and the PPP, and then post-independence blues.

Martin Carter functioned as Guyana's Poet Laureate though no such office exists there. Like Roy Heath and Beryl Gilroy, he is perceived as a writer of the city. Martin Carter died in December last year at the age of seventy. His 1954 poem, "University of Hunger," published that year in his book *Poems of Resistance*, is probably his most anthologized. In it he depicts the struggle of a peasant class of people for subsistence, and for freedom from despotic rule, in a series of scorching and galling statements and descriptions as you will see below:

University of Hunger
is the university of hunger the wide waste,
is the pilgrimage of man the long march.
The print of hunger wanders in the land.
The green tree bends above the long forgotten.
The plains of life rise up and fall in spasms.
The huts of men are fused in misery.

They come treading in the hoofmarks of the mule
passing the ancient bridge
the grave of pride
the sudden flight
the terror and the time.

They come from the distant village of the flood

passing from middle air to middle
earth
in the common hours of nakedness.

Twin bars of hunger mark their
metal brows
twin seasons mock them
parching drought and flood.

Is the dark ones
the half sunken in the land.
is they who had no voice in the
emptiness
in the unbelievable
in the shadowless.

They come treading on the mud
floor of the year
mingling with dark heavy waters
and the sea sound of the eyeless
flitting bat.
O long is the march of men
and long is the life
and wide is the span.

(Extract from "University of Hunger," *Selected Poems*, Georgetown, Guyana: Demerara Publishers, 1989, p. 45)

The first two lines sound like questions, but the interrogative, transitive verb *is* appears in lower case. This opening, coupled with the omission of the convention of the closing question mark, forces the reader to accept both lines as statements of fact rather than queries, unapologetic assertions in no need of ratification rather than a tentative hypothesis to be tested and proved. Therefore, attention must be given to tone: the rising inflection is a perfect rendition of Guyanese English rhythms. In lines 1 and 2, switch the last clauses of each of those lines from the back to the front of the two sentences and the argument of the poem becomes even more apparent: is the wide waste the university of hunger, is the long march the pilgrimage of man. Its subject is the poor and powerless in the countryside as distinct from city dwellers.

Hunger schools these hard working men in the art of unity and rebellion. They are politicized by it. The long march is life and it is also the long struggle to overcome adverse material circumstances. The desolation is psychic too, as if a collective unconscious were impelling these men forward in time and space from poverty to a material improvement of themselves—from psychic wound to psychic redemption.

That refrain about marching in the last two lines occurs several times in the poem. Each repetition deepens its meaning and significance. The tone of lament amplifies and resonates throughout the poem, bracketing its emotional register within the confines of the ballad, and underpinning the overall effect of the poem somewhere between a lament and a protest.

In February 1992, four Guyanese writers toured the southwest of England under the auspices of the British Arts Council in a six-city tour. I was lucky to hear Martin Carter read this poem on at least four occasions. My attention shifted to the various localities of the poem as I became familiar with it, but the emotional

impact of it, the poem's emotional intelligence, if you will, never diminished; if anything, it increased incrementally with each hearing, imprinting its felt discourse on my heart and, by extension, my head; becoming too, I think, unparaphrasable, as all great poetry should be.

When I asked him about his time in prison during the heady political days of anti-colonial protest against the British in the early 1950s, he said he "did what he had to do"—a cryptic and slightly ironic, self-deprecating reply that was typical of the man. The 60s, and to a greater extent, the 70s must have been unbearable for him given his idealism of the early to mid-1950's.

When I heard of Martin Carter's death in December 1997, I wrote the following poem in an attempt to outline my understanding of his work and his life. In my view, poetry works best when it deploys the idiosyncratic arsenal of poetry: image, sound, meter, and the line as a unit of sense.

In Memory of Martin Carter

I

Word, image, breath, body, help me
say now
What moonlight scribbling on the
bay puts down

And the bay shakes off or scrambles
into something new.
Moon, water, cloud, sky, don't let
my spirits get low.

As land frames this bay or bay wraps
land, so I want
To understand, Martin, the poet,
and fellow countryman;

How a life can come and go
no matter what you hope
Or do; how skin as delicate as
cloud or smoke

Breaks down to dust; how breezes
scatter the dust.
We have his words. We lean on
them. They bolster us.

We carry on. Our time soon come.
Like Martin's came.
His heart stopped, his chest fell and
failed to fill again.

His eyes settled back in their
sockets, his jaws slackened.
He no longer answers to his name,
its ring widens

Beyond him. Poems with his name
make him
Live again. He walks a line with a
Creole rhythm.

There's a bounce to his step, just
short of a hop
And a drop. And rhyme and
reason. They don't stop.

Martin rhymed. Martin reasoned.
His words chime;
A bell everybody tries to ignore at
closing time.

