

**Language Appropriation in New Religious Movements: Identity, Conflict, Boundaries, and
Pejorative Terms**

by

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Abstract

As a broad classificatory category, *new religious movements* (NRMs) refers to groups as varied as they are unorthodox. As diverse emergent agents of restoration or change, the social transformations that their doctrines promote and behaviors achieve vary in both articulation and form. To cope with this diversity, one strand of popular and academic inquiry into NRMs stretching from 1960s anti-cult literature to the present utilizes a hermeneutic of meaninglessness. This widely deployable approach to reading new religious texts argues that NRM leaders (mis)use words in their efforts to befuddle and seduce potential converts – recruitment, rather than coherence, guides vocabulary choice in new religious doctrines. Promoters of this hermeneutic point to seemingly catachrestic deployments of familiar terms as evidence of NRMs as organizations that abuse and misuse language.

While a widely applicable tool for examining new religious texts is valuable, the hermeneutic of meaninglessness fails both in its understanding of language and its depiction of NRMs as careless, incoherent language users. This thesis combines recent re-appraisals of religious studies theory with close readings of texts produced by Scientology, Peoples Temple, the Children of God, and the Jesus People to reject the hermeneutic of meaninglessness while providing an alternate analytical framework for approaching new religious texts. In particular, it identifies moments of pejorative language appropriation and adaptation in new religious texts as sites of identity and worldview construction, contestation and conflict with cultural interlocutors, and boundary maintenance. Rather than evidence of terminological paucity, language appropriation in new religious texts reveals persistent patterns for crafting communication strategies, fostering in-group fluency, and ascribing organizational functions to semantic change.

To draw out language appropriation's functional presence in new religious discourse, and to highlight the agonistic dimension of new religious language, this thesis adapts Tim Murphy's language-based theory of religion, particularly his definition of religion as "the structuring of asymmetrical relations between real or imagined groups or classes." It also conceptualizes new religious texts as examples of M. A. K. Halliday's model of "anti-languages." Combined with sociolinguistic research on language's relation to identity, conflict, and boundaries as well as scholarship on pejorative/slurring speech, these theories form the basis for an illuminating examination of language choices in new religions.

To demonstrate the organizational effects of fostering fluency and adapting vocabulary, the thesis first turns to L. Ron Hubbard's writings on language in Dianetics and Scientology. It explores his conception of language change in relation to new religious discoveries, insistence on proper definition as a key aspect of effective group practice, and doctrinal/behavioral apparatus for promoting fluency amongst Scientologists. Moreover, the thesis explores his doctrine of "propaganda through the redefinition of words" as a conceptual analogue to the language appropriation and adaptation processes that takes place in other NRMs, discussing Hubbard's adaptation of *squirrel* and *psychiatry* as examples.

Peoples Temple's audiotapes, the Children of God's *MO Letters*, and the Jesus People's *Hollywood Free Paper*, in turn, each present an opportunity to trace the appropriation of particular pejorative/slurring terms in individual NRMs. Guided by Halliday's observation that anti-languages most often adapt vocabulary that relates to major organizational concerns, the thesis traces the borrowing and altering of *nigger* in Peoples Temple, *whore/harlot/hooker* in the Children of God, and *freak* in the Jesus People. These terms relate to doctrinal and practical interests in race, sex, and counterculture, respectively. Analyzing each group's corpora reveals

both the persistence of language appropriation as a discursive tactic and the organizational divergences in doctrine, practice, and demographic between each NRM. As such, a language appropriation-focused approach to new religious texts is a broadly applicable framework for studying new religions. It reveals patterns across organizations while highlighting distinctive elements, encourages textual analysis of denotative and connotative change without advocating for a particular term's definition, and matches new religious examples to religious studies theory and sociolinguistic concepts.

Preface

This thesis is an original work by Kristian Klippenstein. Some of the research conducted for this thesis appears in peer-reviewed publications by the same author.

Segments of chapters 2-3, and a substantial portion of chapter 5, appear in Kristian D. Klippenstein, "Language Appropriation and Identity Construction in New Religious Movements: Peoples Temple as Test Case," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 82, no. 2: 348–380.

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Chapter 1

“A Type of Hypnotic Music”: New Religious Language

On January 22, 2019, the *Sydney Morning Herald* ran an article written by Jonathan Rivett titled “Deceptive Language is Often Found on the Fringe and Should Stay There.” The article took aim at the Church of Scientology International – or, more specifically, at the unique, technical, and often confusing language that its founder, Lafayette Ronald Hubbard (1911-1986), employed. Rivett recounted a 1968 *World In Action* television interview to demonstrate Scientology’s opaque vocabulary, drawing attention to an apparently-damning paradox where Hubbard claimed that he designed Scientology as especially accessible to lay audiences but then failed to articulate its basic tenets to the mystified interviewer. In a weary summary of the conversation, *World in Action*’s narrator conceded that “even after three hours of talking, we never got an explanation from him that we could understand” (*World in Action*, 1968). Labelling Hubbard “one of the greatest conmen of the 20th century, possibly of all time,” Rivett opined that Scientology’s “bare-faced incoherence” had no place in upstanding society: “the fringe . . . is where words designed to deceive and obfuscate deserve to be” (Rivett 2019).

Function, Not Flaw

Rivett’s opinion of new religious language is not unique. Both popular and academic portrayals of new religious movements (hereafter NRMs) connect deliberately unclear language to “cultic” activity. One reason for this association stems from the object of study itself. Religious texts, generated by either NRMs or established world religions, often contain symbolic language or in-group terminology whose meaning is unclear to outsiders. Bruce Lincoln

highlights both the promise and problem of such language. For Lincoln, religions are “rich in symbolic discourse. . . . The useful ambiguity and polyphony of symbolic discourse accounts in part for the powerful appeal of religious systems, also for their resilience and adaptability” (2018, 23). Symbolic language introduces both adaptability and ambiguity into religious texts. Even when the words that comprise this symbolic content are recognizable, their usage may differ from their commonly known meanings. As Julius Bailey points out, “without membership in the tradition and knowledge about how these texts are understood and related to within the community, historians may go astray or find these documents simply confusing” (2012, 285). He cites group-specific language in new religious texts, furthermore, as a “linguistic barrier” that non-members struggle to overcome (2012, 285).

To compensate for these barriers, outsiders can deploy strategies of either specification or generalization. In terms of specification, outsiders may focus on examining the texts of a single religious group in the context of that group’s behaviors, tenets, or social situation. By itself, this close reading is commendable, as it permits readers to scrutinize an organization’s doctrines as well as the social/historical/economic/etc. environment in which they emerged. Unfortunately, the methodology or framework developed to reduce ambiguity in one situation may prove far less effective when deployed to examine a different religion’s texts. If one wishes to study more than one set of new religious texts, a generalized conceptual stance becomes necessary.

One of the most simple, effective, and problematic generalized methodologies for reading new religious texts is what I term a “hermeneutic of meaninglessness,” and it is this hermeneutic that Rivett’s article employs. As described below, a hermeneutic of meaninglessness posits that new religions use language to bamboozle or confuse potential converts, stripping away both words’ meanings and readers’ critical thinking skills for purposes of indoctrination. In short, the

goal of new religious texts is to confuse/obscure rather than to clarify/illuminate.¹ The lucidity of a text's content, in other words, is incidental – what matters is the text's ability to turn readers into converts.²

A hermeneutic of meaninglessness is attractive because outsiders can apply it to texts generated by any new religion, explaining away perplexing or embarrassing passages while also absolving scholarly confusion. If a group's texts are meaningless, then outsiders can simultaneously justify their confusion and divest themselves of interpreting ambiguous and adaptable passages. This technique supports a larger comprehension of cults that privileges practices over words. If “cult” practices are deemed illogical or aberrant, then the texts that support or encourage them likewise must be illogical, unreasonable, and without meaning.³ As Alexandra Stein puts it, “pick any totalistic group and the emptiness of the language they use is apparent [to a critical outsider]” (2017, 151).

While a widely deployable framework for reading new religious texts is valuable, one that dismisses content in favor of function to avoid difficult or uncomfortable analysis generates warped conclusions regarding NRMs. Scholars need a framework for reading new religious texts that a) links content and function and b) acknowledges and accounts for ambiguity and adaptability within new religious data. In this thesis, I dispute the hermeneutic of meaninglessness' position that seemingly catachrestic language in new religious texts is evidence

¹ A charitable interpretation of this hermeneutic might apply the Buddhist notion of “skillful means,” in the sense that religious leaders can use trickery or deception to teach their followers (see Federman 2009, 128). The analogy breaks down, however, when one observes that a hermeneutic of meaninglessness identifies mystification, rather than edification, as deception's goal (Federman 2009, 133).

² Lucidity is a valuable property of communication, particularly in recruitment discourses (see Mooney 2005, 136, 144). Nevertheless, this hermeneutic sees apparent lucidity as an illusion or a façade.

³ The use of the word *cult* in this sentence is intentional. Annabelle Mooney argues that the label “cult” is applied to a group whose activities are considered “‘unreasonable’ by the mainstream” (2005, 2; see also 6).

of nonsensical doctrines and un-understandable practices. To do so, I trace the appropriation and adaptation of pejorative and slurring language – specifically, language that the NRM’s leader used to refer to its own members – in several NRMs. Without promoting either the use of such language or the new religious beliefs that it appears in, I argue that these instances of language appropriation are sites of identity and worldview construction, moments of contest or conflict with social interlocutors, and demarcations of social boundaries. Rather than meaningless mistakes, such terms are deliberate acts of language adaptation that affect organizational behavior and composition.

To demonstrate the organizational functions of appropriated vocabulary in NRMs, I deploy and adapt Tim Murphy’s (1956-2013) theory and definition of religion, which emphasizes borrowing, communication, and differentiation as crucial aspects of religious practice. He proposes that religions, like languages, are “systems of signification” that people employ to navigate and understand the world (2005, 70). The signs and symbols that make up these linguistic or religious systems of signification are developed contextually or relationally, and can change over time (Murphy 2007b, 121).⁴ Their meaning, moreover, is developed through differentiation, and – in Murphy’s eyes – differentiation results in inequality (2007b, 137, 147).⁵ The relational construction of meaning through differentiation is a key aspect of Murphy’s definition of religion as “the structuring of asymmetrical relations between real or

⁴ Murphy argument relies, in part, on Ferdinand de Saussure’s work. According to Saussure, the relationship between a signifier and the thing that it signifies is arbitrary: there is no “natural connection” between a signifier and that which it signifies ([1916] 2011, 69). Saussure goes on to suggest that the meanings of signifiers can change over time as the social setting of communication changes, even though the signifiers used usually are borrowed from earlier acts of signification ([1916] 2011, 74, 76). As discussed in chapter 2, Jonathan Z. Smith makes a similar case for religions, arguing that religion is a process of continually expanding a fixed canon’s meaning to address new situations (1982b).

⁵ As quoted in chapter 2, Smith likewise notes that identities are created through oppositions and boundaries and highlights the social nature of such demarcations ([1992] 2004, 230, 246).

imagined groups or classes with the involvement of non-obvious beings, states, and events” (2007b, 141). My research tests the ramifications of this broad definition. If religions, like languages, are systems of contextually defined signs and symbols that groups use to structure and understand the world, then taking Murphy’s definition seriously requires one to pay attention to circumstances and contests surrounding the production of signs and symbols in NRMs.

Rather than inventing new signs to navigate these contests, NRMs appropriate and adapt extant signs to construct their meaning-making systems. As Sidney Tarrow notes, “words that emerge as symbols of contention are seldom invented on the spot: [rather,] they have sources in ordinary speech” (2013, 12; see also Yelle, Handman, and Lehrich 2019, 4). The development of new religious vocabulary is a constructive process of confiscations and inversions that can involve retaining the original meaning of borrowed terms, adapting the meaning of borrowed terms, or creating new terms. If, as Murphy argues, meaning is generated contextually and relationally, then the process of affixing meaning to terms provides insight into the context and relations that NRMs identify themselves as existing within or envision as ideal.

To address the connection between vocabulary and both identity construction and intergroup conflict, I rely particularly on M. A. K. Halliday’s concept of anti-languages, or “social dialects . . . [that] tend to arise among subcultures and groups that occupy a marginal or precarious position in society” (Montgomery [1986] 2008, 113). Research on profanity and pejorative or slurring speech research, in turn, foregrounds the presence of seemingly mis-used words in new religious texts. While a hermeneutic of meaninglessness may point to such terms as evidence of linguistic poverty, the very labelling of some terms as “bad language” reveals the social constructionism present in linguistic designations (see Battistella 2005). Thus, vocabulary

itself serves as both the site and means of intergroup contests for legitimacy, normativity, and visions of an ideal world.

Following Halliday's conception of anti-languages, I argue that the terms NRMs appropriate and redefine reflect key areas of organizational/ideological interest and shed light on three social processes. First, acts of redefinition shed light on the way that groups construct their identity and envision the world. Second, acts of redefinition shed light on the way that groups respond to criticism or challenge other social entities. Third, language appropriation sheds light on the way that groups use linguistic fluency and comprehension to create boundaries. Each of these processes is accomplished through language appropriation and the structuring of asymmetrical relations between real or imagined groups or classes. This argument, stemming from a close examination of new religious texts through the lens of Murphy's definition of religion and selected concepts from sociolinguistics, forms a widely applicable methodological approach that has not yet been used in the study of NRMs.

Acknowledging the functional potential of pejorative/slurring language is **not** synonymous with approving of its use. In this thesis, I am no more interested in endorsing the use of slurs than I am in endorsing the new religions whose texts I analyze – that is to say, not at all. Arguing that new religious discourse is intelligible to outsiders or that taboo terminology can achieve organizational goals is **not** the same as arguing that new religious discourse is true or that taboo terms are harmless/helpful. I neither utilize nor condone slurring terms like *nigger*, *whore*, or *freak* beyond the bounds of academic investigation.⁶ As someone who is unlikely to be

⁶ Here and throughout, I italicize words used as labels for entities/concepts, while the labelled entities/concepts (as defined by the NRMs under study) appear in plain text. For example: “*freak* is a hard word to spell,” “only freaks spell well.” Due to its extremely problematic nature, I enclose *nigger* and associated phrases (*crazy nigger tactics*, *house nigger*, etc.) in double quotation marks any time they do not appear italicized as labels or within direct quotes, to indicate that I am quoting Jones's use of the terms.

a target of the racial and sexual slurs that my research examines, moreover, I have no authority in demarcating or sanctioning situations in which such terms may be appropriate.

Religion-as-language, Meaninglessness, and Sociolinguistics

This section surveys three bodies of scholarship to situate my project academically, demonstrate its necessity, and identify its uniqueness. I begin by identifying other scholars who study religion-as-language, noting how my research addresses gaps in extant work. Next, I demonstrate that a hermeneutic of meaninglessness is both present in the field and flawed in design. Finally, I point out several recent sociolinguistic studies of religion, noting the absence of – but opportunity for studying – NRMs.

Murphy is not the only scholar to champion a language-centered approach to religious studies. Lluís Oviedo approaches religion-as-language from a cognitive perspective, identifying the creation and use of symbols as the defining element of human cognition and, consequently, as a fundamental element of humanity's cultural productions (2015, 989). Oviedo criticizes reductive explanations of religion, arguing that they fail to account for the complex network of cognition, language, and culture that makes up human life (2015, 987; also 991). Instead, he calls for a more “holistic, inclusive, and plural” approach that “relate[s] religious cognition to symbols, giving rise to meaning and value, as some of [religion's] main – and most neglected – functions” and “render[s] explicit the hidden codes that rule the religious grammar” (2015, 986).

Like using symbols, Oviedo views religion as a specifically human behavior.⁷ He argues that both language and religion are comprised of “a vocabulary composed of terms or symbols; a

⁷ At several points, Oviedo strives to differentiate human beings from other animals, perhaps due to his position as a “Professor of Christian Anthropology” (2015, 982). Unlike Oviedo (see 2016), my research makes no attempt to connect science and theology.

grammar with a set of rules that allows them to be combined as meaningful constructions; and a syntax that helps to organize symbols in a linear structure” (Oviedo 2015, 993). Religion, like other human cultural creations, is a “specialized or derived language” – it uses concepts found in language but employs unique categories to “transmit information relevant for those who look for an ‘alternative’ or ‘ultimate’ dimension” (Oviedo 2015, 993-994).

The dissonance between Oviedo’s theory and my own research comes when he claims that religion’s creative use of language results in a narrowing of meaning. In his work, specialized or derived languages function by taking broad or basic vocabulary, grammar, and syntax and then tightening or reinforcing boundaries of meaning “to better cope with new situations” (2015, 995). By this logic, new religions appropriate terms from wider society, but then narrow and limit the meanings of those terms to articulate a particular worldview. As my research demonstrates, language adaptation in NRMs involves broadening,⁸ not narrowing, the meanings of borrowed terms to craft a particular worldview. The NRMs studied in this thesis certainly add meanings to terms to achieve social change, but they also retain many of the terms’ original connotations to make doctrinal points.

For Oviedo, language borrowing is derivative and restricts the bounds of meaning. When defining religion as the structuring of asymmetrical relations between groups, language adaptation is better understood as an expansive process. My research demonstrates that when new religions incorporate pejorative/slurring words used by – or expected from – critical outsiders, they retain the power imbalances connoted by those terms but add new layers of meaning that turn the power imbalance to their advantage. Oviedo’s anti-reductionist approach to religion, ironically, reduces the range of meanings available to religious language.

⁸ As Sydney Tarrow argues, “as words diffuse, their meanings expand and change,” (2013, 13). NRMs that confiscate vocabulary serve as one vehicle of linguistic diffusion.

In fact, Oviedo seems to realize that – by its narrowing of meaning – religion risks irrelevance in wider society. Consequently, he introduces theology as a form of interpretation necessary to (re-)broaden the applicability of terms that religions borrow (2015, 996). My project, by contrast, understands appropriation as a palimpsest: the appropriated terms that new religions use bear traces of earlier versions of themselves, but also include additional meanings that allow for re-interpretation of the term’s original connotation. Language appropriation by new religions for purposes of identity construction and contestation is a process of subverting, inverting, reverting, or re-interpreting extant meanings, and all those maneuvers require the borrower to enlarge, rather than truncate, a term’s range of meanings. Only by acknowledging a term’s pejorative connotations, for instance, can one invert those connotations to disempower one’s opponents and empower oneself.

Robert Yelle is another scholar of religion who studies religion-as-language. While Oviedo discusses cognition, Yelle relies specifically on a semiotic perspective. In *Semiotics of Religion*, Yelle elaborates on the benefits and dangers of this approach (2013). He explains that “the task of semiotics is to elucidate the techniques of communication that have been employed in different cultures, and attempt, so far as possible, to specify the general principles that underlie such techniques” (Yelle 2013, 17). Since religious groups utilize communication techniques, religious signs and symbols are fair game for semiotic analysis. Yelle’s understanding of semiotics stresses the discipline’s twofold goals: to determine widely applicable general patterns, and to highlight differences in the rules of communication in multiple contexts (2013, 2).

This applicability of semiotics to religion is, for Yelle, both a benefit and a danger. He champions semiotics as a “set of conceptual tools” that scholars can use to examine general patterns while highlighting differences in religious practice (2013, 163). At the same time,

however, the widespread applicability of semiotics is problematic. If all aspects of human society and culture rely on communication, and if semiotics studies instances and rules of human communication, then semiotics can be brought to bear in all academic fields that study human society or culture (Yelle 2013, 7). This broad applicability is problematic because, for Yelle, its widespread deployment outstrips its awareness of particularities: in his own words, “the more universal in pretension semiotics has become, the more detached it has become from facts on the ground” (2013, 7).

Murphy’s writing does little to counter this argument. Seeking to produce an analysis of Christian discourse as it contributed to the development of the meaning of *religion* in the late eighteenth to early twentieth centuries, Murphy’s writing engages primarily with theorists and philosophers, and only rarely with religious communities, rituals, or doctrines (2003, 64-65).⁹ My research, therefore, strengthens Murphy’s semiotic theory by rooting it in “facts on the ground.” By testing Murphy’s ideas through their application to new religious texts, my thesis benefits from the broad applicability of semiotics while highlighting the nuances and differences inherent in each new religion under study.

Oviedo and Yelle both argue for studying religion through the lens of language, but neither of them focusses specifically on new religions. Annabelle Mooney’s *The Rhetoric of Religious ‘Cults’*, however, looks particularly at language choices in NRMs (2005). Moreover, her work spawns from a disappointment with the hermeneutic of meaninglessness. Rejecting the idea that new religious texts are incomprehensible to outsiders on the grounds that new religious texts follow similar patterns and rules to other texts, she aims to create a new framework for

⁹ Although there is no reason that one cannot use semiotics to study philosophical tomes, and although such texts can be legitimate expressions of religion, it is difficult to see such rarefied sources as examples of what Yelle means by facts on the ground.

textual analysis of NRMs (2005, 1, 3-4). Armed with the idea that new religions use pre-existing communicative forms, Mooney engages in rhetorical analysis of NRM recruitment texts (2005, 14, 137, 150).

In some ways, Mooney's scholarship anticipates and supports my work. She objects to a hermeneutic of meaninglessness, establishes a framework for studying texts created by new religions that focusses on language use, and demonstrates its adaptability by applying it to several different groups. Moreover, Mooney deploys several ideas that are central to my project. She argues that context affects meaning (2005, 20), that a community's discourse contains clues about its identity (2005, 23, 26), that a single word can have multiple meanings (2005, 24), and that marginal communities may use mainstream discursive techniques to both integrate and separate themselves (2005, 138-139).

Mooney's understanding of the representative nature of recruitment texts, however, limits her ability to capture the full extent of linguistic adaptation taking place in new religions. She selects these texts because she is an outsider – since these texts are intended for a non-member audience, Mooney argues that their authors presume the least amount of specialized knowledge necessary to engage with the content (2005, 23-24). In her work, Mooney identifies two characteristics of recruitment texts. First, she claims that recruitment texts downplay or ignore conflicts between the recruiting group and their critics (Mooney 2005, 129). Since the group is trying to acquire new members, it must make itself look attractive rather than embattled. Second, Mooney claims that recruitment texts avoid using altered or invented vocabulary (2005, 150). Since the group is trying to succinctly describe its benefits to a non-specialist, it will benefit from using familiar terminology.¹⁰

¹⁰ Abgrall (1990, 111) and Stein (2017, 55, 129-130) likewise identify accessibility as a characteristic of recruitment texts or propaganda.

Following Murphy's understanding of religion, I argue that religious identity is constantly (re)shaped by interaction or conflict with other social groups. I also suggest that language adaptation need not result only in the creation of technical terms, but can also involve mundane transformations that appear in all sorts of texts, not just doctrines for initiated members. Moreover, I propose that instances of language appropriation – and their role in responding to external criticism – are pervasive throughout religious doctrine. My research identifies instances of language appropriation deployed consistently across textual products meant for group members as well as texts specifically intended for non-members.

Mooney defends her reliance on a single primary source from each NRM on the grounds that recruitment texts are not “atypical” in each NRM's larger corpora (2005, 11). If Mooney's characterization of recruitment texts (as devoid of terms that have specific in-group meanings and devoid of references to conflict) is correct, then her sources are indeed atypical, because they lack acts of language appropriation stemming from contests with others. Her reason for selecting such texts, in other words, depends on the absence of a textual feature – language borrowing and adaptation – present in other movement texts. Alternately, if Mooney's characterization of recruitment texts is incorrect, then she has misunderstood her body of primary sources. In either case, my research identifies processes in new religious texts that Mooney's framework does not cover. Moreover, Mooney's focus on a single text limits her ability to trace language adaptation over time. Since she discusses only a single textual product, it is not clear that her framework's findings are duplicated in the other textual products of the NRMs under study. My research, by contrast, traces language appropriation across dozens of texts produced by each NRM, revealing patterns that persist across occasions and audiences.

Despite its narrow focus, Mooney's work rightfully challenges the hermeneutic of meaninglessness that outsiders may use to avoid analyzing new religious texts. This hermeneutic arose in the 1960s and early 1970s, as evidenced in the work of early cult critics such as Walter Martin (1928-1989), Dave Breese (1926-2002), and Ted Patrick (b. 1930), and remains present today. Martin's *The Kingdom of the Cults* argues that NRMs "utilize the terminology of biblical Christianity with absolute freedom, having already redesigned those terms in a theological framework of [their] own making . . . but almost always at direct variance with the historically accepted meanings of the terms" ([1965] 2003, 28). He warns that "cultism . . . plays a type of hypnotic music upon a semantic harp of terminological deception" to disguise its disregard for the fact that "things are what they are by definition" ([1965] 2003, 32). NRMs, then, make a mockery of semantics by adjusting definitions to fit new contexts or goals.

Dave Breese's *Know the Marks of Cults*, less eloquently but more virulently, laments that "few pursuits are more exhausting than the attempt to get to the bottom of the endless labyrinth of cult pronouncements" (1975, 24).¹¹ Indeed, he assures readers that his exposure of cultic nonsense "will save us the bother and expense of further involvement [in scrutinizing new religious doctrines]" (1975, 11). True to his word, Breese's analysis of NRMs only infrequently cites new religious texts. He explains that quoting from them brings confusion rather than clarity, since "the words of the cults are the products of a corrupted language. The words themselves have no real meaning" (1975, 62). In place of denotive value, cult language turns terms into "emotional triggers connoting to you whatever you want them to mean" (Breese 1975, 62). A

¹¹ See J. Hubbard (1998) for a counterargument in favor of doctrinally focused studies of NRMs. Hinting at a hermeneutic of meaninglessness, he suggests that "the most common reason that the doctrine of the new religious movements is ignored even by those who study their history, rituals, and social and cultural context is that it seems to be taken for granted that they don't have any" (1998, 84). According to Hubbard, this assumption is based on the belief that NRM members' "low level of education and cultural awareness" renders doctrine unnecessary, shifting the blame for meaninglessness from textual producers to consumers (1998, 84).

multiplicity of meanings dependent on speakers, listeners, and contexts, in other words, signals corrupted language.

While Martin focusses on deception and Breese highlights corruption, Ted Patrick brings meaninglessness to the foreground. In his autobiographical account of “rescuing” members of NRMs, Patrick repeatedly presumes that doctrines propagated by new religions do not make sense and are deliberately obtuse (Patrick and Dulack 1976). Describing Children of God pamphlets, Patrick observes that the beliefs that they profess “do[n’t] make any sense” and contain “all kinds of crazy stuff” (Patrick and Dulack 1976, 39). Patrick grants the Unification Church’s books slightly more credit, noting that one of the group’s major texts contains

all kinds of charts and illustrations; graphs of one sort or another; charts [*sic*]; terms like “Individual Truth Body, and the Inner and Outer Quadruple Bases,” relating concepts of God and Man to things like molecules, protons, and electrons. On the surface, the sort of stuff a student in college is likely to see on a classroom blackboard (Patrick and Dulack 1976, 240-241)

Despite these communicative flags that make the Unification Church’s doctrines “look respectable and deep,” Patrick concludes that the text consists of “nonsense” (Patrick and Dulack 1976, 240).

This approach to reading new religious texts demonstrates the basic tenets of a hermeneutic of meaninglessness. First, Martin, Patrick, and Breese can interpret any text by any NRM with this hermeneutic, since all groups ignore “historically accepted meanings” and corrupt language to create functional/emotional, but nonsensical, texts. An outsider may rightfully be confused when confronted with such material.¹² Second, texts generated by new

¹² If Patrick, Martin, and Breese can recognize these doctrines as nonsense, then the question arises: who cannot? Which outsiders will be “duped” into joining a NRM? The hermeneutic of meaninglessness does not dwell on this problem, although sociologists of religion – for their own reasons – have tried to pinpoint NRM demographics. See Dawson (2006, 71-88) for a summary of these demographics; see Lewis (2014, 2-4, 11-15) for a critique of these demographics.

religions are part of a larger doctrinal complex and ritual regime that uses hypnotizing techniques of “semantic deception” to confuse readers (see also Patrick and Dulack 1976, 76). As shown in the block quotation above, these techniques include borrowing communication forms that appear intellectual, legitimate, or familiar. Such appropriations, however, are portrayed as merely an illusion designed to mask the fact that a group’s doctrines do not make sense.

Jean-Marie Abgrall’s 1990 book *Soul Snatchers: The Mechanics of Cults* is a more recent and systematic explanation of the methods that new religions employ to attract and retain followers. Abgrall’s defense of a hermeneutic of meaninglessness includes sustained reflections on words, language, and persuasion. His observation that “the cohesion of the cult is ensured by the unity of the [*sic*: its] speech” and assertion that a “progressive amendment of words’ definitions allows a cultural rebuilding to take shape” both match well with sociolinguistic research concerning language and group identity (Abgrall 1990, 88, 148).¹³ He also argues that new religions cannot create doctrines using completely new words. Instead, groups must rely on words already present in society to make the doctrine appealing and – initially – comprehensible to potential members (Abgrall 1990, 148). As one becomes more involved, however, one realizes that the movement gives these familiar terms new meanings, and this realization is an important step in becoming a group member (Abgrall 1990, 206).

At this point, however, Abgrall turns away from sociolinguistics and declares doctrines expressed in new religious texts to be coercive “fairy-tales for adults” (1990, 31). New religions may rely on discourse and language, but “the speech of coercive persuasion . . . is a made-up

¹³ Regarding language comprehension as a part of one’s identity, see Kelman (2001, 193). Regarding linguistic cooperation between in-group members as necessary for communication, see Coulmas (2005, 12). Regarding language as a bond with one’s own community or family, see Coulmas (2005, 158). Regarding language as a way of identifying one’s group affiliations, see Montgomery ([1986] 2008, 104, 198) and Saville-Troike ([1982] 2002, 97, 199).

discourse whose goal is not communication” (Abgrall 1990, 112).¹⁴ A group may “weave into the jumble of their discourse certain recognizable elements,” but only as a first step in the process of twisting language: their “speech is built on paralogical reasoning that starts from a clear and concrete proposal, is then built up little by little, subtly distorted, and finally reaches an aberrant conclusion” (Abgrall 1990, 62, 68).

Patrick and Abgrall are both clearly familiar with new religions, and can be considered experts in some regards, but both are more concerned with law than scholarship. Martin and Breese both possess degrees, but their work is overtly polemical. Furthermore, all four works cited above were published decades ago. Their methodological presuppositions, however, carry on, and can be found in academia. Alexandra Stein’s 2017 book *Terror, Love, and Brainwashing: Attachments in Cults and Totalitarian Systems* provides an excellent academic example of this problematic hermeneutic.

Like Abgrall, Stein’s work recognizes that new religions adopt and adapt language. Stein argues that new religions need to use recognizable or familiar terms when communicating with non-members or proselytizing, but also notes that many groups have “specialized lexicon[s]” that only group members can deploy properly (2017, 129-130, 143, 148). She breaks a group’s signifying operations into two categories: propaganda – which must be intelligible to outsiders – and indoctrination – which need only be intelligible to insiders. Both signifying operations may use the same terms, but the meanings of those terms can change depending on which audience is being addressed (Stein 2017, 55, 131).

¹⁴ Abgrall’s notion of coercive persuasion, like his view of new religious language generally, overlaps with – but departs from – more widely-accepted observations of language. M. A. K. Halliday, for instance, notes that language has a “regulatory function”; that is, “the use of language to control the behavior of others, to manipulate the persons in an environment” ([1973] 2003, 305-306). Unlike Abgrall, however, Halliday does not overlay necessarily nefarious intent on language’s regulating abilities.

Stein's work acknowledges that new religions borrow and adapt words from wider society, and that linguistic fluency signals membership in new religions. She concludes, however, that the "loaded language" and "group jargon" produced by these acts of language adaptation are inadequate to truly represent the world (Stein 2017, 147). Like Abgrall, her lens for reading the linguistic maneuvers of new religions presumes that deception and meaninglessness is the goal of NRM communication. Groups attract members using language that "overwhelm[s] their critical thinking skills" and then indoctrinates them into a fictionalized reality (Stein 2017, 57, 144).

Stein's loaded language results in a fictionalized reality because of its descriptive poverty. Loaded language or group jargon is "dreary" and "predictable," especially in comparison to the "open" and "imaginative" vocabulary available to non-members (Stein 2017, 148). Loaded language is "vague" and can "stand for anything" – ultimately, it is "devoid of content" (Stein 2017, 151).¹⁵ As such, life expressed using loaded language "bear[s] no real resemblance" to "the actual experience of the individual" (Stein 2017, 149).¹⁶ In *Terror, Love, and Brainwashing*, language adaptation generates terms that are empty, non-descriptive, or – in propaganda's case – duplicitous. All of these arguments exemplify a hermeneutic of meaninglessness.

Abgrall and Stein's arguments make use of some sound sociolinguistic starting points, but they fail to take into account at least two key concepts. First, the hermeneutic of

¹⁵ This description mirrors Robert Jay Lifton's notion of "totalist language," which is "centered on all-encompassing jargon, prematurely abstract, highly categorical, relentlessly judging, and to anyone but its most devoted advocate, deadly dull" ([1961] 1989, 429). Setting up his own hermeneutic of meaninglessness, Lifton claims that users of totalist language are "linguistically deprived. . . . [The user's] capacities for thinking and feeling are immensely narrowed" ([1961] 1989, 430).

¹⁶ Mooney similarly admits that a new religious text's "pragmatic effect is more important than [its] truth" (2005, 152). She does not imply, however, that anyone knows the true/accurate words to describe an individual's life (for Mooney on the danger of claiming "truth," see 2005, 37-38).

meaninglessness presupposes that words have a single or correct definition that inherently matches what they describe. This supposition appears most clearly in Stein's work. For her, a new religion's acts of redefinition strip meaningfulness and accuracy away from terms, and thus the adapted word becomes an ineffective signifier. In other words, there is a correct way to use any particular word and there is a correct word to describe any particular aspect of reality.

At least since the popularizing work of Ferdinand de Saussure, however, semiotics and linguistics has challenged both the idea of a direct correlation between a term and the thing that the term is describing and the idea that a term has a single, proper definition. As described above, Murphy argues that meaning is not static – it can change over time, and is affected by context and intent (2007, 70-71). Language's meaning is malleable, and it is this malleability that makes the linguistic adaptations that Stein and Abgrall point out possible in the first place.

Second, a hermeneutic of meaninglessness mischaracterizes language's malleability as a danger. Martin, Patrick, Abgrall, Breese, and Stein all express concern that NRMs make linguistic choices that conceal – rather than just reveal – certain beliefs and that shape – rather than just describe – the group's identity. None of the authors note that their own work contains linguistic choices that emphasize particular points while obscuring others, much less that their projects are all intended to convince an audience of something instead of simply describing a phenomenon. All language users can alter some pre-existing elements while leaving other elements intact when communicating. Changing circumstances and needs dictate corresponding changes in language usage, while intelligibility necessitates retaining certain words or rules.

Moreover, Stein's criticism that these linguistic choices result in language that is dreary and vague – like Oviedo's claim that religious language borrowing narrows meaning – suggests that adapting language necessarily impoverishes it. Claiming that new religions cannot provide

their members with a worldview that actually portrays their lived experience simply circles back to the first criticism: more or less accurate descriptions may exist, but no single, correct, inherent term exists to describe an experience. It is presumptuous, moreover, to explain that a person's reality is being either properly or improperly described by a third party; as John Edwards notes, "the power of perception creates its own reality" ([2009] 2011, 5). There is no guarantee that Stein can assess a group member's life sufficiently to charge the group with improperly describing that member's life.

The hermeneutic of meaninglessness acknowledges language adaptation but relies on a problematic understanding of how signification works in order to avoid actually considering the content of religious doctrines. Consequently, and erroneously, new religious texts are classified as nefarious impoverishments of language. An analysis of new religious texts that takes Murphy's theory of religion seriously, and that draws on insights from sociolinguistics regarding anti-language and pejorative/slurring speech, sidesteps these problematic presumptions.

Murphy's theory of religion not only diagnoses the problems with this long-standing hermeneutic, but also it suggests which direction scholars can look to construct a better framework to apply to new religious texts. In his own work, Murphy relies on philosophy and semiotics. I, in turn, argue that Murphy's focus on language and change in religion, as well his insistence on the necessarily agonistic relationship between a religious group and outsiders, benefits from sociolinguistic insights.

Allyson Jule sums up sociolinguistics as the study of "who says what to whom – and why" (2007, 1). Edwards elaborates on this formula, claiming that sociolinguistics seeks "to illustrate the connections between language and identity" which, "in turn, necessitates attention to the social and political settings" that contextualize communication ([2009] 2011, 2). He

identifies both language and religion as markers of group identity, and argues that “selecting and codifying languages, reinforcing and implementing them, and seeing that their development and elaboration keep pace with changing social requirements are all . . . in the service of group identity” (Edwards [2009] 2011, 12). These assertions reinforce Murphy’s claim that “any understanding of religion must also be a theory of the formation of the symbolic order, that order of asymmetrical differentiations which constitute the conditions for the possibility of identity formation” (2007b, 151). In sociolinguistics, as in Murphy’s theory, a group’s identity is formed – at least in part – through its use of language.¹⁷ This language use is affected by – and, in turn, shapes – the group’s context and relations. Sociolinguistics, like Murphy’s theory of religion, is interested in processes of borrowing, adaptation, and the establishment of meaning or identity in relation to other entities.

Edwards observes two contradictory trends in sociolinguistic work concerning language, identity, and religion. On one hand, he notes that sociolinguistic scholars are aware that language and religion are two of the “most important markers” of one’s identity ([2009] 2011, 100). On the other hand, Edwards laments that there are few sociolinguistic studies of religious groups ([2009] 2011, 100). One of these few studies is *The Sociology of Language and Religion*, edited by Tope Omoniyi (2010). The volume’s contributors examine language usage and change in multiple world religions including Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism.

Within this collection, Rajeshwari V. Pandharipande’s study of the language used to express Hindu doctrines in the United States makes two observations that enrich and support a study of language change in NRMs. Pandharipande argues that neither linguists nor theologians

¹⁷ See also Doug McAdam, who argues that social movements “depend first and foremost on various forms of signifying actions” to navigate conflict with critics, present themselves favorably to the public, and achieve their goals (1996, 340).

alone can interpret language change in religious groups; instead, ideas from both sets of scholars are necessary (2010, 81).¹⁸ While the former group focusses particularly on *which* sociocultural changes affect *which* language choices in religion, the latter group focusses particularly on *how* changes in a religion's language affect that religion's ideas (Pandharipande 2010, 58-59).

Additionally, Pandharipande argues that language change must be legitimated by some source of authority. Although the source of authority – an individual, a revelation, a sacred text, and so forth – may vary from group to group, there still must be both an impetus and an authorization for change (Pandharipande 2010, 73). Both observations provide some guidance for studying language adaptation as disseminated by NRM leaders.

The Sociology of Language and Religion, however, contains no such studies of new religions. Although contributors focus on several minority groups in major religions, none of them study communities that Patrick, Abgrall, or Stein would classify as new religions. Additionally, *The Sociology of Language and Religion* focusses primarily on the link between sociocultural change and changes in religious language, and only incidentally touches on language and identity construction. Another sociolinguistic collection, Jule's *Language and Religious Identity*, addresses this latter topic (2007).

Language and Religious Identity posits that “the way we speak and what we say work to construct and maintain our identities – identities located in a variety of contexts, including here religious ones” (Jule 2007, 3-4). The volume's contributors explore the effect of language usage on identity in specifically religious contexts. Drawing on the work of Joshua Fishman, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Erving Goffman, the contributors bring up concepts that inform a language-based analysis of NRMs. Neryamn Rivera Nieves and Roxana Delbane Rosati look at the role that

¹⁸ By “theologians,” Pandharipande seems to mean academics who study religion.

religion and language – accompanied by culture and history – play in bonding communities together (2007, 30). Tamara Warhol examines exegetical arguments to explore language's conflictual and dialogical nature in relation to shaping religious communities (2007, 54). Touching on both ideas, Sage Lambert Graham studies the fluidity of identity, particularly regarding one's position in relation to other interlocutors (2007, 80).

Again, however, the volume focusses on language use in communities that practice a large, established religion – usually Christianity. Huamei Han makes a vague reference to “the emerging research on minority religions,” but this research alludes to minority groups – particularly immigrants – practicing established religious traditions (2007, 196). The volume's editor, in fact, acknowledges the need for more sociolinguistic work surrounding religions that are not mentioned within the text (Jule 2007, 6).

Language and Religious Identity and *The Sociology of Language and Religion* serve as heartening examples of the fruitfulness of using sociolinguistics to study religious communities. These works, moreover, contain observations and ideas that compliment Murphy's emphasis on fluidity and relationality in religion. My research takes up Jule's challenge to “add to the growing tapestry of sociolinguistics in its quest to understand how people connect through and in language” (2007, 6). Rather than studying minority groups that practice established religions, my research examines minority groups that practice emergent religions.

Methodology and Outline

This thesis consists of two parts. Chapters 1-3 lay out a theoretical and methodological framework for analyzing language appropriation in new religions. Chapters 5-7 deploy that framework to trace the rhetorical and social implications of language adaptation in three NRMs (Peoples Temple, the Children of God, and the Jesus People). An intermediary discussion of

language adaptation and fluency in Scientology (chapter 4) appears between these two parts to transition from theory to what Yelle calls facts on the ground, and a final analysis of the benefits and challenges of my language appropriation-focussed analysis (chapter 8) concludes the thesis.

Chapters 1-3 challenge the hermeneutic of meaninglessness by linking Murphy's theory to sociolinguistic observations regarding the function of anti-languages and language adaptation in minority or countercultural groups. By combining the major foci of Murphy's definition of religion with insights regarding anti-languages and pejorative/slurring terms, I promote a form of close reading that traces the social and organizational ramifications of patterns of adaptation in new religions. To transition from theory to data analysis, and as a proof-of-concept investigation of language's importance in NRMs, I then outline L. Ron Hubbard's emphasis on organizational fluency in the Church of Scientology International.

Chapter 2 provides an overview of Murphy's religious studies writings, focussing particularly on his definition of religion. In a posthumously published interview, Murphy described his contribution to religious studies as a two-step process: first, a critique of influential nineteenth and twentieth century phenomenological theories of religion and, second, a responsive attempt to generate a new theory of religion (C. Martin 2013). Murphy's *Representing Religion* serves as a summary of this critical and creative process (2007). Although he later published *The Politics of Spirit* (2010) as an amplification of the critical maneuvers in *Representing Religion*, he passed away before publishing a book-length explanation of his own creative semiotic theory.¹⁹

Since Murphy's own writings adequately explain his critiques of phenomenology, chapter 2 focusses primarily on Murphy's creative alternative. After summarizing his critique

¹⁹ Fortunately, Murphy sketches out his theory's basic elements in several publications (2003, 48-67; 2005, 70-75; 2007b, 114-168).

and exploring his stance on theory and definition's purpose in the academic study of religion, the chapter pulls together Murphy's theoretical framework for conceptualizing religion. In particular, the chapter focusses on Murphy's preoccupation with signification, relation, definition, difference, contest, and malleability. Chapter 2 then lays out the key to Murphy's theory as it relates to NRMs: his definition of religion. Lastly, I indicate some of the benefits – and shortcomings – of using Murphy's scholarship to examine NRMs.

Chapter 3 provides sociolinguistic insights that clarify those aspects of NRMs that come to the fore when analyzing new religious texts using Murphy's theoretical work. It selects and introduces several relevant concepts in sociolinguistics relating to identity construction, conflict, and boundary maintenance in social groups. Since Murphy's work likens religion to language, this phase of the thesis explores the ramifications of understanding NRMs as social groups that share and use a common language. I focus on sociolinguistic research concerning language fluency as a marker of group identity, language appropriation and alteration, and the use of anti-languages to contest social norms. These three foci highlight and expand the strength of Murphy's theory.

NRMs link the benefits and expectations of group membership to fluency in the group's particular language. By accepting or internalizing a group's vocabulary, individuals demonstrate their membership, express a fuller understanding of the group's motivations and workings, and receive instructions for interpreting – and reacting to – the surrounding world. This focus relates to the way that NRMs foster fluency in their textual productions and behaviors, and links fluency/acceptance of language adaptation to identity production in new religions.