The bell at the start of Mass; that marks the hour.
Now its tongue is wrapped in cloth or ripped out;

His body, empty, tongueless. But not his words.
His poems make so much noise. I hear them above

Low-flying jets, sirens, carpets of parakeets,
Children playing with building blocks in streets;

Over drill sergeants at local army barracks;
Their tropical downpour; their wet mouth of fog

On a window; Lake Erie snow over Buffalo;
Hard and hot as nails on a track flattened by a train.

Martin's poems model their sting on marabuntas;
Their sweetness understudies sapodillas;

With Stabroek market on Saturday for onomatopoeia.
Between road and yard sits trench for enjambment.

The continent balks at all prospects of definition.
A tangled vine ensnares his work and refuses translation.

Martin's poetry arches its back and takes the lean
Of continental drift. The rain forest runs off into his poems.

Georgetown's streets arrange themselves like stanzas.
Six hundred feet below sea level, the land rears up and gazes

With muddy head at Martin's poems lined up offshore,
Full of seaweed, crustaceans, Harmattan dust, crude oil.

II

When a man you love dies,
Even if you have loved him
As a flower must surely love a bee
Fearing its sting and craving its visitations,
Loving the bee and not its sting,
Seeing all that pollen gathered from
Roving the world, dripping off its feet,
Wingtip, beard, and wanting to be a part of it.
How do you commemorate him?

A full moon sails across the sky
Or clouds coast by,
A cobalt sky, a luscious moon.
One band of moonlight crosses the bay
In shivers, climbs the balcony and falls
On me with the weight of moonlight:
Cool, dull, weak as a shadow,

Silent and printless.
Martin Carter
Your memory is this light, this bay,
This sky that will soon
Be too bright and then vacant.

The first bee crawls up the hibiscus
Stamen and the dew not even gone,
Petals still folded in a fist.
No one told that bee.
It simply wants to make honey.
Faint moonlight, mixed with dawn
Is enough for it to see in.
It would tell you it could find
That flower with its eyes shut
And one translucent wing
Tied on its back.

The sky drops the moon.
Clouds flock by. A bangle of
moonlight
Is barely discernible now as the day
Intrudes and either the moon
Expands into a sun or it shrinks
From sight. Traffic begins-
One giant bee. The morning,
a rose,
Opens; Martin in everything.

A younger generation of Guyanese writers like David Dabydeen, Grace Nichols, Pauline Melville, Sasenarine Persaud, Harischandra Khemraj, Ian McDonald and John Agard show twin loyalties. Preoccupied with correcting old shibboleths about Guyana exported to Britain and Canada, these writers also concern themselves with British and Canadian society. This twin canvas of their concerns is in keeping with changes in the relations between colonizer and colonized. The decolonized regions have yet to fulfill Ngugi wa T'hiongo's call in the 1970s for a decolonization of the mind. If there is a post-colonial movement it is surely a contest conducted on a psychological plane. The idea being that long after the material relations between peoples have changed, the mental chains remain unbroken.

In a sense, when Guyana could not answer back, precursors like Edgar Mittleholtzer ploughed a well-defined, if lonely, field. He deserves credit for manning a solitary sentry post—that of the colonized writer—fulfilling what Derek Walcott has called an "Adamic" function. But Mittleholtzer had a blank if singular canvas. He was Adam because the West Indies had not been named in its own image, it had merely been fenced in by a foreign power. Local writers defined their world, and the act of definition proved sufficient. The outside world, the surroundings, had to be claimed before there could be the luxury of an inward glance and the self purging of a centuries-old implanted ideology of inferiority.

To conclude, let me say that Jonestown in 1978 shocked and appalled me. I was eighteen in South London, and proud to be English with a Guyanese difference until the calamity distinguished Guyana from Ghana once and for all in everyone's mind. When I saw the pictures of the bloated bodies of 913 people, 274 of them children, and without any knowledge of the intricacies of the case, I wanted nothing to

do with a country that could host such barbarism. Without much insight into Jim Jones and his American followers, I readily attached responsibility for the painful deaths by cyanide of those children to the country's politicians of the day. In my young adult mind, somehow, a rampant political corruption had reaped the whirlwind of this massacre of the innocents. The country's symbolic death at the hands of a corrupt leadership had been rehearsed for the world to see, and all that remained was a second, less newsworthy calamity of the death of the nation. There was no shortage of the dramatic in my eighteen year old mind (I should say I was a young socialist at the time). The leadership of Jim Jones and the fate of his followers mimicked that of the larger national picture. Guyana, six hundred feet below sea level, would be devoured by a tidal wave of corruption and rebellion against it, and the world would see pictures, many graphic pictures, but no authority with the will to prevent it.