The remaining two foci – namely, language alteration and the use of anti-languages – are linked. These foci examine the functions of language borrowing and language adaptation in

marginal or minority groups. Textual analysis that focusses on language borrowing and adaptation demonstrates that religious groups rely on pre-existing communicative elements to create their doctrines and practices, and that religious groups define themselves in relation to other social entities. Focussing on anti-language's role in contesting social norms while envisioning an alternate reality exemplifies Murphy's statement that religions come into being by structuring asymmetrical relations between real or imagined groups or classes (see also Lincoln [1989] 2014, 2-3). Issues of borrowing, adaptation, and anti-language highlight the agonistic and hierarchical procedures that Murphy deems necessary for identity formation (see Murphy 2001, 32, 65).²⁰ Chapter 3 also outlines relevant research on pejorative/slurring terms and their role in navigating identity, boundaries, and conflict. Together, chapters 2 and 3 form the theoretical base of the thesis.

Chapter 4 transitions from theoretical explication to data analysis by examining the Church of Scientology's insistence on language comprehension. By examining Scientology dictionaries, monographs, lectures, and policy letters, I show that Hubbard purposefully linked language fluency to group membership and used language adaptation to validate Scientology and establish its dominance over perceived opponents.

Scientology is particularly helpful as a proof-of-concept because of the sheer volume of terms that Hubbard adapted or invented, to say nothing of the acronyms he employed. In fact, the volume of new/adapted terms present – combined with the importance of language comprehension in the organization – forced Hubbard to begin most Scientology texts with a stern warning to “never go past a word that you do not fully understand” ([1952] 2007, Important

²⁰ Murphy's agonistic emphasis pairs well with McAdam's political process model of social movement formation. According to this model, social changes that lessen the power gap between those in control and those who feel oppressed are a key factor in the successful mobilization of social movements (see McAdam [1982] 1999, 40-43; McAdam and Marx 1994, 84-85).

Note). Instead of skipping unfamiliar vocabulary, Hubbard advised readers to “go back to BEFORE you got into trouble, find the misunderstood word, and get it defined” ([1952] 2007, Important Note). Chapter 4 unpacks the organizational implications of this warning for Scientology. I also look at Scientology’s specialized vocabulary through the lens of Hubbard’s own writings on language use, particularly his 1971 policy “Propaganda By Redefinition of Words” (Hubbard [1971] 1976, 423). This policy expresses Hubbard’s awareness that language adaptation functions as a tool for structuring asymmetrical relations between real or imagined groups or classes.

Chapters 5-7 deploy the theoretical and methodological mechanisms described in chapters 2-3 by exploring specific instances of language appropriation and adaptation in Peoples Temple (chapter 5), the Children of God (chapter 6), and – briefly – the Jesus People (chapter 7).²¹ Each chapter follows a similar structure, although each NRM’s doctrinal and social particularities allow me to emphasize different elements of Murphy’s definition of religion. With Peoples Temple, I emphasize the importance of asymmetry in language appropriation and conflict navigation. With the Children of God, I focus on the construction of real/imagined groups and classes in new religious texts. Each analysis consists of a two-stage process: first, identifying the community and corpus in question and, second, qualitatively analyzing key texts to demonstrate the social functions of language appropriation. This second process of data collection and analysis follows Veronika Koller’s “systematic-functional analysis” of organizational corpora (2008).

²¹ My decision to use these groups, along with Scientology, as representatives of the category “new religious movement” stems from historical groupings or identifications of each group, but also revises historical understandings of both the exemplifying groups and the category (see Murphy 2007b, 142). As Murphy argues, “a definition is both an end and a beginning. It is deduced from the data, so it comes ‘after’ the data, but it is also a heuristic for selecting, organizing, and characterizing the data, and so, comes ‘before’ the data” (2007b, 154).

Ascertaining the social-historical context of each NRM as well as its communicative goals is a crucial first step because, as Jule argues, sociolinguistics is “dialogic and context-driven” (2007, 4). I begin by laying out a brief history of the community in question, focussing particularly on its context, key behaviors and beliefs, and perceived opponents. I also scrutinize the communicative tools used, noting how these tools affected the transmission of doctrine and subsequent socialization.²² To achieve consistency, I focus on the method of communication each group’s leader used most frequently to disseminate teachings: for the Children of God, David Berg’s *Mo Letters*; for Peoples Temple, audio recordings of Jim Jones’s addresses; and for the Jesus People, Duane Pederson’s *Hollywood Free Paper*. These NRMs represent a variety of social concerns, administrative styles, leadership types, and belief systems, but each movement generated a sizeable and stable body of disseminated texts.

This breadth of source material is intentional – rather than exploring a single particularly appropriate test case, my research examines different forms of language appropriation that range in both complexity and effectiveness across multiple mediums. Although these three corpora represent a range of textual audiences, contents, contexts, and mediums, they all create what Koller calls a group’s “ideal self” (2008, 396). Each corpus reflects the leadership’s ideal model of the group and its world, whether seen by insiders or outsiders (Koller 2008, 391). While this ideal self may not mirror the group’s actual status, it does represent the leader’s vision or goal, which language appropriation helps achieve.²³

²² See Bahktin (1981, 293), McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly (2001, 23-24), Mooney (2005, 20), and Nelson ([1987] 2011, 16).

²³ As a further caveat to my text selection, my research traces the dissemination, rather than the reception, of doctrine. I balance this emphasis by noting moments in the corpora where the groups’ leaders address reception-related issues, whether in connection to members’ comments or to translating the message for outsiders. My focus remains, however, on the *ideal* group form as it is *actually* articulated.

After completing this first methodological stage, I track the rhetorical and linguistic processes through which each group appropriated and adapted key terms, explaining how these acts of redefinition contributed to identity construction and boundary maintenance within the group while delegitimizing critics. To do so, I adapt Koller's analytic method to scrutinize religious organizations. While Koller studies business corporations rather than NRMs, her focus on formal communications from organizational heads to other parties – both inside and outside the organization – and her interest in the way that organizations “try to establish their identity in the minds of stakeholders” through language choices fit well with my project (2008, 389). Moreover, Koller shapes her methodology around written texts. Many sociolinguistic studies – including most of the contributions to *The Sociology of Language and Religion* and *Language and Religious Identity* – involve participant observation; however, participant observation is either impossible or infeasible in the NRMs I am studying.²⁴ Koller's methodology thus matches the corpora that I have collected. Finally, Koller's methodology complements my own background and goals. She works with groups that she is already familiar with, employing content analysis and close reading to draw social conclusions.

Koller begins by selecting words and phrases that she hypothesizes are relevant to identity construction on the basis of “previous knowledge of, and familiarity with” the organizations and texts in question (2008, 398). After identifying other possible words that could be used to similar effect, she examines the organization's texts to evaluate the frequency of each term and, more importantly, to identify passages that are densely populated by her selected words (2008, 399). Then she analyzes the content of these passages to determine both the

²⁴ Participant observation is impossible in the case of Peoples Temple and anachronistic in the case of the Jesus People. Participant observation is infeasible in the case of the Children of God (since the current structure of the group differs radically from the form of the group when the *Mo Letters* were written) and Scientology (on account of the group's perception of certain members of my committee).

function of the key terms in the passage and the function of the passage in the text (Koller 2008, 400). Koller focusses on the range and variety of meanings ascribed to the keywords to show how various passages contradict, echo, or expand one another (2008, 400). Finally, Koller uses elements of Halliday's theory to highlight the relational and ideologically constructive roles that these keywords play in shaping the organization's identity.²⁵

I approach the corpora of Peoples Temple, the Children of God, and the Jesus People in a similar fashion. To address popular conceptions of each organization, I selected one or more key terms that embodied a central concern in each group: *nigger* in Peoples Temple (to address race), *whore/harlot/hooker* in the Children of God (to address sex),²⁶ and *freak* in the Jesus People (to address counterculture). Analyzing appropriative linguistic acts using each of these terms reveals similar goals of establishing identity, navigating conflict, and delineating membership, but acknowledges different methods of language adaptation in each NRM. While each group appropriated key vocabulary terms to achieve similar general aims, the methods of adaptation – and the terms being adapted – varied according to each movement's goals and resources.

Pejorative/slurring terms are particularly helpful – although not strictly necessary – to demonstrate the analytic value of Murphy's theory of religion in NRM research for three reasons. First, these terms highlight the antagonistic dimensions inherent in Murphy's definition of religion. By appropriating pejorative terms like *nigger*, *whore*, or *freak*, the leaders of each group highlighted, and then inverted or contested, social inequality. These anti-language inversions underscore the reactive or conflictive nature of NRMs. Second, the appropriation of

²⁵ While I rely on Halliday's theory of anti-languages, Koller uses his theory of functional grammar (see Halliday [1985] 2014).

²⁶ Selecting multiple keywords in the Children of God's texts exemplifies Koller's maneuver of searching for other terms that could fill the same linguistic function of initially selected keyword, and anti-language's claim that social groups proliferate terms for ideas of particular importance. In this case, *harlot* and *hooker* seemed likely to fulfill similar denotative roles as *whore* (although, as chapter 6 indicates, this is not actually the case).

these terms as part of the group's identity implies – indeed, requires – redefinition: in each NRM's popular cultural context, designating oneself as a *nigger*, *whore*, or *freak* without adjusting the connotations of each term was decidedly counter-productive. Pejorative terms thus provide a clear venue for observing adaptive linguistic practices. Third, I focus on pejorative terms to challenge the hermeneutic of meaninglessness's conclusion that such vocabulary reveals NRMs to be “ununderstandable” or beyond the realm of academic discourse (Smith 1982c, 104). A common critique of profanity claims that using taboo terms signals linguistic laziness or a lack of imagination (see Wajnryb 2005). Identifying the social and rhetorical reasons for adopting taboo terms reveals the complexity of new religious discourse rather than its simplicity or laziness.

Although I focus on pejorative or slurring terms, my social/organizational-focused method of textual analysis can be deployed with similar effectiveness to study keywords that one might expect to find in religious discourse – such as *God* or *evil* – or that one may skip over as non-religious – such as *America*. Social organizations can appropriate and redefine any terms, albeit with varying success. Pejorative language, which can appear catachrestic – “out of place” or “misused” – when deployed in a positive sense, is simply one of the clearest instances of language appropriation and adaptation.

For each pejorative keyword, I explore how the NRM in question understood that term to be used in wider society, and why they saw the term as (potentially or actually) relevant to contests of power or legitimacy. In particular, I probe the status of each keyword as a socially contested concept, as well as the subsequent effectiveness of the language adaptation that took place. Jones's reconsideration of *nigger* and Hubbard's challenge of *psychiatry*, for instance, mirrored larger social contests of authority and meaning. Pederson's use of *freak*, however,

lacked a corresponding external, widespread endeavor to establish freaks as empowered or legitimate members of American society.

The majority of chapters 5-7 consists of textual analysis that identifies, catalogues, and summarizes the range of meanings assigned to the term in the group's doctrines.²⁷ Since my primary sources are both written and audible, and since they exist in both digital or physical forms, I located instances of each group's keywords in their respective corpora using methods appropriate for each type of text. These methods included expedient tools such as electronically searching for text, utilizing indexes, and attending to titles and headings. To avoid missing instances of appropriation that these tools cannot pick up, I also either read (Jesus People, Children of God) or listened to (Peoples Temple) relevant sections of the corpora. Although I scrutinized the entirety of the *Hollywood Free Paper*, the sheer volume of Berg's *Mo Letters* and Jones's sermons prohibited listening to/reading every text. To surmount this difficulty, I focused on listening to/reading those sections of the corpora that share similar content, intended audience, or temporal closeness to the sections that my more expedient analytical tools highlight.

I focused particularly on texts created between 1969 and 1978. The *MO Letters* and the *Hollywood Free Paper* both began in earnest in 1969, and Peoples Temple's record-keeping practices rendered audiotapes from before 1969 scarce. Moreover, 1978 saw major changes in each movement: Peoples Temple ended, the Children of God underwent radical organizational restructuring, and the *Hollywood Free Paper* began a lengthy hiatus. More generally, this time period covers a transition in both the expression of discontent and quest for alternatives within

²⁷ This range of meanings includes uses of the keyword that retain, rather than challenge, the term's connotations as used by wider society. As I demonstrate, these uses underscore the acts of redefinition that take place. I also note how a group's changing context or goals necessitates either re-adapting a term's meaning or jettisoning the term altogether. Since a signifier's meaning can change over time, it does not undermine my argument to note that NRMs can neglect terms that they have appropriated, re-adapt their definitions, or later reject them. These subsequent instances of language shift merely reflect the group's changing context or needs.

North American counterculture. Political protests intended to change society increasingly gave way to religious innovation intended to change the self, shifting the means and site of social transformation while highlighting the way that religious innovation reflected social contests and sentiments (see Kent 1993; Kent 2001b). New religious texts from this time period, then, link worldview, conflict, and boundaries between dominant and challenger social organizations.

After locating each group's keywords within their respective corpora, identifying their presence as acts of language appropriation, and noting their range of meanings, I demonstrate the (actual or intended) behavioral consequences of these communicative acts in relation to identity construction, conflict and criticism, and binding individuals more closely to the group. Instead of simply encouraging audiences to use words like *nigger* or *hooker*, for instance, Jones and Berg expected that their acts of appropriation and adaptation would impact the lived behaviors and experiences of group members.

To demonstrate how language appropriation contributes to identity construction in NRMs, I focus particularly on instances where the keyword's role in the text suggests an altered connotation. By exploring how the keywords function within the passage, and how the passage functions within the corpus, I demonstrate how acts of language appropriation contribute to the larger doctrinal goals of the text. More to the point, I demonstrate how these larger doctrinal goals shape the believer's identity and worldview.

To demonstrate how language appropriation functions in relation to critical opposition, I demonstrate the "bivalent" and "double-voiced" nature of each keyword and the social possibilities that these techniques occasion.²⁸ I show, on the one hand, how the NRM retains the

²⁸ Bivalency refers to the "simultaneous membership of an element in more than one linguistic system" (Woolard 1998, 6). "Double-voiced" discourse refers to the "various hybrid forms in which an utterance can mix more than one linguistic consciousness" (Woolard 1998, 17; the concept first emerged in Bakhtin 1981).

borrowed term's pejorative connotations in some instances to acknowledge the presence of critique or conflict. I also show, on the other hand, how the NRM subverts the borrowed term's pejorative connotations to disempower critics and empower group members. Noting the way that each keyword's usage functions to either support or subvert its original connotations allows me to clarify the nature of the asymmetrical relations that NRMs create and respond to.

Finally, focussing particularly on instances that retain – rather than alter – each keyword's pejorative connotations, I demonstrate how each group used appropriated language to encourage its members to remain loyal or devoted. In some cases (such as Jones's pronouncements of doom regarding the world's "niggers") this encouragement takes the form of noting the hostility of outsiders and identifying the group as a site of safety. In other cases (such as Berg's suggestions that members act like hookers) this encouragement takes the form of underscoring the sacred and separative status of deviant behavior. By creating feelings of "affinity" and "estrangement" in their audience, these appropriative acts reinforce solidarity by emphasizing alienation (Lincoln [1989] 2014, 8).

This method of textual analysis rejects a reductionist approach that shrinks any new religion down to a single keyword. As Yelle notes, "we must not take signs one-by-one, considering them only in relation to their individual referents, but must instead consider signs as part of a system in which their relationship to other signs establishes their meaning or value" (2013, 137). Jonathan Z. Smith (1938-2017), likewise, argues that trying to translate the meaning of a single word without reference to the sentences that it appears in is dangerous (1990, 77). In light of this advice, I selected demonstrative terms that serve as gateways into the broader collection of signs and symbols structured by the group into a worldview. The initial tasks of

identifying the context, textual bodies, and communicative goals of each group ensure that these instances are clearly contextualized and linked to the group's larger doctrines.

Although chapters 5 and 6 follow a similar pattern of analysis (to show that my framework is broadly applicable), clear differences appear between the processes of appropriation/adaptation in Peoples Temple and the Children of God. Moreover, as the cursory treatment of the Jesus People in chapter 7 demonstrates, the extent of appropriation/adaptation corresponds to the level of conflict that stems from the NRM's rejection or embrace of surrounding society. While I do not argue for doctrinal similarity between these groups, I do argue that each group uses the same mechanism of language appropriation for the same purpose of simultaneously constructing identity while deflecting or levelling criticism. By using Koller's methodological apparatus as described above, I show how language appropriation in NRMs bears out Murphy's semiotic theory of religion in observable ways with social consequences. Moreover, I reveal the erroneous conclusions of the hermeneutic of meaninglessness by showing that close content analysis of a NRM's corpus reveals a body of texts whose functional utility arises from a coherent and internally meaningful doctrine.

Chapter 8 summarizes my findings, indicate areas for further study, and revisits the question of (Murphy's) theory's role in textual analysis of NRMs. Conducting this research contributes to the field of religious studies generally and the study of new religions specifically. Relating to the study of new religions, my project diagnoses the flaws in a long-running framework for approaching new religious texts and suggests an alternate theoretical and methodological approach. By providing a general hermeneutic that takes new religious doctrines seriously, my research gives scholars a way to study issues of identity, conflict, and group dynamics within a group's corpora.

Relating to religious studies, my work tests Murphy's theory of religion by applying it to concrete instantiations of religious behavior. In his work, Murphy gives both a mandate and a caution for theory. As for mandate, he explains that "the purpose of theory is to account for, as best we can, how the world really is" (2005, 75). By way of caution, Murphy warns that "we cannot accept academic theories and methods as transparent media... It is more compelling to see theories as specific, historical discursive practices, which actively shape their objects" (2010, 275). Turning these two statements back on their author, my research tests the ability of Murphy's ideas to explain "how the world really is" while at the same time paying attention to the ways in which Murphy's theory creates or shapes its object of study.

Finally, relating to sociolinguistics, my research takes up Jule's hope that the exemplary work already done regarding the link between religious language, sociocultural change, and identity formation will spawn more studies. As both products and producers of social change, NRMs are ideal subject matter for an approach that focusses on adaptation and meaning making in a world of shifting realities. Additionally, my research demonstrates that scholars can apply sociolinguistics to religious groups whose formation – either textual or administrative – is still comparatively recent, rather than just the monolithic world religions studied up to this point in time.

Chapter 2

Relentlessly Relational: Tim Murphy's Definition of Religion

Religious studies is not only a discipline that describes and analyzes religions – it also actively constructs and configures religions. This assertion appears in Jonathan Z. Smith's book *Imagining Religion*, which argues that “religion is solely the creation of the scholar's study. It is created for the scholar's analytic purposes by his [or her] imaginative acts of comparison and generalization” (Smith 1982a, xi). Religion, in other words, is a category that scholars impose onto various human practices. Thus, designating a person, practice, or text as “religious” is not an innocent act; as Tomoko Masuzawa argues, “even an activity as seemingly cerebral and academic as [identifying and classifying religions] is thoroughly and ineluctably intertwined with larger social and political processes” (2005, 264).

Since the category “religion” is constitutive, rather than simply indicative, of religious studies' object of interest, Smith warns scholars to be “relentlessly self-conscious” of the ways in which their theories affect and shape data (Smith 1982a, xi). To this end, the first step in examining the function of language appropriation in NRMs is to sketch out Tim Murphy's theory and definition of religion, which catalyze and undergird this project. This chapter begins by briefly explaining Murphy's critiques of prior theories of religion, focussing particularly on the ways that religious studies creates, rather than merely describes, its objects of study. Then, this chapter lays out Murphy's alternative theory and definition of religion, both of which he designed to counteract his criticisms. Finally, this chapter concludes by evaluating the effect of applying Murphy's theory to the study of new religions and highlighting the ways in which such an application enriches both Murphy's work and the study of NRMs.

Murphy situates his publications as part of a growing dis-ease in religious studies, claiming that

the failures of the category 'religion' have brought about a double movement, both critical and constructive. The critical move has undertaken a more analytical approach to the history of the study of religion . . . showing that 'religion' is not a universal category, but one constructed in specific places and times, in the context of specific, not generic, cultural histories. . . . The constructive move which comes out of the denaturalization of the category is the emergence of new theories of religion (2007b, 13).

Stated broadly, then, Murphy's work consists of two maneuvers – a critical maneuver that identifies major flaws in previous theories, and a creative maneuver that suggests a new theoretical approach to studying religion that sidesteps these flaws.

Critiquing Phenomenology

The critical maneuver manifests itself much more frequently in Murphy's writings than the creative maneuver; consequently, I recapitulate Murphy's critique only insofar as it acts as a backdrop to his creative work. Specifically, Murphy identifies and problematizes the influence of Hegelian phenomenology in religious studies theory. At its broadest, Murphy uses the phrase "phenomenology of religion" to signal "the intention to study religion in a strictly non-reductive way" (2007b, 17). He characterizes this non-reductive approach by highlighting three methodological preconceptions. First, the phenomenology of religion differentiates between "essence" (an intangible unfolding of a timeless universal impulse) and "manifestation" (individual historicized expressions of this impulse) when describing religions. Second, the phenomenology of religion overlays the notion of "development" (a journey towards fulfilment or realization of an entity's most complete form) onto religion's essential unfolding in historical moments. Third, phenomenologists of religion engage in description and do not manipulate or affect their data. While the phenomenology of religion is not identical to a hermeneutic of

meaninglessness, its propensity to view all religions as essentially similar in nature – as well as its use of an Other to justify/promote its own familiar institutions – echoes the hermeneutic of meaninglessness described in chapter 1.

For Murphy, phenomenologists of religion follow Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel’s (1770-1831) philosophy to differentiate between essence and manifestation, positing that “there is a[n] underlying essence of religion, religion as such, which manifests itself in various historical circumstances” (1994, 127; also Murphy 2010, 182). Phenomenologists thus arrange multiple religions into a coherent set of data by “extracting formal elements from material instances. Such a conception is only possible, however, if one assumes an underlying unity to the multiplicity of historical materials” (Murphy 1994, 127; also Murphy 2010, 182).

In this view, all religions are motivated by the same essential nature. Certainly, religions differ from one another due to contextual and historical particularities, but these differences obscure their – ultimately more important – shared impetus. Scientology may look different than the Jesus People due to “the sheer flux of events, or mere change,” but both are presumed to be manifestations of a universal, timeless religious impulse (Murphy 1994, 124). Phenomenology thus licenses confident comparison. Since all religions are considered expressions of a transhistorical human impulse – not just culturally-specific practices – scholars from one socio-cultural location can describe and understand religious practices occurring in different socio-cultural locations (Murphy 2010, 4).

Mircea Eliade’s introduction to *Shamanism* provides a succinct demonstration of Murphy’s charge that, for phenomenologists, “historical [religious] entities . . . are not strictly empirical phenomena” (1994, 124). He writes that “although historical conditions are extremely important in a religious phenomenon, they do not wholly exhaust it. . . . There is always a kernel

that remains refractory to explanation, and this indefinable, irreducible element . . . is not solely historical” (Eliade [1951] 1974, xiii-xiv). While historical conditions may produce difference in religious manifestations, the essential “kernel” transcends a purely historical explanation.

For Murphy, phenomenology’s task thus becomes one of abstraction, where scholars separate instances of religion from their historical context to identify a persistent guiding essence (1994, 131). This abstraction “will inevitably efface . . . difference, otherness, historicity, and specificity”, and “depoliticizes both the cultural formations of religion, and the academic interpretation of those cultural formations” (Murphy 1994, 141; Murphy 2007b, 25).

Downplaying historicity affects not just the studied object but also the studying subject, since “every understanding subject and every act of understanding stands within a specific, historical horizon of understanding” (Murphy 2006, 201, 216).

The phenomenology of religion’s second methodological presupposition characterizes human history in developmental terms. As humans cultivate their shared creative impulse and potential for progress, they move towards self-understanding, and this movement is reflected in social institutions (Murphy 1999, 11-14; see Murphy 2007b, 84-85 and Murphy 2010, 71-72). Religion, then, becomes an index of development – “a culture’s ideas of god or divinity reflect its development of selfhood” (Murphy 2007a, 10). In a phenomenological view of history, this developmental process is linear, allowing one to place religions – as expressions of humanity’s journey towards self-understanding – on a continuum from less-developed to more-developed (Murphy 2010, 75). For Murphy, this trajectory of development is dangerous insofar as subjective positionality means that scholars are likely to identify their own culture as the most developed, and to calibrate their measurements of other cultures to protect that identification.¹

¹ The theorists that Murphy critiques are, predominantly, Europeans and/or Christians, and thus European and Christian culture is taken to be the most advanced measure of human development (Murphy 2007b, 79, 93).

Whether intentional or unintentional, these acts of calibration have undesirable consequences, a lineage that Murphy increasingly frames in relation to colonialism (2003, 65; Murphy 2007a; Murphy 2007b; Murphy 2010).² He follows Bakhtin in arguing for the “‘addressivity’ of all signification,” or the idea that every communicative act requires an-Other party to occasion communication (Murphy 2003, 52, 59-60). In phenomenological theories of religion, “the colonized Other forms the constitutive Other of this discourse [of development]. . . . The category ‘religion’ as used in [the] field of Religious Studies today, is itself a product of . . . colonial discourse” (Murphy 2003, 65).³

In a colonialist hermeneutic of development, the colonized Other occupies the less-developed pole of civilisation’s progress. Moreover, this Other is seen as dependent or reliant on outsiders to understand or articulate their own nature (Murphy 2007a, 10; see also Murphy 1999, 14). This dependency legitimates colonization and oppression, sometimes in the guise of academic scholarship on religion and sometimes with the “natural-scientific legitimation” of evolutionary theory (Murphy 2007b, 32, 79). In a post-colonial academic climate, Murphy argues that “the world has changed too drastically for us to continue to conduct business as usual. This heritage [of colonialist oppression justified by plotting civilizations onto a continuum of development] of Religious Studies is something that must be overcome” (2007b, 74; see also Murphy 1994, 140).

The third and final critique that Murphy lodges against the phenomenology of religion relates to its status as a purely descriptive enterprise: “the core tropes of phenomenology are . . .

² Initially, Murphy situates phenomenology’s developmental view in relation to evolutionary theory (1999). Robert A. Yelle likewise suggests that ignoring the effects of one’s own social location on labels like “primitive” or “scientific” can lead to “European ethnocentrism and social Darwinism” (2013, 55).

³ See also Chidester (2014) and Masuzawa (2005) for discussions of colonialism, imperialism, and the development of religious studies.

iterated as if they were no theory of religion, no specific structure of representation, but merely a ‘natural’ presentation of the subject matter” (2007b, 24). In this reading, phenomenology is a transparent framework that presents information – often, that of a cultural or religious Other – without altering or shaping that information.

Empathy – here, the notion that all cultures and all religions are connected as manifestations of the “transcendental unity of [human] consciousness” – allows for this transparency (Murphy 1994, 134). Even though scholars may study cultures that are temporally, geographically, or ideologically distant from their own context, they can recognize and explicate the “features, structure, or meaning” of those cultures as commonly held human impulses (Murphy 1994, 134; also Murphy 2007b, 70). Thus, “the phenomenologist has no sense of moving in any area foreign to him or her” and academic theories of religion become “a transparent media by which a universalized subjectivity ‘understands’ its objects” (Murphy 2007b, 71, 75; also Murphy 2010, 275).

In addition to freeing theorists to articulate and appropriate foreign religious examples as manifestations of a familiar, totalized human creative spirit, the phenomenology of religion also uses familiarity to hide its constructive or interpretive nature. Since religion is a manifestation of human self-understanding and self-consciousness, scholars can engage in “pure description” and “get back to ‘the things themselves,’” rather than resort to reductive theorizing (Murphy 2010, 235, 276). If phenomenologists possess empathetic and familiar access to their object of study, then they can thus present an unmediated depiction of religion. Lacking, however, the empathy created by essential sameness, other theoretical approaches must rely on reductive logic and thereby alter their data (Murphy 2010, 235).

Nevertheless, context and positionality have mediating functions whether or not scholars acknowledge them. For Murphy, theories result in similar mediations. Like any theoretical approach, the phenomenology of religion “is not a passive place holder for the display of the true being of things, but an active, configurative structure which prefigures what can and cannot be placed within it” (Murphy 2007, 75; also Murphy 2010, 276). Scholars may claim empathy and familiarity with their religious objects of study, but such stances do not efface the active, configurative structure of interpretation derived either from theoretical frameworks or context.⁴

What is (a) Theory (of Religion)?

Murphy’s critiques have to do with theories and their users, and beg a broader question: what should theory do? This query guides his creative response and demonstrates that Murphy’s own theory of religion is no less immune to criticism than the phenomenology of religion. Simply put, Murphy explains that “the purpose of theory is to account for, as best we can, how the world really is” (2005, 75). As such, “it is an appropriate *aspiration* of a theory to aim at an all-embracing account of its delineated field of phenomena” (2003, 63). By these criteria, the phenomenology of religion operates exactly as a theory should – it accounts for the presence of various religious practices using a widely-applicable approach. Murphy’s critique of the phenomenology of religion, therefore, is not aimed at either its scope or its intent.

Instead, Murphy’s critique is based on his argument that theories construct, rather than merely describe, their objects of study. In his first book, Murphy asserts that experience is never unmediated (2001, 89). Culture and context act as a buffer between experience and description/

⁴ Historical instances of religion add an additional configurative layer for scholars studying textual descriptions, since “when it comes to *past* states of affairs, there exist no undescribed congeries of phenomena with which to compare those versions offered in different descriptions of it” (White 2014, 65).

interpretation, and these buffers shape a scholar's presuppositions and goals. The phenomenology of religion missteps by refusing to acknowledge that mediating/influencing factors affect one's description of "how the world really is."

The key to Murphy's critique is the idea that theories of religion affect the data that they interpret. Describing the relationship between theorists and religious practitioners, he asserts that "identity is as much imposed as it is inherited, constructed, resisted, and/or appropriated. Consequently, there is always a gap, a fissure, a conflict between how members of an 'identity group' define themselves and how they are defined" (Murphy 2007b, 13). Even if scholars of religion possess empathy or familiarity, differing mediating factors, goals, or contextual buffers will affect a studied object's scholarly presentation.

Later, Murphy argues that "the text of theory is not situated higher in an ontological hierarchy" than any other form of description or interpretation, and mediates experience like any other text (2007b, 168).⁵ All scholarly writing on religion – theoretical, analytical, or descriptive – "is 'institutional' and operates within systems of meaning that pre-exist individual authors and their choices" (Murphy 2007b, 32). The fact that any given theory recapitulates or draws on prior discourses does not absolve individual authors, however, from monitoring the presence of such discourses in their own work. Theories are assailable, as Murphy's study of *the study* of religion demonstrates, and scholars "must be willing to abandon or overturn *any* belief at any time" (Murphy 2007b, 123; Murphy 2000, 191, 186). In *Representing Religion*, Murphy underscores the need for self-reflective theorizing, stating that "the categories scholarship applies to its

⁵ Similarly, Halliday notes that theories – like languages (and religions) – develop over time in response to users' needs and contexts: "a theory, of any kind . . . is a semiotic system, a system of meanings. . . . [Theories, like grammars] are not designed as a whole, in one massive burst of semiotic energy; and they are not usually constructed for their own sake. . . . [T]hey evolve in particular historical contexts, in pursuit of particular tasks. . . . Their design is that of the culture in which they operate, embodying its values, its styles of meaning, and the conflicts and tensions within it" ([1993] 2003, 222, 224). Halliday begins "Linguistics as Metaphor" with a similar argument ([1997] 2007).

objects cannot be understood as transparent. . . . Rather, we must be very careful to be as informed as possible about the historical discursive formations in which and from which they have emerged” (2007b, 135).

To anticipate Murphy’s own theory of religion, the reason for such care is that “the subject [of discourse] only becomes a meaningful entity by virtue of its engagement in one or more social discourses. . . . There are no ‘facts’ about the subject, only its various interpretations or articulations. Discourses produce subjects” (Murphy 2007b, 123). This expansion of Friedrich Nietzsche’s warning that “we cannot establish any fact ‘in itself’” in *The Will to Power* explains Murphy’s insistent self-policing and critical reading of phenomenologists (Murphy 2001, 66). If theory affects/produces data, and if every theory is contextually bound, then the religious practices described by scholarly observers reflects the observers’ goals, presuppositions, and mediations as much as they describe objective reality. Murphy’s conception of theories as tools that both reflect/explain and actively shape how the world really is re-appears in his remarks on definition. Specifically, he writes that “a definition is both a[n] end and a beginning. It is deduced from the data, so it comes ‘after’ the data, but it is also a heuristic for selecting, organizing, and characterizing the data, and so, comes ‘before’ the data” (2007b, 154; see also 141). I return to these constitutive/selective realities of deploying theory in chapter 8.

A Semiotic Alternative

Murphy’s theory of religion is premised on the assertion that “human beings constitute themselves and their relations to the world and to each other through multiple systems of signification” (Murphy 2005, 70).⁶ These multiple systems derive from an individual’s

⁶ In *The Politics of Spirit*, Murphy likewise claims that “the medium by which humans relate to the world . . . is language” (2010, 35).

participation in multiple social groups, as Lincoln describes: “the members of a total social field can recombine at different levels of integration to form aggregates of varying size. . . . [All individuals] simultaneously belong – in potential, at least – to multiple social groups” (Lincoln [1989] 2014, 17-18). A complex, multi-faceted, and even conflictive picture of society as created by its members emerges.⁷ Individuals draw on various systems of signification, corresponding to their various interpersonal roles and affiliations, to construct a shifting and contested – rather than objective and stable – subjective world. From this multiplicity, Murphy selects “one species of systems of signification” to study: “that which scholars and practitioners have come to call ‘religion’” (2005, 70).

Murphy anchors his theory in two principles relating to moments of signification. First, Murphy argues that meaning is created through difference, and that difference is always relational. Furthermore, differential relations always entail conflict, contest, or hierarchy. Second, Murphy argues that religious signification involves selecting or manipulating a set “canon” of signs in creative “hermeneutical” ways. The selection, manipulation, and deployment of these signs is guided by, and addresses, a religion’s particular context. These two principles depend on Murphy’s reading of semiotics and Smith’s view of religion, respectively.

Murphy’s claim that religions are systems of signification inherits the semiotic axiom that a sign’s meaning is found in its relation to other signifying elements. In Murphy’s words,

semiotic elements . . . do not having meaning in and of themselves. They only mean in relation to other elements. The set of elements which make a given element have a given meaning is the paradigm, or associative field, for that element. Changing the ‘surrounding’ elements of a particular element will change the meaning of that element (2003, 55).

⁷ For Murphy, society itself is not a creative actor: “‘society’ does nothing; it is nothing more and nothing less than a contingent ensemble of relations” (2003, 48n). It is, instead, the individuals within society who actively construct their social reality. Halliday identifies language as “the principal means through which we create the world in which we live,” but admits that since language-users have access to multiple symbolic systems sanctioned by multiple sub-sections of society, “this is of course a world of multiple realities” ([1977] 2003, 114).

The signs – words, images, and actions – that make up religions do not have inherent meaning. Moreover, there is no *necessary* correlation between a sign and that which it signifies. Words, images, and actions are meaningful only in relation to other elements of communicative systems, and thus “no thing can be abstracted out of a set of relations. . . . Identity does not reside in things, but depends upon the articulation of things in a context” (Murphy 2007b, 120-121). According to Murphy’s reading of semiotics, no sign can mean anything apart from its presence within, and relationship to, larger communicative systems.⁸

Identity and meaning, therefore, are relational. The relational nature of communication points out another key element of semiotics; namely, that an occasion for signification presupposes every signifying act and its subsequent interpretation (Murphy 2005, 72). In terms of communication, humans can only relate if they have something – an Other – to relate to. These Others are noticed through differentiation, and – for Murphy – this process always results in establishing hierarchy (Murphy 2001, 35, 61, 65; 2007b, 116, 120, 137).

Difference and hierarchy are key to Murphy’s work. Difference both generates occasions for signification and allows for coherent definitions. As mentioned above, Murphy borrows Bakhtin’s concept of “addressivity” to mark the “relational, differential construction of meaning” (2001, 66). All instances of signification form part of a chain of conversation: they address some prior signifying instance while also anticipating a future address by some interlocutor.⁹ Murphy characterizes the academic study of religion, therefore, as an attempt to “trace out specific scenes

⁸ Yelle challenges this observation by considering the function of miracles in the Hebrew Bible. He argues that a) miraculous events are intended to signify something – the power of God, for example – while simultaneously and necessarily b) taking a form that “is utterly new and singular” (Yelle 2013, 145). One might begin to counter Yelle’s argument by noting that these miraculous events are still *mediated* through language for the text’s audience, or by suggesting that these events are miraculous *in relation to* mundane history.

⁹ See Murphy’s discussion of “consciousness” (Murphy 2010, 303).

of the provocation of signification” (Murphy 2003, 52). For Murphy, the origins of religion are dialogic and discursive: religions are “provoked” into existence as responses to the signifying actions of other social groups.

Individual religions, moreover, are bundles of smaller provocative significations. Aaron Hughes writes that religions are “a site, or perhaps a series of sites, of skirmishes, of competing truth claims” where sub-groups argue over matters of orthodoxy and orthopraxy (Hughes 2007, 95; see also Hughes 2012, 24). This characterization of religion matches Lincoln’s observation that a social group’s constituents can recombine and reconfigure into smaller competing sub-groups. For instance, it is inaccurate to say that *Islam* refers to a unified religious population. Sunni and Shi’a Muslims can provoke discursive responses from one another in the same way that Muslims and non-Muslims can provoke responses from one another. In fact, Murphy suggests that religious discourse – with its focus on “‘absolute,’ ‘ultimate,’ [or] ‘transcendent’” language – is prone to both in-group and out-group provocation (2007b, 148).

Much religious discourse, consequentially, operates in the superlative register.¹⁰ Murphy dovetails this observation with his claim that differentiation between interlocutors generates hierarchies. By virtue of difference, the Other/interlocutor who provokes signification never stands exactly equivalent to the “speaker” (Murphy 2003, 60).¹¹ This hierarchy manifests itself in a variety of ways, dictated by Murphy’s shifting emphases. In *Nietzsche, Metaphor, Religion*, hierarchy emerges as a by-product of the necessarily agonistic or combative nature of language

¹⁰ Susan Raine and Stephen A. Kent extend this argument, noting that these superlative claims take place within “a set of binary terms . . . that identify and separate the ‘pure’ from the ‘impure’ and the ‘us’ versus ‘them’” (2006, 609). These binaries contribute to Murphy’s notion of religions as sites of hierarchical differentiation.

¹¹ Marilyn Brewer argues, in contrast, that “comparison (whether interpersonal or intergroup) is not inherently competitive” (2001, 24). For Brewer, the creation of asymmetry arises only when an Other is noticed in a “relative and evaluative” context (2001, 24). Murphy’s argument that all religious speech occurs in the superlative register creates this relative/evaluative context.

interpretation. As Murphy reads Nietzsche, interpreting language involves transposing the Other's signs into one's own interpretive categories to understand them (Murphy 2001, 17, 37). This transposition is an act of confiscation, which the Other resists while simultaneously re-mapping or transposing one's own signs into their interpretive categories. Communication is thus a struggle to overpower/confiscate the Other's signs, resulting in hierarchy.

In later works, Murphy's identification of hierarchy becomes less abstract, either as a claim that difference is necessarily non-identical or, more pragmatically, as part of his post-colonial reading of intercultural and interreligious relations (see Murphy 2003, 60; Murphy 2010, 127). Although hierarchy – as a result of interpretation, as an outgrowth of difference, or as justification for colonialism – can have violent consequences, Murphy is quick to note that hierarchical separation as he sees it is inescapable. He writes that “the misunderstanding of asymmetrical relations [arising from discourse and signification] lies in thinking that they can only reside in ugly forms of hierarchical repression” (Murphy 2007b, 154).¹² In Murphy's work, hierarchy arising from signification provoked by the presence of an Other is a necessary element of communication. As such, hierarchy becomes a primary focus of Murphy's theory of religion.

Wherever the source of provocation lies, religions come into being through a mechanics of differentiation. Religions are collections of conversations or discourses, and conversations require the presence of multiple signifying groups or individuals. Religions are, thus, “created” by difference insofar as their acts of signification respond to, and anticipate responses from, other groups and individuals. Equally fundamentally, difference contributes to generating coherence and meaning in acts of signification.

¹² For example, Gina Philogène argues that social groups always define themselves hierarchically in relation to an Other: “irrespective of the specific justification, the production of images about the Other aims always at demeaning and assuming control over the group to be dominated” (2007, 34).

Signifiers *mean* only to the extent that they differentiate what they denote from everything else. Just as interlocutors catalyze one another into existence, so too do signs contribute to creating one another's denotations through a process of relation-via-differentiation (Murphy 2005, 71). To explain this process, Murphy refers to Jacques Derrida's (1930-2004) concept of *différance*, wherein "every concept is inscribed in a chain or in a system within which it refers to the other, to other concepts, by means of the systematic play of differences" (Derrida [1982] 1986, 404; see Murphy 2007b, 55-56). These systems of relation form a constellation of meaning, which individuals select from when parsing signs or describing signified objects. These selections are never exhaustive, since the constellation of meanings is never complete – it can always grow larger as other relational/opposite situations appear (Murphy 2001, 24).

Smith likewise notes that a religious group's identity is defined through oppositions and boundaries (Smith [1992] 2004, 230). Discussing heresy, he writes that "a theory of difference, when applied to the proximate 'other' [here, the heretic], is but another way of phrasing a theory of 'self'" (Smith [1992] 2004, 246). More basically, "meaning is made possible by difference," and these differences are determined – by individuals in a particular context – rather than inherent (Smith [1992] 2004, 246). As such, Smith concludes that this process of meaning-making "results in an object no longer natural but rather social, no longer factual but intellectual. Relationships are discovered and reconstituted through projects of differentiation" (Smith [1992] 2004, 246). Smith's summary of how religious groups create their own identity by differentiating themselves from others circles back to the initial impetus for Murphy's critique of the phenomenology of religion; namely, that religions are "social" and "intellectual" – rather than "natural" or "factual" – entities.

Murphy's focus on differentiation's role in constructing religions, their interlocutors, and the signs with which they communicate emphasizes the malleability of religious language. Murphy understands religions as changeable and inventive groups that utilize signs with – potentially – ever-shifting meanings. In his first book, he claims that “cultural phenomena like religions are not closed, ‘isomorphic’ systems, but dynamic and fluctuating ensembles of relations that interpenetrate and absorb one another in . . . ongoing cultural contact” (Murphy 2001, 147). In his second book, he claims that this capacity for “transforming, combining, and/or inverting” a sign's meaning constitutes the origins of any given religion (Murphy 2007b, 156). The selection and articulation of signs – texts, gestures, images, and so on – is, bounded, however, by Murphy's conception of “canon” as a focussing and limiting tool.

Murphy de-emphasizes the unbounded number of definitional possibilities for religious signs by focussing on omission and selection. If any given sign can technically have any object for its referent, then any attempt to catalogue the total number of referents for any given sign will be theoretically limitless. To avoid this infinite quality, Murphy focuses instead on referential preferences: why do certain religions emphasize certain meanings (instead of other meanings) for certain signs (instead of other signs)? A religion's canon affects and guides these preferences for certain meanings within the total play of signifiers.

Communicative selection and omission support Murphy's depiction of signification as a provocative and combative behavior. Signification – as well as interpretation and identity formation – “is a process of selecting some features out of a multiplicity that is, at least in principle, infinite” (Murphy 2001, 61, see also 2). This statement hints at how theorists construct their objects of study: observers focus on certain aspects of an object when describing or interpreting or identifying it by virtue of their context or intentions. Since no sign can totally

articulate its referent, every act of signification – including definition, description, and interpretation – selects certain attributes to convey instead of others.

Thus, selection results in omission. Definition, identification, and interpretation involve “forgetfulness, effacement, or exclusions” insofar as people submerge these acts of omission and represent signs as accurately or exhaustively defining whatever it is they signify (Murphy 2001, 32, 74). These omissions, moreover, reinforce ideas of hierarchy and differentiation. Moving some characteristics to the foreground of a definition or description necessarily relegates other characteristics to the background. For instance, if the phenomenology of religion renders all manifestations of religious behavior understandable to the observer, then such an approach will privilege similarities between the religious manifestations and the observer’s own context, de-emphasizing the value of elements that highlight disparity.