Twenty years later, the reality is different. I view Jim Jones as an accident waiting to happen. He could have been anywhere. Guyana was merely a backdrop for his Hollywood apocalypse flick. His followers became fodder for his megalomaniacal delusions of persecution and self-aggrandizement right here on earth, but if not on earth—because he was denied by curious government agencies in the form of the murdered U.S. Congressman, Leo Ryan —then in some conjured, other-worldly place. The majority of Jones' followers were poor and powerless. They invested a high premium in a hereafter, having been betrayed by a life of struggle and need in the here and now of 1970s America, still licking its wounds from desegregation battles and Vietnam. These poor blacks (and a few whites) were ripe pickings for Jones. His brand of charismatic biblical rhetoric became a tonic for the poor, relief and retreat from the hard graft reality of bills and the struggle to make ends meet, and nothing to answer a spiritual hunger but want and more want, greed, and no way of matching that need.

The Bible is the foundation for the resilience of the American poor, rather than any unionism or socialism or racial solidarity. Jones knew how much a poor black family invested in a belief that somewhere, other than here on mean old earth, a place existed where men and women of all races and classes lived on the same plane, believing that access to that harmonious plane was earned, not by wealth and influence, but by simple devotion to the idea of an after life. He preached to their vulnerability and gained his hundreds of followers willing to uproot and relocate to a country they had probably never heard of before.

What is the legacy of Jonestown? These days you can take your pick of fundamentalist thought gone awry. Is Jonestown the result of an escalation in material greed, matching an equally blind quest for spiritual fulfillment, not met by the stale establishment religions or conventionally configured denominations? Or is it the natural consequence of a rise in millennium fever, coupled with a genuine

quest for something other than the rat race, and the emptiness of material possessions? Are such sects simply trading on some popularized notion of an inner life worthy of discovery, and virtually a guarantee of contentment whatever the material reality? Perhaps Jonestown was even part of a Guyanese government plan to place citizens from the most powerful nation in the world in the middle of territory that Venezuela claims, in order to stave off a Venezuelan invasion, since any such move would risk involving America by threatening American lives. Who knows? What is certain is that Guyanese do not talk about Jonestown. In fact, Jonestown is even a joke, a foreign experiment failing spectacularly on Guyanese soil with little to do with the Guyanese themselves. A satellite project, another imperialist dream turned into a nightmare, the excesses of Western-bred indulgence, with the idea of God and paradise reaching a logical conclusion: Joseph Conrad's Colonel Kurtz in the *Heart of Darkness* gone mad, except that Kurtz' darkness, which is Jones', is somebody else's daylight, the "everydayness" of all Guyanese.

For me, with my mix of English and Guyanese, and now residing in the U.S., I find Jones is a way of bringing the three conditions together. I can rehearse the meaning of a Guyanese past in my life by looking at Jonestown and linking it to an Englishness shaped by American cultural imperialism. If Guyana were ever a site for the last romantic engagement of this century, with an ancient, pure and instructive landscape, then Jones' presence in the Guyanese interior, so close to the rain forest of the Amazonian basin, certainly exploded that notion for my generation of Guyanese writers.

The power of humanity to exert a destructive influence on the environment is equaled only by our capacity to turn that destructive potential against ourselves. The Guyanese interior was bruised by the Jonestown settlement but it is now overgrown and returned to the wild. The scar is not physical in terms of landscape—that has healed—but human, and psychic. Once you know about Jonestown, how can you trust ideology or charisma or have faith again? A body and mind are emptied of all three. One's capacity to imagine an unadulterated humanity is tainted. The romantic gene—so necessary for regeneration—is eviscerated and replaced by the cynic, a clinical mind and disengaged heart incapable of ever being surprised, because history—a modern history at that—displays all of humanity's worst excesses. One is left in that cynical condition and then expected to raise children, and raise hope for the future.

Fred D'Aguiar (London, 1960) was raised in Guyana, and is the author of *The Longest Memory* (1994), winner of the Whitbread First Novel Award and the David Higham Award; and *Dear Future* (1996), which won the Guyana Prize for Fiction. His upcoming novel, *Feeding the Ghosts*, about the survival of a slave thrown overboard during transport, will be published in the United States by Norton in 1999. He has also published four volumes of poetry. He won the Malcolm X Prize for Poetry in 1986, and the Guyana Prize for Poetry in 1989. Mr. D'Aguiar is currently teaching Creative Writing at the University of Miami.

POETRY
Mama Dot. London: Chatto and Windus, 1985.
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PLAY
A Jamaican Airman Foresees His Death. London: Metheun, 1995.

TELEVISION
Sweet Thames (poem/documentary for BBC, 1992.)
Rain (poem/documentary for BBC, 1994)

AWARDS
The University of Kent's T. S. Eliot Prize for Poetry, 1984.
The Malcolm X Prize for Poetry for *Mama Dot*, 1986.
The Guyana Prize for Poetry for *Airy Hall*, 1989.
Sweet Thames won BBC's "Race in the Media Award", 1992 and the British Film Institute's "Most Innovative Film Award," 1993.
The Whitbread Prize for Best First Novel, the David Higham Award and the Guyana Prize for First Novel for *The Longest Memory*, 1994.
The Guyana Prize for Fiction for *Dear Future*, 1996.

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