Murphy uses Smith’s categories of “canon” and “hermeneute” to explain tendencies of selection and omission within religions (Murphy 2001; Murphy 2003; Murphy 2005; Murphy 2007b). Smith uses these two terms to describe the way that religions simultaneously uphold inherited traditions, doctrines, and practices while also adapting these elements to address new socio-historical contexts. In this paradox, canon refers to “the arbitrary fixing of a limited number of ‘texts’ [which are seen] as immutable and authoritative,” or the fixed element of religion (Smith 1982b, 44). Hermeneutes, on the other hand, exercise “exegetical ingenuity” to relate this fixed element to new contexts and situations (Smith 1982b, 44). An insistence on historical context underlies this paradox: religious customs and texts come into being in particular situations, which inevitably give way to new situations over time. Context endlessly shapes and re-shapes religions, and thus fixed elements must be reinterpreted to account for new situations. In Smith’s words,

where there is a canon, it is possible to predict the *necessary* occurrence of a hermeneute, of an interpreter whose task it is continually to extend the domain of the closed canon over everything that is known or everything that exists *without* altering the canon in the process (1982b, 48).

This understanding of religion matches Murphy's observation that religions speak in superlative registers – the hermeneutical extension of a canon's relevance into new situations signals both its authority and its all-encompassing nature. Smith's understanding of religion also supports Murphy's insistence on meaning's malleability – hermeneutical ingenuity allows practitioners to adapt their canons to interpret socio-historical contexts that previous practitioners never imagined.

By employing Smith's notion of the canon and hermeneute, Murphy also introduces boundaries to a religion's signifying practices. Hermeneutes are confronted by ever-changing situations, but they are also confined by a set canon, which designates "the perimeters of [their] tradition" (Murphy 2001, 148). In semiotic terms, "the canon is the lexicon of a language, the sum of possible resources for making sentences out of the words, while the activity of the hermeneute... is the act of combining words into sentences" (Murphy 2003, 54; also Murphy 2005, 72 and Murphy 2007b, 160). Context determines a religion's hermeneutical needs, but a canon determines a religion's hermeneutical possibilities in any given context. Although "there is no limit to what a canonical paradigmatic may be applied to," the canon as a set of doctrinal or ritual inheritances promotes hermeneutical acts that – at the very least – acknowledge previous signifying or interpretive trends (Murphy 2003, 56).

By identifying religions as systems of signification that humans use to understand and navigate the world, Murphy characterizes religion according to semiotic tenets. Religions come into being and create meaning through difference and opposition. The process of creating meaning differentially in turn structures hierarchies between religions and their interlocutors, and

requires selecting and omitting various meanings to support such hierarchies. Finally, religions as semiotic systems are at once free and bounded. Practitioners relate their religious systems to new contexts in novel ways due to the lack of inherent meanings in signs, but canon bounds the nature of these hermeneutical applications.

Defining Religion

Murphy names religion as “one species of signification” that humans use to “constitute themselves and their relations to the world and to each other” (Murphy 2005, 70). Despite all his work on confiscation, differentiation, and canonical preference, this description of religion remains vague and abstract. Moreover, theory itself – as a species of signification – becomes a religion when using this description. Certainly, Murphy recognizes that theoretical discourse is not ontologically different than other types of discourse, just as he states that religious signification follows similar patterns to other forms of signification. These caveats, however, offer little assistance in apprehending or delineating religious signifying behavior.

To escape this vagueness and crystalize his theory, Murphy provides a specific definition of religion at several points in his work. This definition of religion shapes my research and summarizes the theory sketched out above. Murphy’s earliest and simplest definition of religion appears in his first articulation of his semiotic theory: “religion is a practice of semiotic construction and displacement” (2003, 51n). Anticipating objections to such a terse and non-specific description, he insists that “religion is not a unique kind of activity, but only a more aggressively symbolic form of a very basic and ordinary human activity, namely, interpretation” (Murphy 2003, 51n). Echoing Smith’s caution that scholars create their object of study, he states,

I use the term “religion” in a purely conventional sense . . . to designate that which the practitioners of the science of religion have historically studied as religion. This is not so

much a definition of a substance in the world nor the deployment of a technical term as a name for a research tradition and its associated body of data (Murphy 2003, 51n).

Although Murphy continues to insist on a tersely functional definition of religion in later publications, he fleshes out his definition as his theory takes shape.

In both “What is a Semiotic Theory of Religion?” and *Representing Religion*, Murphy offers an almost-identical definition of religion: “religion has historically been the structuring of asymmetrical relations between real or imagined groups or classes with the involvement of non-obvious beings, states, and events” (2007b, 141).¹³ Again, he defends his definition against charges of vagueness and non-differentiation, suggesting that his definition focuses neither on religion’s function nor on its substance – “there are too many, conflicting, competing, even contradictory ones” (Murphy 2007b, 140). Instead, he envisions religion as an “ongoing, mobile, continuous process of structuration” (Murphy 2007b, 140).

Murphy’s definition of religion forms the heart of his creative response to the phenomenology of religion and serves as the guiding analytical lens for my investigation of language appropriation in NRMs. Moreover, its adequacy – or inadequacy – as a description of “that which the practitioners of the science of religion have historically studied as religion” serves as a metonymical evaluation of his theory as a whole. Murphy’s definition of religion as used in this study, therefore, gestures both backwards and forwards. It gestures backwards towards Murphy’s semiotic theory as a summary point for analysis, evaluation, and critique, and gestures forwards as the basis for a new approach to studying NRMs.

Two elements of Murphy’s definition of religion particularly structure my reading of new religious texts. First, religions signify through the “structuring of asymmetrical relations.”

¹³ The definition provided in “What is a Semiotic Theory of Religion?” differs slightly, lacking the phrase “or classes” (Murphy 2005, 73).

Second, these relations involve “real or imagined groups or classes.” Together, both phrases highlight the relationally creative nature of language appropriation in new religions. Asserting that practicing religion involves “the structuring of asymmetrical relations” effectively summarizes much of Murphy’s theory as described above. Two points regarding “structuring” and “asymmetrical relations” require, however, brief comments. First, Murphy’s description of religions as structures allows for a problematic rigidity. Sally Falk Moore, for instance, criticizes scholars whose work on cultural behaviors and structures “postulates an existing symbolic system” that is simply deployed in new situations (S. F. Moore 1987, 729). Moore questions, in other words, theoretical frameworks that explain human behavior as an ongoing deployment of an inherited and standardized set of behaviors – even behaviors that are creatively deployed based on context. Such frameworks are overly rigid, ignoring the fact that “used and changed at the same time, cultural categories can easily be infused with new meanings that attach to them in the practical situations that refer to them” (S. F. Moore 1994, 364).¹⁴

Smith’s canon-hermeneute principle exemplifies the rigidity that Moore criticizes. Although religions can creatively deploy their canon in response to ever-changing situations, Moore’s critique emphasizes Smith’s caveat that such deployments take place *without* altering the canon. In Smith’s example, traditional structures remain somewhat impervious to sociohistorical change, whereas Moore claims that hermeneutical creativity alters – even as it utilizes – cultural canons. Murphy’s own conception of religion’s structuring operations acknowledges both Smith’s insistence on constancy and Moore’s insistence on alteration. On the

¹⁴ Consider, as an alternative to Smith’s canon/hermeneute, Tarrow’s description of language adaptation in insurgent political groups: “new actors facing new opponents take the cloth of contention – language – and turn it into costumes that match different conflicts and different opponents” (2013, 198). Tarrow’s metaphor accounts for the same mechanisms (individuals deploying inherited/extant materials to address emergent situations), but his “cloth” – that is, language – lacks the rigidity of Smith’s “canon.”

one hand, he accepts that religious structuring involves a “relatively constant . . . pattern of relations” (Murphy 2007b, 140). On the other hand, Murphy insists that this pattern of relations is never immutable or firm – a religion’s structuring activities can always, “at the very least, be materially reversed, symbolically altered, or grafted onto/into a new set of relations” (Murphy 2007b, 140). In fact, Murphy goes on to clarify that religion as a “structuring” refers to “a mobile structure, or the process of continuous structuration” (Murphy 2007b, 141). Neither of these protestations, however, totally dismisses the possibility of an immutable, unchangeable canon. Moore’s work serves as a reminder that religion’s “mobile structure” or “process[es] of continuous structuration” is itself affected by the conditions of its ongoing deployment. While my work upholds Murphy’s definition insofar as it emphasizes religion’s role in providing a structuring framework that creates and manages opportunities for interaction, it acknowledges that this structuring framework changes and develops as a result of its deployments.

The more important component of Murphy’s definition of religion for my project, however, concerns the nature of asymmetrical relations which – as noted above – are always potentially reversible. As I demonstrate, appropriating pejorative language in new religions depends on asymmetry and reversal. Pejorative terms clearly imply a hierarchy, which the speaker invokes when referring to the interlocutor signified by the pejorative term. In moments of language appropriation, in turn, the interlocutor reverses this asymmetry by confiscating the term and adapting its meaning to revise the relations in favor of the disrespected interlocutor.

Murphy’s definition of religion does not deal directly with pejorative words, but he identifies the asymmetrical relations common in religious discourse by referencing various hierarchies: sacred/profane, blessed/cursed, heaven/earth, faithful/infidels, etc. (Murphy 2007b, 149). These examples point back to Murphy’s idea that religions sign in the superlative register

and deal in absolute categories. In his own words, “religions, as asymmetrical structures which traffic in non-relative realities are *structures of supremacy*” (Murphy 2005, 74). If religions are “structures of supremacy,” then religious signification produces asymmetrical relations. As Murphy notes, “representation determines the possible modes of intentional meanings available to a subject” – structures of supremacy cannot help but construct a world using superior/inferior categories (1994, 139). The pejorative language adopted by NRMs works in the same way.

The second aspect of Murphy’s definition of religion that impacts my reading of new religious texts describes both NRMs and their interlocutors: both parties are “real or imagined groups or classes.” The former distinction – between real and imagined entities – acknowledges the constructed, rather than inherent, nature of identity. The groups and classes in religious systems can, but need not, descriptively correspond to empirical conditions. Murphy states that “religious ideation is not empirically descriptive, although it can be. It is also imaginative, even, and not at all infrequently, the product of fantasy” (Murphy 2007b, 150). The caveat to religion’s propensity to generate imaginative or fantastic depictions of either itself or its others comes in a footnote, but is of crucial importance:

That it [i.e. a non-empirical description] is a product of fantasy, of course, in no way entails that it is not historically effective. The history of religious ideation shows us that humans are capable of taking as deadly serious even the maddest of their dreams (Murphy 2007b, 190n23).¹⁵

This warning affirms that imagined conceptions that contribute to forming asymmetrical relations can result in real actions. Murphy’s critique of colonialist discourse demonstrates this point. Imagined racial, cultural, or ethnic asymmetry between European colonists and the colonized Other justified real subjugation and oppression. These real effects, in turn, generated

¹⁵ This observation approximates William I. Thomas and Dorothy Swaine Thomas’ sociological maxim that “if men [*sic*] define situations as real, they are real in their consequences” (1928, 572).

social structures that embraced and passed down as natural the superiority of Europeans over colonized subjects.¹⁶ The initial imagined classes, therefore, affected real groups.

The boundary that Murphy erects between “imagined” and “real” is deliberately permeable, and recognizes the way in which imaginary, or culturally constructed, asymmetrical relations can result in real, or actualized, states of being. He erects a similar, but blurrier, boundary between “groups” and “classes.” In differentiating groups from classes Murphy tries to distinguish “concrete social bodies” – that is, groups – from “abstract states and beings” – that is, classes (Murphy 2007b, 149). He acknowledges, however, that “in point of religious practice, they circulate into and out of each other,” and finally admits that “ultimately, the difference between the two is not, for the purposes of the larger argument . . . that important” (Murphy 2007b, 150). *Cultist*, for example, is both a group and a class. As a group, cultists are practitioners of new religions – they are Scientologists, Jesus People, and so on. As a class, however, cultists are (negatively) easily duped weirdos or (positively) liberated holders of transcendent truths. Either *cultist* class distinction can apply, moreover, to a group of *cultists*.

At worst, Murphy’s explanation of groups and classes fails to meaningfully differentiate between the two terms. At best, his groups/classes distinction reinforces the point that he makes more clearly with his real/imagined distinction: interlocutors who provoke communication and produce meaning exist on a continuum of reality spanning from empirically present to subjectively imagined. Although the interlocutor’s position on this continuum may affect the type of communication and meaning provoked, any position – even that of imagined classes – is

¹⁶ The process by which imagined groups or classes become real groups or classes operates similarly to Roland Barthes’s explanation of how mythic discourse “transforms history into nature” by masking culturally constructed realities as natural states of being (Barthes [1957] 2012, 240). From a sociological perspective, the process by which imagined groups or classes become real groups or classes (or, history becomes nature) is part of the process of legitimating an institutional order that is created by one generation and then passed on to another generation (Berger and Luckmann [1966] 1967, 93). In each case, that which is Imagined/Historical/Constructed becomes Real/Natural/Innate.

capable of generating an “historically effective” result. Since Murphy’s distinction between groups and classes is weaker than his differentiation between real and imagined entities, my research focuses on this latter distinction.

Murphy’s definition of religion serves as a succinct rendering of his semiotic theory. Addressing his critiques of the phenomenology of religion as well as his stated goals of theory in general, this definition is widely applicable but avoids positing an essential or qualitative similarity between various human practices commonly labelled as religion. Although differing religions may all create relationships that imply a hierarchy, that hierarchy is asserted in diverse ways. Most importantly, Murphy’s definition brings into focus several key qualities of religious behavior: its situational adaptability, its reliance on relational meaning-making, its hierarchy-dependent worldviews, and its ability to generate empirical effects – for both members and their interlocutors – using abstract or invented constructions.

Inviting Adaptation

Murphy’s definition of religion is not perfect. Even those sections that this project relies on most frequently – religion as “the structuring of asymmetrical relations” and religions and their interlocutors as “real or imagined groups or classes” – require elaboration, alteration, or correction. Moreover, Murphy nowhere suggests that his theory of religion applies to NRMs. It is necessary, therefore, to justify its use as a tool for exploring the role of language appropriation as a means of identity formation, conflict management, and in-group solidarity in NRMs.

Murphy’s theory as outlined in his extant publications risks defeating itself. As noted above, Murphy claims that theory’s goal is to explain how the world really is. According to his own logic, then, actual instances of religious behavior – texts, rituals, and so forth – should bear

the hallmarks that his semiotic theory of religion suggests. It stands to reason, furthermore, that Murphy would benefit from citing actual instances of religious behavior in support of his claims. Unfortunately, Murphy's extant corpus contains only sporadic and brief examples.

In "Elements of a Semiotic Theory of Religion," Murphy provides only a single descriptive example borrowed from Robert Baird and Alfred Bloom's 1971 *Indian and Far Eastern Religious Traditions* (Murphy 2003, 62). At the end of the article he states a desire "to pursue the use of these [semiotic] elements in the study of the history of Christian theological discourse" as a way of sharpening his claim that a semiotic theory of religion "is very useful for the elucidation of the textual practices of both religionists and scholars of religion" (Murphy 2003, 63). His further proposition to study "Protestant philosophical theology of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries" supports his critique of the phenomenology of religion, but such subject matter represents a rarefied stratum of religious discourse.

In "What Is a Semiotic Theory of Religion?" Murphy references Theravada Buddhism, Lao Tzu, Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, and Valhalla, but none of these topics receives any more than a cursory mention (Murphy 2005, 74-75). His final sustained description of a semiotic theory of religion in *Representing Religion* includes comparatively-long examples from the both the Hebrew Bible and Haitian Vodou, and expands his – now repeated – examples from Hinduism, Christianity, Buddhism, and Taoism (Murphy 2007b, 137-139, 144, 147). The fact remains, however, that Murphy's corpus deals predominantly with the work of philosophers and academics and that he backs his own theoretical assertions with only the barest of evidence.

Murphy sidesteps this problem with repeated invitations to readers to test his theory's adequacy in their own research. Referring to the way that adapting extant religious practice can create new "genres" of religion, Murphy remarks that "the collection of historical instances of

such acts, the formation of a catalogue of their types, and an analysis of their formal properties would be of great service to the science of religion” (Murphy 2003, 50n4; see also Murphy 2007b, 191n1). More importantly, he acknowledges that

the application and/or extension of these theoretical elements to specific area studies is, of course, the work of specialists, and I leave such work to them, both in ‘raw’ application, as well as in the reflexive modification of these elements which is an inescapable (and welcomed) result of such application (Murphy 2003, 63).

Murphy repeats this request for verification, extension, and/or modification by area specialists in *Representing Religion* (2007b, 142, 154-155). My research constitutes one instance of the testing and adaptation that Murphy invites as a necessary element of his self-reflexive theorizing.

Admittedly, he never directly addresses NRMs as a sub-category of the larger identifier *religion*. Indeed, Murphy argues that the phrase “new religious movement” is a misnomer:

From where do religions come? From other religions. A ‘new’ religion is a permutation – not infrequently in the form of a reversal, total or partial, of a previously existing religion. . . . Religions ‘originate’ by transforming, combining, and/or inverting pre-existing cultural materials” (2007b, 156).

Even religious founders are “themselves culturally and historically produced (and reproduced) phenomenon” (Murphy 2007b, 43).

Rather than suggesting that new religions do not exist, however, these arguments match Murphy’s assertion that identity formation always entails confiscating and adapting extant cultural elements (Murphy 2001, 62). Religions emerge, then, by acts of appropriation, in which individuals hermeneutically adapt a pre-existing cultural canon. These adaptations signal and address the socio-historical circumstances that occasion identity-construction-via-appropriation in the first place. Murphy’s work links new religions to acts of symbolic appropriation, and looks to the context of such appropriations to understand their significance and effect.

Moreover, Murphy's theory of religion acknowledges language as a marker of group identity. He remarks that "as languages set up a 'separate world' [through their particular confiscations and interpretations], different linguistic communities, in effect, inhabit different 'worlds'" (Murphy 2007b, 117). In addition to delineating different viewpoints, language usage also delineates group members and non-members. Murphy identifies in-group slang, in particular, as a site of using fluency to separate members from non-members. He notes that "connotative dimensions of a language-user group, such as slang... are very much part of how meaning is made and remade within a defined context. . . . [However, slang's] connotation is hard to detect to 'outsiders,' and... is highly, highly context sensitive" (Murphy 2007b, 192n8). Since slang is difficult to use correctly, an individual's fluency indicates their participation in a particular language community as well as their larger understanding of the group's worldview. Thus, language is both a marker of group identity and as a sign of group affiliation.

Murphy's focus on the way that cultural interlocutors provoke interpretation and identity construction, as well as his insistence on the unequal – and reversible – relation between cultural conversation partners implicitly undergirds a study of both disempowered social groups and pejorative language. In fact, Murphy relates language appropriation directly to his agonistic reading of the way individuals and groups produce meanings: "very often what constitutes victory in a protracted cultural struggle is the elimination of the other's code by means of having successfully encoded it completely within one's own code" (Murphy 2007b, 128). As I demonstrate, targeted groups can deflect – and then control – the damaging force of pejorative language by situating it within the group's own symbolic worldview. Elsewhere, Murphy acknowledges that the language choices made by religions may "have emerged from a long, mostly silent and unacknowledged, cultural struggle. As such, they may have been adapted,

arranged, even reversed in any number of ways, *and* in relation to possibly lost enemies” (Murphy 2007b, 136). A religion’s symbols and their associated meanings, then, serve as markers or traces of that religion’s cultural contests.

The idea of “positionality” is a final element in Murphy’s work that supports mating his definition of religion with a study of conflict and language. Positionality refers to “the form of a relationship between a subject and an object within a system of representation,” or, for example, the power differential crafted in a relationship between a new religion and its cultural critics (Murphy 2005, 73; see also 2007b, 148). Gesturing back to his explanation of real and imagined entities, Murphy notes that the relative power positions between the two groups need not have any basis in reality to be effective. He suggests that “a party, which is relatively weak, can, through symbolic/semiotic means, create a universe [in] which they are stronger than their oppressors” (Murphy 2005, 73; see also 2007b, 148). In fact, Murphy suggests that the relatively weak party will emphasize asymmetrical relations at least as much as the relatively dominant party. Rather than downplaying difference, a disempowered group’s unenviable position makes that group more likely to leverage symbols to invert the relation and claim the positional high ground: “the oppressed are every bit, if not even more, inclined to structuring religious ideation in radically asymmetrical ways as are the oppressors” (Murphy 2007b, 189n20). This use of symbolic/semiotic means by a relatively weak party to overpower oppressors – in a real or imagined sense – describes the acts of language appropriation covered in chapters 5-6.

Murphy’s theory and definition of religion provides scholars with a self-reflexive series of arguments that bring religion’s relational and contextual elements to the foreground. His work avoids conflating all religions as evolutionary manifestations of a trans-historical religious essence that lies at the heart of human creative activity, and instead highlights difference’s role in

constructing religious worldviews and systems of signification. Although his work retains the idea of an agonistic or provocative gap – whether real or imagined – between different social groups that affects intergroup relations, he stresses that this gap is positional, alterable, and even reversible, rather than inherent and static. Murphy’s efforts to bridge religious studies theory with semiotics account for both religious change over time – using the emptiness of the signifier as well as the hermeneutical deployment of signs in new contexts – and religious perseverance – using religious canons as inherited vocabularies.

Murphy’s scholarly work assesses – and sidesteps – several disconcerting trends found in the phenomenology of religion. His resultant semiotic theory of religion, as outlined above, provides an alternate way of viewing and interpreting religious behavior. For all of their high-level theoretical positions, however, Murphy’s writings fail to demonstrate their pragmatic applicability. His real or imagined groups or classes remain largely faceless, and their structuring of asymmetrical relations remains formless. Before giving face and form to his theory, chapter 3 elaborates the sociolinguistic concept of anti-language – with its connections to identity construction, conflict management, and boundary maintenance – that shape the picture of NRMs that emerge when viewed through Murphy’s lens.

Chapter 3

Using (Bad) Language: Identity, Conflict, and Boundaries

Murphy's theory and definition of religion function best as a widely-deployable structure that applies – in theory – to different manifestations of religion. By focussing on structure, he analyzes religions using easily identifiable elements; namely, two or more social interlocutors who each attempt to organize their relations with the other(s) in an ongoing contest for superiority, appealing to what they believe to be the supernatural in their claims. By presenting a theory that relies on conceptual presuppositions more than concrete evidence, Murphy avoids crafting a thesis that is supported only in a limited number of representative cases.

This focus on structure and high-level theorizing, however, is also detrimental. Lacking substantial interaction with actual religious examples, Murphy's conception of religions is tentative, and accurate only hypothetically. In addition, he talks about inversion, reversion, and lively fluidity using a rigid semiotic premise. When applied to NRMs, Murphy's definition of religion draws out the creative and malleable ways in which language appropriation serves as a means of identity construction, a site of conflict or contest, and a means of boundary marking. These functions vary in shape and content based on the NRM's leader, source of authority, intended audience, social context, and goals. In this chapter, I assemble sociolinguistic observations – most notably Halliday's notion of anti-languages – that provide a conceptual toolkit for exploring those elements of NRMs that Murphy's perspective draws out. I begin by briefly commenting on sociolinguistics' relationship to textual sources, and conclude by addressing the importance – and challenge – of studying pejorative terms.

Narrowing the Focus

Murphy's semiotic approach fits well with his goal of articulating a general theory of religion due to the discipline's broad interest in signification. The strength of semiotics lies in the variety of data that it interacts with – Murphy lists “religious architecture, iconography, ritual and even disciplinary practices such as prayer, mediation, yoga, sweat lodges, vision quests, and the like” as semiotic religious sites (2003, 63). The weakness of semiotics, however, lies in its often structured or systematic – even impersonal – portrayal of signification (see Yelle, Handman, and Lehrich 2019, 5). Sociolinguistics addresses this issue by emphasizing meaning-making's mutable elements. Instead of focussing on “system, structure or grammar, sociolinguistics sets out to pay attention to contexts, users, [and] functions” (Lillis 2013, 3-4).

Since semiotics and sociolinguistics do not directly overlap with one another, it is misleading to simply replace Murphy's semiotic starting point with a sociolinguistic starting point. What I intend, in other words, is less a hybridization of somewhat-related disciplines than a selective utilization of sociolinguistic concerns, observations, and hypotheses to contextualize and personalize Murphy's definition of religion without destabilizing the assertions that undergird his basic argument. Sociolinguistics allows me to enliven, rather than fundamentally alter, his depiction of religions. This interdisciplinary approach increases my research's relevance in multiple areas of study, enlarges the scholarly toolkit for analyzing new religions while testing Murphy's theory, and narrows the scope of investigation to a close analysis of spoken and written language.

In line with Murphy's claim that theories affect data, it is worth noting that this analytical narrowing affects my depiction of new religious discourse in two ways. First, I emphasize linguistic signifying operations. On one hand, it is prudent to select specific behaviors for

comparison across new religions to facilitate close analysis. Focussing particularly on language allows for a targeted study of linguistic meaning-making in new religious contexts.¹ On the other hand, however, my focus on language obscures non-linguistic elements that contribute to religion's structuring of asymmetrical relations or creation of real/imagined groups. As Wendy Doniger argues, selecting certain elements of religion to compare may serve pragmatic purposes, but it also affects the scope and outcome of that comparison ([1998] 2011, 39-40). Focussing on linguistic elements of new religions artificially elevates their importance in religious meaning-making while simultaneously downplaying the role of non-linguistic elements in communicating or creating religious meaning (see Yelle, Handman, and Lehrich 2019, 1, 9).

Moreover, I primarily analyze written language. Scholars studying social movements and NRMs express concern about the textual focus prevalent in both fields. In his work on NRMs, James Lewis worries that "NRM research is currently overwhelmingly based on analyses of texts," suggesting that this textual focus fails to capture the changing demographic data of participants in new religions over time (2014, 2). Doug McAdam, alternately, argues that social movement studies possesses an "ideational bias," or a propensity to view a movement's texts – rather than its actions – as the primary site of meaning-making (1996, 341).²

The social movement studies concept of "frame alignment processes" addresses Lewis' charge that a textual focus obscures demographic data. Frame alignment suggests that "some set of individual interests, values and beliefs and SMO [social movement organization] activities, goals, and ideology are congruent and complementary. . . . [and are] a necessary condition for

¹ Moreover, Wendy Doniger notes that comparison involving subjective selection from within a larger body of potentially comparable elements does not render those selections arbitrary ([1998] 2011, 40).

² See also Nile Green and Mary Searle-Chatterjee's summary of the rise of "world religions" scholarship, which likewise suggests an over-emphasis on texts as the primary/sole source of meaning-making (2008, 1-2).

movement participation” (Snow et al. 1986, 464). To successfully attract members, NRMs must align their ideas and goals with those of a target audience. It follows, then, that a NRM’s language will reflect the needs and interests of its potential or actual members. Although such reflection is not direct demographic data, it furnishes information about the type of individuals who participate in particular groups.

One can compensate for McAdam’s ideational bias by focusing on language’s exhortative nature, and by identifying written/recorded language as a behavioral product. Linguistic productions – including speeches, letters, newspapers, and books – both encourage audiences to act in certain ways and constitute actions themselves. The Children of God’s *MO Letters*, for instance, contain the group’s doctrines, but they also implicitly and explicitly guide members’ behavioral response to those doctrines. The letters themselves, moreover, represent dynamic creative processes involving multiple actors and resources. The *Mo Letters* are a product of dictation, transcription, translation, dissemination, reading, studying, response, collection, retention, revision, and censorship. New religious texts both result in actions – their hortatory function – and are products of actions – their created nature. These written products are not, however, the normal focus of sociolinguistic study.

Sociolinguistics concerns itself predominantly with spoken language. For instance, a recent methodological overview of sociolinguistic research dedicates significant space to gathering and analysing data through participant observation and interviews (Heller, Pietikäinen, and Pujolar 2018, 77-92). Although the authors acknowledge the need to “attend to multiple forms of data,” especially when “textual, visual, and special materials may be the only data that you will have access to,” the book spends little time discussing how to collect or analyze language’s “material traces” (Heller, Pietikäinen, and Pujolar 2018, 57, 72, 92-96). In his

Sociolinguistics: A Very Short Introduction, Edwards similarly suggests that “the value of written information . . . has not been entirely displaced,” but names interviews and participant observation as the two principal means of obtaining linguistic data (2013, 20-21). In her own analysis of the field, Theresa Lillis confirms this assertion, stating that “spoken language has been and continues to be overwhelmingly the empirical object of gaze in sociolinguistics” (Lillis 2013, 2). She refers to the “primacy” of speech in sociolinguistics – or, in Yelle’s words, the idea that “writing is simply speech recorded or written down” (Lillis 2013, 2; Yelle 2018, 8). In this view, writing is derivative of – or secondary to – speech.

Nevertheless, Lillis offers several reasons for bringing sociolinguistics to bear on texts. She observes that written language allows scholars to access four overlapping goals of sociolinguistics: to study language as it occurs in a social context, to study language “as it is actually used,” to study “the language that we use in going about our everyday business,” and to study language as a malleable tool (Lillis 2013, 3-7). These goals concern Yelle’s “facts on the ground” – that is, language use as a real social practice rather than an ideal systematic construction. As my research demonstrates, written/recorded new religious language constitutes a pliable tool used both to express ideal doctrines and to navigate actual/mundane aspects of new religious life. Berg and Jones repeatedly claimed to use everyday/familiar language, rather than rarified or elevated linguistic constructions.

Lillis further notes that written/recorded language can be lively in its creation and use. She and Edwards both note the sociolinguistic tendency to view writing as static or normalized: speech’s dynamism and mutability, in other words, rigidifies in writing’s spelling and grammar (Edwards 2013, 47, 53; Lillis 2013, 25). As I demonstrate, new religious texts can both support and resist normalization. Although religious acts of signification may employ standardized forms

to facilitate future use (as in rituals), they may conversely rely on new or adaptive forms of signification to signal their newness. Hubbard noted – and struggled with – this balance, suggesting that languages are sets of rules to be both learned and broken. Rather than rigidifying, Pederson’s *Hollywood Free Paper* shifted its linguistic style to match new audiences, and Berg re-adapted the meaning of *whore* throughout the *MO Letters*.

Finally, written/recorded language provides a stable body of data for tracking language appropriation in small or short-lived discourse communities.³ Written and recorded language is less transient than speech. Although Heller, Pietikäinen and Pujolar prioritize speech as the primary object that sociolinguists study, they nevertheless acknowledge transcription and recording as helpful – even necessary – ways of generating data (Heller, Pietikäinen and Pujolar 2018, 80). Peoples Temple and the Children of God exemplify the importance of persistent data. The Temple’s audiotapes exist as a record of voices that – following the mass-murders/suicides that took place in Jonestown in 1978 – can no longer speak. The Children of God, alternately, radically altered their teachings over time, redacting or destroying documents that no longer benefited the group. In both cases, written/recorded texts circumvent research difficulties caused by the group’s actions.

Anti-languages: Contesting Authority

The work of structuring asymmetrical relations and creating real and imagined groups or classes using pejorative/slurring terms is work that sociolinguistics can address. These instances of language use are processes of enacted fluency: they facilitate identity formation, play a role in

³ Championing emergent and lived expressions of religion, Green and Searle-Chatterjee argue that “over-reliance on written texts can obscure the discursive strategies and alternative forms of group-labelling used by subordinate groups” (2008, 7). As my extensive use of primary sources indicates, subordinate groups can certainly deploy discursive strategies to challenge religious/political dominance using written and recorded texts.

intergroup conflict, and establish social boundaries. In this section, I summarise Halliday's notion of "anti-societies" and "anti-languages" – first introduced in a 1976 *American Anthropologist* article – as concepts that fold matters of identity, boundary, and contest into language creation and adaptation in marginal social groups. Although Halliday does not rely on NRMs as examples of anti-societies, and although Murphy nowhere cites his work, anti-societies and their anti-languages serve as conceptual models for the new religions and texts that I examine.

In Halliday's work, an anti-society is "a society that is set up within another society as a conscious alternative to it. It is a mode of resistance, resistance which may take the form either of passive symbiosis or of active hostility and even destruction" (1976, 570). Anti-societies cannot be extricated from the contexts in which they develop; their creation as well as their form reflects a version of dominant society (Halliday 1976, 570, 573). Halliday explains, however, that an anti-society "provides an alternative social structure, with its systems of values, of sanction, of rewards and punishments; and this becomes the source of an alternative identity for its members" (1976, 573). This alternative structure is especially beneficial to groups facing identity threat or social destruction (Halliday 1976, 573).

While Halliday's examples include "vagabonds," "criminals," "underworld" figures, and inhabitants of "prisons and reform schools," his description of an anti-society matches well with new religions. NRMs arise as conscious alternatives to dominant society, providing new sources of validation, identity, and community for their members. Moreover, the fact that these alternatives range from passive symbiosis to active hostility provides room for an array of new religious forms. Both Jonestown's violent protest against American society and Scientology's comparative acceptance of dominant social structures fit the anti-society model. Moreover,

Halliday's claim that anti-societies reflect the dominant societies from which they arise meshes with Murphy's argument that religions emerge by borrowing extant cultural materials.⁴

These anti-societies generate anti-languages. While an anti-language mirrors or draws on dominant linguistic patterns, it crafts and expresses the alternate reality of an anti-society. As such, "an anti-language . . . is nobody's 'mother tongue'; it exists solely in the context of *resocialization*, and the reality it creates is inherently an alternate reality, one that is constructed precisely in order to function in alteration" (Halliday 1976, 575). For Halliday, a major feature of anti-languages is their propensity to generate new terms and/or meanings that relate to the central components of an anti-society's alternate vision of reality and corresponding activities (1976, 571). His criminal exemplars, for instance, created a cacophony of anti-language terms to discuss illicit activities, stolen goods, and law enforcement (Halliday 1976, 577, 579).

Language appropriation in new religions operates similarly. While Hubbard, Jones, Berg, and Pederson borrowed vocabulary from extant communities, they adapted its meaning to craft an alternate social vision. The terms susceptible to the greatest re-imagining, moreover, matched each organization's major point of contention with established society. For example, Berg's critical condemnation of tightly regulated attitudes towards sexuality adapted multiple terms for sexual promiscuity in his new understanding of sex. While I analyze *whore*, *harlot*, and *hooker*, the *Mo Letters* also reconceptualized *slut*, *prostitute*, and *call girl* in their alternate vision of promiscuity as holy sexuality. Hubbard's fixation on the relationship between health/success and the human mind, as another example, generated a myriad of new terms relating to mental health.

⁴ New religions seem better suited to Halliday's anti-society label than the world religions that Murphy discusses due to their marginality and questionable legitimacy. Ultimately, however, Halliday explains that a group's status is a matter of tension between conceptions of reality, not social location (1976, 575).

This focussed re-invention underscores a basic point in Halliday's work: anti-languages are not completely new languages. Instead, they are targeted adaptations: "the principle is that of same grammar, different vocabulary; but different vocabulary only in certain areas" (1976, 571). This targeting explains why Hubbard insisted that effective (English-speaking/reading) Scientologists had to be proficient in (English) grammar. Scientology's texts are replete with new or adapted vocabulary, but this vocabulary is ensconced in the dominant linguistic system's grammatical framework.

Other characteristics of anti-language relate to constructing identity, social conflict or contest, and establishing boundaries in anti-societies. In a 1975 article, Halliday draws together these three themes in a comment regarding challenged subcultures: "the language of a social group that is under pressure . . . becomes a major factor in the definition and defence of that group's identity" ([1975a] 2003, 85-86; see also 1976, 576). Regarding identity, he suggests that language's meaning-making qualities allow speakers to both describe and produce the worlds around them: "in using language, we are both observing the environment and intruding on it. . . .The semantic system is organized around this dual focu[s] of reflection and of action" ([1975a] 2003, 84). In reporting on 1970s issues, for instance, the *Hollywood Free Paper* crafted as well as communicated American life. Stories of international conflicts and local protests received spiritual significance, generating – not just describing – a world in which Jesus People stood as redeemed exemplars of an alternate social vision.

Halliday insists that an anti-language's purpose as a "reality-generating syste[m]" is to both "create and maintain . . . alternative reality" (1976, 573-574). Using anti-language is tantamount to "acting out . . . a distinct social structure" and, in doing so, "maintaining identity" (Halliday 1976, 572-573). Anti-languages – and the groups that use them – not only describe an

alternate version of reality; they also shape both individual and organizational identity through words and meanings within that alternate reality.

Regarding conflict, Halliday argues that anti-languages rely on relationship – and asymmetry – in social contexts. In an earlier article, he emphasizes relationality as a central element of studying language: “to exclude the social context from the study of language is . . . to exclude human interaction and the exchange of meanings from the scope of serious inquiry” (Halliday [1975a] 2003, 78).⁵ He foregrounds conflict or contest in these relations, writing that “anti-language arises when the alternative reality is a *counter*-reality, set up *in opposition* to some established norm” (1976, 576). This emphasis on counter-reality affects an anti-language’s subject matter and purpose; specifically, it necessitates “the foregrounding of the social structure and social hierarchy” (Halliday 1976, 576). Like dominant society’s language, anti-languages have the “power to create and maintain social hierarchy,” but this hierarchy differs from that which dominant social forces impose and sustain (Halliday 1976, 574). In a 1978 article, Halliday conflates society and inequality, arguing that “the essential characteristic of social structure as we know it is that it is hierarchical” ([1978] 2007, 253).

Thus, in an anti-language, “social meanings will be seen as oppositions . . . like time and space in the Looking-Glass world (where one lives backwards, and things get further away the more one walks toward them)” (Halliday 1976, 576). Anti-languages alter the dominant social structure, warping or inverting rather than demolishing hierarchy in the anti-society’s favor. In her work on religious anti-language, Jean DeBernardi demonstrates that persecuted communities can invert charges of heresy or dishonor by redefining the criteria for determining holiness,

⁵ Elsewhere, Halliday states that “we cannot understand about social man [*sic*] if we do not understand about language” ([1975b] 2007, 169), or “the study of social man [*sic*] is the study of language” ([1971] 2007, 44). James Milroy, similarly, writes that “our analysis [of communication] – if it is to be adequate – *must* take account of society, situation, and the speaker/listener” (Milroy 1992, 5-6).

orthodoxy, or purity (2006, 286). She notes that these reversals retain the utility/power of sacred categories, turning them back on the dominant group: “to defend themselves against the negative judgments of the orthodox, they [persecuted/minority groups] rework meanings, stigmatizing those who seek to stigmatize them” (DeBernardi 2006, 286). Language appropriation in Peoples Temple exemplifies this process. Jones’s preaching hinged on identifying hierarchy in American society using *nigger*, as well as rendering *nigger*’s connotations more and more positive the closer that one looked. By reworking *nigger*’s meaning, Jones reflected social stigma away from African Americans while exposing racism and classism as white America’s legacy.

Halliday also uses anti-language’s presence as an index of unrest, explaining that “non-standard dialects may become languages of opposition and protest; periods of explicit class conflict tend to be characterized by the development of such protest languages. . . . Dialect becomes a means of expression of class consciousness or political awareness” ([1978] 2007, 254). Accounting for this proliferation using unequal access to mechanisms for change, Halliday claims that “meaning is often the most effective form that is available to [oppressed language-users]” ([1978] 2007, 254).

Finally, Halliday addresses the formation of social boundaries. He explicitly identifies social separation as a function of language, writing that “we use language to approve and disapprove . . . to include in the social group, or exclude from it” ([1973] 2003, 316; see also [1972] 2003, 330). Anti-languages accomplish this approval/disapproval by dividing communities based on fluency and perceived identity. Whether they occur along “class or caste . . . religious, generational, sexual, [or] economic” lines, dialect variations (including anti-languages) function to “express, symbolize, and maintain the social order” (Halliday 1976, 580). Differences in speech patterns signal differences between social groups. Since anti-languages are

“self-consciously opposed to the norms of the established language,” they deliberately emphasize difference and, in doing so, establish linguistic borders between competing outlooks (Halliday 1976, 582).

These boundaries account for the hermeneutic of meaninglessness in NRM research. According to Halliday, anti-languages seem unclear or unwieldy to non-anti-society members because the version of reality that they create/portray does not match that of the non-member. Simply put, “the modes of expression of the anti-language, when seen from the standpoint of the established language, appear oblique, diffuse, metaphorical; and so they are, *from that angle*” (Halliday 1976, 582). He goes on to suggest that “the obliqueness of meaning and form that makes them so effective as bearers of an alternative reality also makes them inherently comic” (Halliday 1976, 583). Defending his study of such texts, Halliday insists that scholars must “take them seriously – though not solemnly!” (1976, 580).⁶ While the hermeneutic of meaninglessness chooses other terms than “comic” to describe NRMs, Halliday’s observation that alternate conceptions of reality render anti-languages unclear to outsiders accounts for the hermeneutic of meaninglessness’ stance that NRMs employ vague language.

Language, Identity, and Agreement

Having sketched out Halliday’s concept of anti-language as a tool for thinking about new religious texts, I now provide supporting observations from more recent sources. In this section I

⁶ This bifurcation between seriousness and solemnity is an unelaborated tangent. Halliday’s claim that anti-languages are comic is unusual, since he earlier suggests that “there is much to be learnt from pathological manifestations, which are seldom as clearly set off from the ‘normal’ as they first appear” (1976, 570). In a religious studies context, I would clarify Halliday’s prohibition on solemnity with Lincoln’s advice that “the failure to treat religion ‘as religion’ – that is, the refusal to ratify its claim of transcendent nature and sacrosanct status... is the starting point for [religious studies]” (2012, 2-3). In this injunction, solemnity takes the form of religious adherence. Taking religion seriously but not solemnly affirms the value of religious texts/rituals/beliefs as insights into human/social behavior *without* affirming the transcendent origins of those texts/rituals/beliefs.

discuss language's relation to identity, while the next section discusses language as a tool of social conflict. Both sections address language's role in establishing or maintaining boundaries.

Martin Montgomery and Muriel Saville-Troike both identify language as a defining cultural marker and label language as a "badge" of group identity (Montgomery [1986] 2008, 104, 198; Saville-Troike [1982] 2002, 97, 199). Montgomery includes a "common genealogy or ancestry and some shared characteristics such as distinctive language, culture, religion or other biological and/or behavioral traits" in his list of such markers (Montgomery [1986] 2008, 96). Social groups do not have to invent their cultural markers for these markers to be valid as a source of identity; instead, they must agree on which signs count as markers as well as what those markers mean (Levine [1977] 2007, 24). Lacking long-standing traditions, emergent social groups can establish their identity and differentiate themselves from the surrounding population with linguistic markers (Montgomery [1986] 2008, 205).

Language usage also establishes identity through familiarity. Writing about taboo words, Ruth Wajnryb notes that using such terms signals comfort with one's interlocutors (2005, 12, 33, 35). Familiarity with one's listeners, in other words, allows speakers to know how far from "proper" speech they can stray and remain intelligible/tolerated. This observation explains how Jones established a comfortable, familial rapport within Peoples Temple through profanity. While other preachers maintained formal distance from their parishioners, Jones employed the uncouth language of confidants and close relations, signalling his familiarity with the plights and outlooks of listeners. Familiarity also serves as a form of boundary maintenance (Montgomery [1986] 2008, 202; Kamwangamalu 2010, 191). Jones repeatedly told his audience that Temple members – secure in their shared experience of oppression – could describe one another using slurring speech that would not be tolerated from outsiders. In Scientology, fluent familiarity

contributed to social identity, insofar as being able to (properly) read Hubbard's texts signalled a Scientologist's organizational affinity. Fluency in a group's affiliative boundaries, grammatical rules, and definitions is a linguistic marker that signals one's membership in that group (Saville-Troike [1982] 2002, 70).

Of course, Scientologists are also employees/employers, spouses, descendants, inhabitants of particular regions, and so on. These different affiliations can each furnish specialized lexicons. Edwards notes that "speakers select from their repertoire according to perceptions of situational constraints and demands," an act that he later identifies as "code-switching" (Edwards [2009] 2011, 27, 30; see also Halliday 1978, 65).⁷ One such constraint/demand is speaking to be understood, and this links language to identity on a pragmatic level. William Downes argues that "people are like the people they communicate with most frequently" – individuals employ the language patterns of those with whom they interact either out of necessity or out of a desire to cultivate an intended persona (2011, 232; see also Brewer [1996] 2003, 23; Bybee 2015, 5; Coulmas 2005, 28). In this way, Dan Dediu et al. argue, language has "a 'parity problem'; that is, it works only if we agree on the joint code" (2013, 310).⁸ Language requires, in other words, cooperation to operate effectively.⁹

⁷ As Edwards defines it, code-switching acknowledges that "all ordinary speakers have a range of possibilities in their linguistic repertoire, from which they pick and choose according to their sense of the occasion" (Edwards [2009] 2011, 30). Daniel Chandler notes that code-switching does not necessarily imply bilingualism: it can also refer to "intralingual switching between discourse types" ([2002] 2007, 245).

⁸ See also Halliday, who observes that this parity problem extends to experience: "in any exchange of meaning, the individual assumes . . . that interpretations of experience are shared (others see things the same way)" ([1975c] 2007, 133).

⁹ This observation presumes that the goal of language is to transmit information (see Dediu et al. 2013, 310). Some instances of language usage, however, purposefully obscure information from certain audiences as part of this transmission (see Dalzell 2010, 53).

This cooperation extends, to some extent, to perceived worldview and environment. James Liu and János László suggest, for instance, that narrative choices that contribute to a group's mythology likewise contribute to that group's formation of social reality (2007, 87-88). Mayr argues that "institutions seek to legitimize their own interests and existence through discourses through which they seek to transform or recontextualize social practices" (2008, 2). Beyond simply perpetuating norms for communicability's sake, language actively (re-)shapes social reality.

One's environment, in turn, affects language choices. Florian Coulmas discusses language "domains" as social environments that demand specific types of language use (2005, 138). James Milroy, similarly, writes of social consensus: communicating using a particular language suggests that the speakers agree upon a set of rules and meanings (1992, 6, 17). To the extent that individuals employ another's language patterns, they acknowledge another's social domains, with their respective language requirements and worldview. Pederson's *Hollywood Free Paper*, through its use of hip lingo, recognized and acknowledged a younger, countercultural condemnation of traditionalism, for example.

Agreement about language's rules, however, does not necessarily lead to agreement about one's environment. Saville-Troike extends a "speech community['s]" unity beyond speaking the same language – shared knowledge and behavior also contribute to a community's unity ([1982] 2005, 14-15). Marilyn Brewer, moreover, notes that happenstance can affect language habits – individuals may use a certain language because of where they are born or who their parents are, for instance (1991, 477). Thus, one should not conflate pragmatic necessity with ideological agreement. The Children of God's second-generation members, for example, inherited the group's language norms but did not necessarily embrace the social identity or

worldview that accompanied those norms, leading to debate and defection. The NRMs covered in chapters 4-7, moreover, agreed with surrounding society regarding grammar, pronunciation, or vocabulary to present a comprehensible message, but they deployed these agreed-upon elements to indicate sharp disagreement with surrounding norms.

Liu and László separate cooperation between a speaker/author and an audience from acceptance of that audience's worldview using the notion of empathy. They suggest that empathy – cooperation leading to comprehension – involves “momentarily suspend[ing] disbelief” rather than “a homogenization of attitudes and conformity of opinion” (2007, 98-99). For instance, religious studies scholars temporarily share linguistic choices with the religions that they study without adopting that religion's beliefs. Agreeing on linguistic features for pragmatic purposes is not equivalent to agreeing on linguistic features for identity purposes.

Language and Conflict

Murphy posits that meaning requires differentiation, and that differentiation results in inequality. Writing about inter-group identity formation, Gina Philogène traces the same pattern:

Groups generally define themselves by instilling in their subjects a sense of belonging. While such solidarity may contain positive attributes as foundations for a shared identity, groups also have a tendency to define themselves in juxtaposition to others who manifestly do not belong because they are different. . . . Groups define their collective Self by presuming superiority over the Other whom they do not allow to belong (2007, 32).

Thus, social groups function as agents of inclusion and separation. Exclusive or isolated groups, in particular, fulfill these functions with clearly delineated, impermeable membership boundaries (see Brewer 2001, 22). Benjamin Bergen likewise uses inclusion/separation to explain the harm/benefit of pejorative language. Regarding separation, Bergen notes that speakers use slurs to ostracize or exclude individuals or groups (2016, 204). Regarding inclusion, Bergen notes that

victims of pejorative language can “retrench within their group identity” as a defense mechanism, focussing on positive group qualities to offset negative associations (2016, 205). In this sense, pejorative language catalyzes positive associations or solidarity within challenged groups. Bolstering or challenging a group’s identity in this way creates a cultural moment that Edwin Battistella suggests can generate language change (2005, 89). As one tool with which battles of identity and superiority are fought, language affects inter-group conflict, initiating processes of separation and boundary reinforcement as well as contest over a particular social identity’s merits or weaknesses. In fact, Dediu et al. argue that “the general tendency for humans to divide humanity into in-group—out-group oppositions is a force to develop different languages” (2013. 315). Linguistic differences mark social divisions, just as social divisions generate linguistic variations.

Except in cases of extreme insulation or isolation, most individuals participate in multiple social groups (Blommaert 2005, 75). Thus, individuals must express themselves coherently in multiple social contexts. Even if a minority group differentiates itself by developing its own grammatical rules and definitions, it is beneficial to retain knowledge of the language used by whichever dominant social population exists around that group (Montgomery [1986] 2008, 101). This multilingualism, along with the process of inheritances and confiscations that comprises group creation, can result in multiple social groups using the same linguistic elements. These shared elements, in turn, become contested sites during intergroup conflict.

As Hubbard observed in Scientology, language is shared even with one’s opponents. Particular communicative circumstances may require individuals to choose from a selection of linguistic responses, but the total number of linguistic responses that an individual can choose from is controlled by the dominant social structure (Halliday [1975c] 2007, 138). Regulating

language is one way of asserting, denying, or contesting power. As I discuss below, controlling access to slurs and swear words through propriety and expectation – as well as transgressing these systems – constitutes one form of power.

If language signals social affiliation, and if NRMs are denied social power/legitimacy, then the question of why individuals would linguistically assert their affiliation with NRMs arises. Roger Andersen's *The Power and the Word* offers an answer that incorporates Murphy's emphasis on positionality: "members of a less privileged group might want to change their membership of that group or their group's position in society" (1988, 108). This passage offers two alternatives for individuals affiliated with minority groups. On one hand, individuals can end/hide this affiliation to raise their social status. The Children of God's name change in the late 1970s exemplifies this option. Aware of the negative social stigma associated with belonging to the Children of God, Berg's followers became members of the re-christened Family of Love. Affiliating with a minority group can be forced by social powerholders, however, if individuals are denied entry into legitimate or accepted social bodies. Peoples Temple's early success in Indianapolis, for instance, was partially caused by a lack of opportunities for African Americans to effect social change in extant civic committees or organizations.

Alternately, Andersen suggests that individuals can re-balance social power to raise the prestige of their own group or lower the prestige of other groups. Affiliating with minority groups, in this case, becomes an anticipatory act wherein the minority group becomes an opportunity to alter the balance of power. Peoples Temple and the Jesus People exemplify NRMs that gained members through anticipatory participation. Targeting African Americans in the mid-1950s, Peoples Temple self-identified as a source of civic and religious change to a racial demographic suffering the effects of segregation. Similarly, the Jesus People addressed

countercultural dissatisfaction by promising that social change followed personal salvation. As chapters 5 and 7 demonstrate, people joined Peoples Temple and the Jesus People not because either group held significant power, but rather because both groups offered an anticipatory vision of altering social status. The *Hollywood Free Paper*'s readers became microcosms of social change rather than disillusioned youth, and the Temple's adherents became socialist revolutionaries rather than disempowered victims.

For Andersen, as for Murphy, social standing is reversible. Although dominant institutions may use language to perpetuate a worldview that protects their authority,¹⁰ minority groups can likewise use language to reconfigure or contest that worldview (Mayr 2008, 3; Yelle, Handman, and Lehrich 2019, 16). While dominant social groups may determine orthodox definitions or sanction certain terms, minority groups can leverage language change as a protest tool. Language functions as a tool of stratification in both cases, but the language-using group's social status determines whether they support or subvert current stratification. Tom Dalzell argues that "expressive culture" – particularly, slang – allows minority groups to "deceive and subvert the authority of the oppressor without the risks of open revolt" (2010, 4). Even if they lack political power, military force, or religious authority, minority groups can use language adaptation – as one mechanism of expressive culture – to potentially or actually reconfigure the social world. Timothy Jay puts a positive spin on this lack, remarking that language adaptation is preferable to outright violence (2009, 155). Less optimistically, Melvin Lasky observes that "just as one reforms . . . when one cannot revolutionize, so are the injured and oppressed tempted to try tiny and tricky verbal devices to better their abject conditions" (1998, 66). Language

¹⁰ Shân Wareing notes that language protects the interests of dominant institutions, since dominant institutions have the greatest regulatory control over language (1999, 12). Writing about institutional protection of racist language, Molefi Kete Asante likewise notes that dominant institutions can control discourse both by promoting certain definitions and by "stifling opposing discourse" that suggests alternate definitions (1998, 92).

adaptation rebalances social power using rhetoric rather than arms. For NRMs, the former is usually more readily available than the latter.

Pejorative Language

Pejorative language provides a particularly potent mechanism for asserting or contesting social power in NRMs. In addition to foregrounding matters of discontent and social challenge, exploring “bad” language addresses the hermeneutic of meaninglessness’ claim that NRMs lack semantic rigor, since popular sentiment holds that swearing signals laziness, limited vocabulary, insincerity, and/or errant ideas.¹¹ By elaborating on the value of studying swears and slurs, this section implicitly critiques the hermeneutic of meaninglessness and supports my examination of pejorative language in the following chapters.

Challenging Jennifer Hornsby’s assertion that derogatory language is useless, Adam Croom proposes that “speakers can, and often do, use derogatory language as a linguistic means for the negotiation of social capital” (Hornsby 2001; Croom 2013, 184).¹² Echoing Murphy, he argues that employing pejorative language “increase[es] the difference in asymmetrical power relations among the interlocutors involved in the particular conversational context, or among the social groups to which they belong” (Croom 2013, 186). He also acknowledges that people targeted by slurs can “creat[e] a sense of solidarity through in-group uses of slurs. . . . Speakers

¹¹ Regarding laziness and limited vocabulary, see Bergen (2016, 215) and Wajnryb (2005, 3, 181). Regarding errant ideas, see Battistella (2005, 12) and Bergen (2016, 7). Regarding insincerity, see Wajnryb (2005, 6). In fact, Jonathan Culpepper argues that the opposite is true – using “bad” language in inappropriate contexts is inherently creative, since doing so deviates from situational norms rather than relying on “routinized patterns” (2011, 241).

¹² Hornsby argues that derogatory language is useless to everybody except those who employ it for malicious intent. She suggests that derogatory terms are emotionalized synonyms – they refer to things that can also be referred to by descriptive, but non-malicious, “neutral counterparts” (2001, 129). Since these neutral counterparts are equally effective at describing the world, Hornsby sees no reason for anybody to deploy slurs except “to convey hatred or contempt” (2001, 129).

are afforded an additional linguistic technique for signaling to each other that they are not alone and that others like them share in their pains [and] perspectives” (Croom 2013, 192).

Moreover, speakers can use derogatory or taboo language to transgress social barriers, upending societal constraints in the process. Halliday explains that social structure dictates which linguistic registers a speaker has access to, as well as which registers one is expected to use ([1978] 2007, 255).¹³ In her work, Wajnryb discusses “sanctioned permission” as a socially constructed expectation that renders swearing allowable or abhorrent depending on who is speaking and who is listening (2005, 133).¹⁴ For Wajnryb, unsanctioned swearing signals the speaker’s rejection of norm-enforcing authorities (2005, 116). As an example of an unsanctioned group, Wajnryb mentions Christian preachers.¹⁵ Indeed, one of the most striking elements of Jones and Berg’s language patterns is the frequency of coarse language. Both leaders articulated their rejection of traditional norms by ignoring their lack of sanctioned permission to swear, transgressing the usual linguistic boundaries for American preachers.

Battistella further suggests that unsanctioned swearing situates the swearer as a social maverick, remarking that “because offensive language is both improper and daring, it takes on a role as a status marker” (2005, 77). He claims that using “offensive language positions [the user] with respect to the perceived mainstream,” clarifying that unsanctioned swearing aligns the speaker with marginal or non-traditional communities (Battistella 2005, 80, 83). All of these

¹³ Note, however, that “a speaker also has the option of being ‘wrong’” by using language that “runs counter to the context of a situation, with marked rhetorical effect” (Halliday [1975b] 2007, 172).

¹⁴ This expectation serves as a specific instantiation of Culpepper’s broader work on impoliteness as “situated” – that is, contextually dependent – behavior (2011, 22). According to Culpepper, “situated behaviours are viewed negatively – considered ‘impolite’ – when they conflict with how one expects them to be, how one wants them to be and/or how one thinks they ought to be” (2011, 23). In Wajnryb’s work, swearing either conforms to or conflicts with situational norms and expectations, rendering it acceptable or objectionable.

¹⁵ Battistella justifies this claim, asserting that religions frequently endorse linguistic propriety or discourage profanity (2005, 82).

arguments support the notion that language is one battlefield on which social groups differentiate themselves from their opponents, contest social norms, and craft their own identity. In Battistella's words, "the use or nonuse of offensive language is not a simple matter of propriety or impropriety but rather involves effects, intentions, rights, and identity" (2005, 77).

Croom identifies three characteristics that make pejorative language useful for studying identity, conflict, and boundaries. First, pejorative language indicates issues of particular importance within society. Melissa Mohr defends her interest in the history of swearing as an interest in major cultural concerns: "people swear about what they care about" (2013, 14). Wajnryb inverts this sentiment to support a similar argument, claiming that bestowing taboo status on certain terms highlights which subjects cultural powers wish to make it difficult to speak about (2005, 14). The fact that standards of taboo or vulgarity vary temporally and geographically demonstrates that bad language is a socially constructed category that indexes differing tolerances, propriety, and values.¹⁶ Prohibiting or sanctioning speakers and terms is thus a "culturally driven speech act" (Wajnryb 2005, xiii). Like identifying a particular group as a NRM instead of a religion/protest movement/political party, identifying a word as taboo is an act of social sanctioning that has ramifications for propriety/legitimacy and relies on social standing/power. Pejorative terms illumine social conflicts because of their relation to prominent or contested social concerns.

Second, Croom claims that pejorative language conveys emotion or judgement, rather than simply denotative content. In his study of slurs, he identifies three types of language: descriptive language, expressive language, and slurring language (2013, 178). Descriptive language "identif[ies] objects, individuals, and groups in primarily value or affect neutral terms,"

¹⁶ See Battistella (2005, 8), Bergen (2016, 20, 25), and Wajnryb (2005, xiii).

expressive language emphasizes “the speaker’s heightened emotional state,” and slurring language conveys both descriptive and expressive elements (2013, 178-179). As Croom argues, slurs and pejorative terms describe characteristics of individuals or groups, but they simultaneously cast judgment on those individuals or groups, expressing the speaker’s own emotional stance (2013, 179, 195).

Magnus Ljung uses a similar pairing to argue that pejorative language is “evaluative” as well as descriptive, noting that such evaluations are invariably “unfavorable” (2011, 125). William Lycan, finally, refers to slurs as a particular kind of “expressive” term that communicates derogatory content (2015, 6). Thus, slurs are “semantically . . . equivalent to the corresponding nonpejorative terms, and differ from them only by lexically presuming a negative normative belief or attitude, typically a derogatory belief or an attitude of contempt” (Lycan 2015, 6). Slurs do not just describe; they also reflect their user’s condemnatory stance. Since these stances are culturally conditioned and differ between users, a slur’s meaning is malleable.

Lastly, Croom suggests that slurring language identifies family resemblances and characteristics, and thus groups together individuals who otherwise have little in common (2013, 195). This grouping ability appeared in Jones’s efforts to label all Peoples Temple members *niggers*. Rather than defining *nigger* by the single characteristic of being black, Jones defined *nigger* using broader criteria of being downtrodden and economically oppressed. *Nigger* in Peoples Temple referred to a group of people who all shared some characteristics while differing individually.

Dannielle Gaucher, Brianna Hunt, and Lisa Sinclair further emphasize group identity over individual designations through their research on appropriations of the slur *slut* (2015). Their research demonstrated that women’s reactions to being labelled *slut* varied to some extent

based on the labeller's identity, but varied to a much greater extent based on the slur's social context and their own group identity. (2015, 125-126).¹⁷ *Slut*'s pejorative connotations changed more, in other words, in relation to the designee's group affiliation and situation than in relation to the designator's identity. Gaucher, Hunt, and Sinclair's work thus clarifies that the designee's social affiliation and context, and not solely the designator's attitude, affects a slur's effects.

Both Croom's work and Gaucher, Hunt, and Sinclair's research demonstrate that pejorative language is multivalent, malleable, and open to creative deployment and interpretation. Moreover, both studies insist that redefining pejorative language plays a part in social contests. Croom in particular asserts that "the non-derogatory in-group use of slurs is especially prevalent in communities highly influenced by 'counterculture' norms (i.e., norms adopted in opposition to, and for the purpose of subverting, other entrenched sociocultural norms that a group contests)" (2013, 191). Thanks to its malleable and emotive qualities and its deployment in social contests, pejorative language offers NRM scholars an opportunity to examine and evaluate religious identity, conflict, and affinity.

Classifying and labelling slurring/pejorative language, however, is challenging. Mohr studies "swear words," Hornsby concerns herself with "derogatory words," Croom theorizes "slurring speech," and Dalzell interrogates "slang." While their labels differ, the terms that each author studies overlap; for instance, *nigger* appears in each author's work. Wajnryb acknowledges the variance and imprecision of the metalanguage used to discuss taboo language (2005, 9-10). This imprecision is evident even in Peoples Temple and the Children of God. Both Jones and Berg used sexual/racial slurs for the same purposes – and according to the same rules

¹⁷ Gaucher, Hunt, and Sinclair introduced two variables into their experiments. First, they varied the slur's context (being called a *slut* while attending a SlutWalk or being called a *slut* while going about normal life). Second, they varied the slur's user's gender (being called a *slut* by a male or being called a *slut* by a female). The variance in context affected women's perceptions of *slut* more than the variance in user.

– as other taboo terms that Jones labelled “cussing”; that is, “swearing in the general sense of using foul language” (Wajnryb 2005, 11).¹⁸

Although Jones and Berg’s thoughts/rules regarding cussing informed their use of slurs, they showed little concern for sub-categorizing taboo language. Indeed, the rules that each leader followed when appropriating pejorative terms matched their attitudes towards swearing generally. *Hooker* or *nigger*, that is, followed the same rules as *damn* or *ass* in Jones’s sermons and Berg’s *MO Letters*. To accommodate this disinterest in differentiating between types of taboo terminology and better describe the functions of language in my source material, I will not strictly adhere to scholarly separations between slurs, swear words, oaths, or curses.

It would be misleading to suggest that the labels “swear words,” “slang,” “slurs,” and “derogatory words” are synonymous. Nevertheless, a general definition of pejorative/slurring language emerges from the overlap between each author’s delineation of their sphere of interests. Mohr’s swear words encompass impolite terms which rely heavily on connotation, “carry an emotional charge that exceeds the taboo status of their referents,” and are “employed in a *nonliteral* sense” (2013, 5-6). Hornsby explains that pejorative words

satisfy two conditions. First, they apply to people and are commonly understood to convey hatred or contempt. Secondly, for each word, there is, or at least perfectly well could be, another that applies to the same people but whose use does not convey these things (2001, 128-129).

Blending elements of both Mohr and Hornsby’s criteria, Croom defines slurs as “emotionally charged derogatory terms that target certain group members on the basis of a descriptive feature”

¹⁸ Duane Pederson, by contrast, deployed the pejorative *freak* in periodicals otherwise devoid of foul language. Text type and audience account for this discrepancy – different mediums and interlocutors have different tolerances for offensive language (Battistella 2005, 71). A newspaper distributed to a large, potentially uninitiated audience – like the *Hollywood Free Paper* – had lower tolerance for foul language than a verbal address – like Jones’s sermons – given by a familiar figure to an audience well-versed in in-group speech patterns.

and are “taboo” (2013, 178). Dalzell broadly defines slang as an element of “defiant expressive culture” (2010, 5).

Each definition contributes to a classification of pejorative language as emotionally rich taboo terms deployed creatively to express disrespect or contempt for their referent. Keith Allan and Kate Burridge similarly classify pejorative words as offensive or forbidden terms whose use threatens to destabilize the dominant social order (1991; 2006).¹⁹ They also emphasize cultural context, noting that offense and taboo are culturally specific. A term that offends one audience may function purely descriptively for another audience. A term that destabilizes one group’s claim to power may shore up another group’s claim to power. The capacity to harm using language depends on language users and their contexts.

For instance, in a 1976 sermon Jones distanced himself from Christian and religious labels, exclaiming “I hate the name of church. . . . I am not religious! I hate religion! And we’ll never have freedom ‘til the damn thing is done away with” (Q969). In Peoples Temple, *church* or *religious* identified a lack of compassion and an interest in other-worldly escapism, and thus calling the Temple a church filled with religious people constituted a pejorative act within Peoples Temple. *Church* and *religious* are not, however, always pejorative. Jones’s Christian interlocutors used the terms as neutral descriptors, at worst, or positive labels, at best. By the same token, and in the same sermon, Jones used *nigger* to describe his audience: “that’s what we call ourselves” (Q969). As chapter 5 demonstrates, being a “nigger” in Peoples Temple invoked a nexus of descriptive qualities and empowering attitudes. For the Temple, *religious* qualified as a pejorative term while *nigger* did not.

¹⁹ Allan and Burridge call these terms dysphemisms: “an expression with connotations that are offensive either about the denotatum [the referent] or to the audience, or to both” or, more simply, as “speaking offensively” (1991, 26; 2006, 1). Unlike euphemisms, dysphemisms deliberately break social conventions of politeness.

Pejorative status, like meaning, is not inherent in a term. Instead, pejorative status is invested by the user, the audience, or both. For this reason, the family resemblances characterization of pejorative language described above is approximate and applies, theoretically, to any word – *nigger* and *church* are equal candidates. In mid-twentieth century America, however, only *nigger* was widely considered pejorative. There are two more elements, therefore, to consider when identifying pejorative terms: intention and popular perception.

Pejorative language is intentionally offensive and contemptuous rather than simply descriptive. Whether or not the referent agrees that the term is demeaning, the user intends to demonize, demoralize, or delegitimize their referent. As such, using slurs to achieve beneficial/positive functions requires “verbal dexterity” that both comes to grips with the pejorative term’s demeaning intent and provides rhetorical justification for retaining the term despite its harmful nature (Lasky 1998, 67). Such dexterity layers – rather than effaces – meaning; as Hornsby notes, “where words are appropriated for a new use, old non-descriptive meanings are not brushed away: they are subverted” (2001, 134). For reasons of intent, *nigger* is a better candidate for pejorative status than *church* – the difference lies in the labeller’s intent. Outsiders who called Peoples Temple *church* meant no offense, while outsiders who called its members *niggers* deliberately denigrated their referents. Jones’s appropriation of *nigger*, moreover, subverted rather than erased previous meanings. Despite Jones’s adaptations, *nigger*’s presence in an African American congregation’s discourse remains uncomfortable or unusual, while *church* – despite Jones’s attempts to derogate the term – appears relatively innocuous.

This difference between *nigger* and *church* also reflects the popular perceptions of, and popular meanings attached to, each term. Although some individuals in 1976 America may have considered attending church to be a demeaning characterization, a larger portion of 1970s

Americans would have been offended if characterized as “niggers.” Influenced by the legacy of slavery’s dehumanizing premises, on the one hand, and the American myth of the United States as a nation chosen by (the Protestant Christian) God, on the other hand, popular perceptions of *church* lacked *nigger*’s pejorative status.

The danger of invoking popular sentiment when determining pejorative status lies in the apparent privileging of a broad definition over a narrow definition. Critics could argue that, by identifying *nigger* instead of *church* as a pejorative term, I reject acts of meaning-making performed by disempowered, embattled, or minority populations in favor of those by dominant society. In fact, the opposite is true: I seriously consider the process and results of meaning-making in new religions and identify non-standard usages as creative attempts at empowerment. By invoking popular social sentiment as a criterion for identifying pejorative language, I privilege contextualization over imposing personal bias. Choosing to examine *nigger* rather than *church* as a pejorative term reflects the linguistic reality in which Peoples Temple operated.

By drawing on the scholarship of those who study slang, swear words, slurs, and derogatory language, I have assembled criteria through which one can populate a lexicon of pejoratives. To reiterate: pejorative terms are emotionally rich and inventive taboo words deployed to deliberately express disrespect or contempt for their referent. These terms craft an asymmetrical relationship between user and referent based on actual or imagined qualities. Defining, deploying, and/or contesting pejorative terms allows social groups to assert or create individual and corporeal identity, issue or respond to challenges/conflicts, and establish or maintain social boundaries.

In chapters 5-7, I analyze religious discourse in three NRMs: Peoples Temple, the Children of God, and the Jesus People. Each organization’s doctrines, practices, or demographic

profile rendered it susceptible to pejorative/slurring designations. By appropriating and adapting these terms, each group crafted a worldview and identity, rebuffed critics and challenged dominant social structures, and developed boundaries between adherents and opponents. None of these groups, however, explicitly accounted for how these linguistic changes took place, nor did they expand on the organizational benefits of the fluency required to understand such adaptation. Scientology, however, produced texts that directly address language, meaning, and fluency, as well as the organizational functions of such concepts. In chapter 4, I examine Hubbard's teachings that relate to vocabulary, changes in meaning, and language's role in strengthening one's own identity while simultaneously disempowering one's critics.

Chapter 4

Be Clear: Scientology and Organizational Fluency

Scientology Sources: L. Ron Hubbard canonized Scientology teachings in a variety of formats. I rely primarily on communiques/bulletins that he wrote and distributed to various Scientology organizations and individuals. These texts were later gathered, re-issued, or cancelled in multi-volume collections grouped either by date of publication, subject matter, or intended audience.¹ I obtained these multi-volume collections from the Stephen A. Kent Collection on Alternative Religions (University of Alberta). Specific publication/alteration/re-printing/cancellation dates appear in the bibliography as available, and in the text where significant. I cite these documents parenthetically in the following format: (“Title of Document” [Year of Original Publication] Year of Collected Volume Publication, Page Number in Collected Volume). For example, (“Language Adjustment” [1950] 1982, 357).

The Church of Scientology International’s founder, Lafayette Ronald Hubbard, wrote prolifically. Hubbard’s corpus contains an array of repurposed terms and a plethora of acronyms. Although Hubbard did not rely on pejorative language as an ideological tool in the same way that Peoples Temple, the Children of God, or the Jesus People did, he adapted and repurposed a variety of otherwise-mundane words to describe and legitimate Dianetics and Scientology.

Recognizing the potential confusion that group members faced when confronted with so many redefined terms, Hubbard insisted on linguistic fluency – particularly, reading comprehension – as a key to Scientological success. To this end, many Scientology books begin with an Important Note. While the Note’s details varied over time, its core concept remained stable:

In reading this book, be very certain you never go past a word you do not fully understand. The only reason a person gives up a study or becomes confused or unable to learn is because he or she has gone past a word that was not understood. . . . If the

¹ During his lifetime, Hubbard adapted and re-issued material, and cancelled some older instructions in new publications. These adaptations and cancellations were justified as updating older policies with new discoveries, optimizing extant procedures, or re-wording earlier ideas using newly standardized vocabulary. Adaptations and cancellations thus appear as improvements rather than rectifications of erroneous doctrines. In Hubbard’s words: “Teaching and Admin evolved with our formative years. Thus patterns and policies, like our tech, grow better. Growing better, some of it became obsolete” (“Technical and Policy Distribution” [1965] 1974, 106).

material becomes confusing or you just can't seem to grasp it . . . don't go any further, but go back to BEFORE you got into trouble, find the misunderstood word and get it defined ([1952] 2007, Important Note).

A Scientologist's success or failure in using Hubbard's techniques, in other words, depended on that practitioner's fluency.

At first glance, Scientology's definitional warning seems to conflict both with Murphy's understanding of language and Lillis' argument that written language is as lively as spoken language. That is, Scientology's insistence on proper definition appears to point towards language's standardization and immutability, where an orthodox definition is applied in varying circumstances. Scientology's fascination with fluency, comprehension, and proper usage, however, exemplifies the functions of language covered in chapter 3 and the theory and definition of religion explained in chapter 2.

This chapter demonstrates that Hubbard's insistence on in-group fluency arose from two ideological collisions. First, his decision to depict Dianetics and Scientology as a completely new technology clashed with his desire to promote Dianetics and Scientology as accessible to a broad, non-technical audience. Second, Hubbard's assertion that Dianetics and Scientology could fail only in practice became dangerous in light of his assertion that practical applicability directly correlated to a philosophy's truth or value. While effectively handing responsibility for Scientology's legitimacy and truth to its practitioners, Hubbard relied on cultivating definitional fluency to ensure the movement's success – at least on its own terms. Hubbard further guarded against the dangers of misinterpretation by framing in-group reading comprehension in terms of the asymmetrical categories of sanity and insanity. By linking both internal organizational failures and external critical opposition to insanity, and by describing insanity as antithetical to Scientology, Hubbard linguistically guarded against opposition and failure.

Discovering Dianetics, Engineering Scientology

To provide a historical and doctrinal context for language change and organizational fluency in Scientology, it is necessary to sketch the contours of Hubbard's life and work. Similar to the Children of God, Scientology developed as a collection of global franchises, rather than a single movement community. Rather than accounting for the individual variations of Scientology centres around the world, I here present an abbreviated historical timeline that focusses on Hubbard's role in disseminating Scientology teachings and the organization's changing organizational structure.² Moreover, although Scientology persists beyond Hubbard's death, this historical summary focusses primarily on the time period between Hubbard's first forays into marketing Dianetics in the early 1950s and his death in 1986.

Hubbard was born in Nebraska in 1911, the only child of Ledora May Waterbury and Harry Ross Hubbard (Westbrook 2019, 67). As the son of a naval officer, Hubbard encountered Navy doctors and scientists, including a figure named Snake Thompson (Miller 1987, 23-24). Allegedly, Thompson had studied with Sigmund Freud, and Hubbard later identified Thompson as the figure who first introduced him to psychoanalytic theories.³ Hubbard's own post-secondary career began in 1930 at George Washington University, where he studied engineering and physics (Melton 2009, 18; Westbrook 2019, 68). Rather than finishing his degree, however, Hubbard pursued adventure – including taking up aviation and leading a sailing expedition to the Caribbean – before dropping out to turn his attention to an occupation that would define his

² The brevity of my historical synopses here and in chapters 5-7 is also dictated by the availability of recent and comprehensive historical overviews of each of the NRMs covered in this thesis. In relation to Scientology, Donald Westbrook's *Among the Scientologists: History, Theology, and Praxis* (2019) is exemplary.

³ Scholars debate Thompson's identity. Russell Miller warns that Thompson "cannot be identified from US Navy records, nor can his relationship with Freud be established" (1987, 25). William Sims Bainbridge, anecdotally, claims that Thompson was a colleague of his (Bainbridge's) great uncle, further explaining that his work as a soldier and spy in multiple conflicts and countries made him difficult to track (2009, 39-41). Bainbridge further claims that Thompson was familiar with psychoanalysis (2009, 41).

career: writing (Miller 1987, 48, 52).⁴ In particular, Hubbard began writing science fiction stories, combining his academic interest in new technologies with his passion for adventure.

Janet Reitman suggests that science fiction's appeal as a genre in the early 1930s lay in its ability to transport readers away from Depression-era hardship (2011, 8). She goes on to write, however, that one of Hubbard's most supportive editors – *Astounding Science Fiction's* John W. Campbell, Jr. – downplayed escapism, instead viewing the genre as a way for authors and readers to address real-world problems through analogy and metaphor (Reitman 2011, 9). Campbell defended science fiction against critics who labelled the genre fanciful or juvenile. Responding to those who believed that “the majority of our readers are . . . equipped with adolescent minds,” Campbell characterized his audience as possessing “two characteristics which the average man – even the average normally intelligent man – simply does not have: imagination, and a willingness to think” (Fulton 2016, 352).

Campbell's idea that imaginative/speculative discussions of science, exploration, and technology could affect positive change in the real world provides an apt summary of Hubbard's later goals with Dianetics and Scientology. While science fiction texts may fall outside the bounds of traditional religious discourse, several scholars connect religion to speculative (quasi-)scientific writing. James Lewis, for instance, connects Hubbard's early work with New Thought's emphasis on individuals finding solutions to practical problems by manipulating the unseen (2012, 134). Susan Raine, in turn, remarks that “although characterized by rationalist discourse, science fiction narratives do mirror the functional aspects of religion” insofar as they offer insight into human nature, attempt prophetic readings of the future, and discuss themes of salvation (2017, 539). Hubbard's leap from science fiction stories to religious technology

⁴ Stephen A. Kent (2020) suggests that lackluster grades facilitated Hubbard's departure from university.

manuals, therefore, was not a total shift in literary interests. While Hubbard's genre – and audience – changed, his interest in combining personal quests for progress and purpose with imaginative approaches to emergent technology persisted.

This transition, however, took place gradually. During the Second World War, Hubbard served in the naval reserve and spent time in a naval hospital, where he later claimed to have begun his research into the mental origins of physical illness (Westbrook 2019, 69). Following the war, Hubbard spent time in Los Angeles in the social circle of occultist Jack Parsons (Urban 2012, 94). Although Hubbard seemingly fit in well with the authors and open-minded esoteric seekers in Parsons' social circle, he was reportedly unhappy, and – after looking into psychiatric treatment – followed a self-help regime outlined by Parsons consisting of making self-affirming statements to boost his self-esteem (Reitman 2011, 20-21). Hubbard's interaction with esotericism and growing interest in self-catalyzed healing that utilized the mind – along with his ongoing output of science fiction stories – eventually resulted in his researching and writing about the science of the mind.⁵ In the May 1950 issue of *Astounding Science Fiction*, Hubbard announced his discovery of a new science of mental health and published *Dianetics: the Modern Science of Mental Health* the same year (Hellesøy 2014, 258; Hubbard [1950] 1978).

Dianetics divided the human mind into two parts: an “analytical mind” responsible for managing information gathered in everyday life, and a “reactive mind,” or an unconscious that is activated by painful or traumatic experiences (Reitman 2011, 25). According to Hubbard, the

⁵ There are two caveats to qualify this genealogical claim. First, Hubbard's research into mental health in the late 1940s is difficult to prove. Little evidence exists that he actually supervised patients suffering from mental illness (Westbrook 2019, 70). Evidence does exist, however, that Hubbard falsely reported his scientific credentials to legitimize his claims (see Manca 2012, 84-85). Second, scholars and former members debate the extent to which Hubbard's occultist connections affected Dianetics's development (see Urban 2012, 92-93; Westbrook 2019, 69). By claiming that Hubbard's post-war activities influenced the birth of Dianetics, I suggest only that a) his self-directed search for scientific certainty regarding mental health characterized his approach to research throughout Scientology's history, and b) his development of an alternative religion that relayed secret revelations took place in an intellectual climate that privileged specialized, closely-guarded knowledge.

repressed traumatic memories – or “engrams” – in the reactive mind could be triggered by stimuli after the traumatic experience, hindering an individual’s physical and psychological well-being (Westbrook 2019, 70). Through a technique called “auditing,” Dianetics practitioners could rid themselves of engrams, exorcising traumatic memories to allegedly alleviate physical symptoms and increase their health, well-being, and potential (Cowan and Bromley 2008, 33). To disseminate auditing techniques, Hubbard gave lecture tours, explaining new developments in Dianetics and offering test cases for public scrutiny.

David Bromley attributes the early success of Dianetics to its status as a “do-it-yourself alternative [to psychotherapy]. . . . In contrast to psychotherapy, Dianetics was much more accessible, promised more immediate progress, and placed the practitioner rather than a therapist in control of the therapy process” (2009, 87). This do-it-yourself approach, however, also made Dianetics difficult to regulate. Dianetics Clubs sprang up across the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom, but – as deployments of techniques described, rather than directly overseen, by Hubbard – the understanding and practice of Dianetics in these venues varied (Hellesøy 2014, 259). While he established his own Dianetic Research Foundations to license and professionalize the auditing process, poor financial management forced Hubbard to sell the naming rights to Dianetics in 1952 (Reitman 2011, 30, 38). Equally problematically, Hubbard’s research lacked scientific and medical credibility. Although *Dianetics* sold well initially, medical experts quickly panned both Hubbard’s research and Dianetics’ claims (see Kent 1999, 107-108).

To cope with errant practitioners, forfeiting the Dianetics name, and criticism from scientific and medical experts, Hubbard morphed Dianetics – a science of the mind – into Scientology – a religion of the soul. This transition marked a departure from Hubbard’s original intent. *Dianetics* made little attempt to classify its subject as religious, instead outlining “an

organized science of thought built on . . . statements of natural laws,” clarity, and rigor ([1950] 1978, 6). In an October 1950 publication, Hubbard shrugged off questions of whether Dianetics preferred faith or atheism, explaining that “Dianetics is a science; as such, it has no opinion about religion” (“Dianetics and Religion” [1950] 1979, 38).

Within a few years, however, Hubbard embraced an understanding of religion that served his growing movement. First, Hubbard identified “religious” behavior as practices that connected the human spirit to the physical world, writing that “religious philosophy implies . . . research on the nature of the spirit and study on the relationship of the spirit to the body” (“Religious Philosophy and Religious Practice” [1967] 1976, 195). He clarified that his early research into “cells and cellular memory,” particularly memories retained from past lives, exemplified this spiritual connection (“Dianetics and Scientology Definitions” [1965] 2007, 7).

Second, “religion” in Hubbard’s writing referred broadly to “a philosophic teaching designed to better the civilization into which it is taught” (“Why Doctor of Divinity?” [1954] 1980, 73). Third, Hubbard candidly remarked that “society affords to men of the church an access [to social organizations and authorities] not given to others,” claiming that religious status granted Scientologists “expediency and protection under the law” (“Why Doctor of Divinity?” [1954] 1980, 73-74). These conceptions of religion helped rebrand Hubbard’s research, classified Scientology as beneficial to society, and potentially afforded Scientology both prestige and protection.

The Church of Scientology of California was incorporated in 1954, prepared either to spread Hubbard’s philosophy of improvement or to “insulate [Hubbard’s] fledgling Scientology practices from secular regulators” (Kent 1999, 113-114). Hubbard also endorsed the “E-meter,” an auditing tool that promised greater clarity and insight for auditing practitioners than previous

Dianetics techniques (Reitman 2011, 39-40). The transition from therapy technology to religious body mirrored other mid-century self-help gurus, such as Norman Vincent Peale, who linked religious identity and self-help practices (Reitman 2011, 44). Hubbard's conflicts with American regulatory bodies, however, persisted. In 1959, Hubbard relocated to Saint Hill Manor in Sussex, England to pursue his research without federal oversight from American bodies (Bromley 2009, 87). A Food and Drug Administration raid on Scientology's Washington, D.C. headquarters in 1963 to seize E-meters seemingly justified Hubbard's worries about external opposition to Scientology's discoveries (Reitman 2011, 61).⁶ Ongoing perceptions of external pressure despite Scientology's religious – that is, tax exempt – status in the United States resulted in three organizational and doctrinal developments in Scientology during the 1960s.

First, Hubbard distanced himself from the public eye, claiming to resign as Executive Director of Scientology to focus on research and discovery ("Founder" [1966] 1974, 579). Leaving Saint Hill Manor, he founded the Sea Org, a small flotilla of vessels that would house Hubbard from 1967 until 1975 (Westbrook 2019, 128).⁷ This shift to secluded/transitory life meant that Hubbard relied increasingly on disseminating his teachings by written methods. Unlike his early promotion of Dianetics through lectures, Hubbard communicated with converts primarily through texts and audiotapes that practitioners either purchased or received in the course of their Scientology duties. These texts, moreover, increasingly took the form of

⁶ The FDA worried that Scientology mis-represented the E-meter's ability to treat mental health conditions as medical tools, while Scientologists contended that E-meters were religious artifacts (see Melton 2009, 24).

⁷ Westbrook notes that Hubbard's exit from England coincided both with his failure to renew his visa and the government's refusal to grant Scientology charitable status (2019, 127).

administrative documents or highly specific theological/technological communiques, rather than monographs containing basic doctrines distributed to potential converts.⁸

Second, Hubbard instituted measures to punish aberrant or wayward practitioners, emphasizing orthodoxy through surveillance, punishment, and education. In his immediate sphere of influence, Hubbard subjected Sea Org members to unannounced inspections, creating the Rehabilitation Project Force to correct and re-educate members whose behavior or beliefs appeared deviant or dangerous (Raine 2009, 84-85). In addition to receiving social stigma and physical labour as sanctions, participants in the Rehabilitation Project Force undertook intensive study of Scientology doctrines (Kent 2001a, 362). As I discuss below, careful study mediated by reading and understanding texts is a key Scientology technique for ensuring organizational unity and fluency, and for curbing ingenuity. In less punitive terms, Hubbard communicated with the Sea Org through “Messengers,” or youth who attended Hubbard and relayed his directives to other Scientologists (Miller 1987, 301-302). The verbatim quality of these messages – Miller notes that Messengers were “trained to deliver Hubbard’s orders using his exact words and tone of voice” – underscores another topic discussed below: the importance of fidelity and replication in Scientology’s doctrines and practices (1987, 301-302).

Third, Hubbard created the Guardian’s Office to counter critics. Donald Westbrook explains that the Guardian’s Office’s “original purpose was to safeguard the church and its members from the unnecessary influence of negative news that might thwart spiritual progress” (2019, 159). To silence critics, the organization participated in both legal and illegal tactics, ranging from lawsuits to implicating opponents in criminal activities to infiltrating government offices to gather information about critics’ investigations of Scientology (Westbrook 2019, 160).

⁸ Certainly, Hubbard continued to write books. Scientology texts, however, increasingly reflect the organizational and doctrinal complexity that characterized its growth into an international religious body.

The Guardian's Office's efforts to infiltrate and surveil the American government ultimately led to the office's dissolution,⁹ but reflected the "context of fear, suspicion, and secrecy that gave birth to incredibly elaborate new systems of security" during the Cold War (Urban 2006, 374). Scientology's paranoia and mistrust of groups such as the FBI and the CIA, ironically, mirrored the FBI and CIA's paranoia and mistrust of Scientology. While Hubbard's seclusion and increasingly confrontational approach to critics might suggest that Scientology's development in the late 1960s emphasized separation and hostility, the creation of the Guardian's Office reveals the ongoing interplay between developments in NRMs and wider social attitudes/practices.

As the primary site of new Scientology research and discovery, Scientologists regularly visited the Sea Org to obtain training from upper-level members. By 1975, this floating centre for disseminating Hubbard's doctrines could no longer effectively handle the number of Scientologists willing to pay to learn what levels of personal ability lay beyond the status of Clear, so Hubbard established a centre in Clearwater, Florida (Melton 2009, 27). By acquiring multiple properties in Clearwater,¹⁰ Scientology created a fixed physical location for adherents to congregate, but Hubbard's transition back to land remained characterized by the paranoia that had fueled his sojourn in international waters and the Guardian's Office's creation. In fact, Hubbard's fears were well-grounded, as a mid-1977 government raid on Scientology churches in Washington, D.C. and Los Angeles revealed documents that outlined the Guardian's Office's infiltration of the Internal Revenue Service (Melton 2009, 27). Although Hubbard himself was not charged, other upper-level Scientologists – including his wife, Mary Sue Hubbard –

⁹ Urban explains that this dissolution led to the creation of "an Office of Special Affairs (OSA), which many believe has continued the same sorts of clandestine surveillance and espionage operations" (2011, 206).

¹⁰ As Westbrook notes, Hubbard considered other locations as well (2019, 138). He attributes the decision to establish a base at Clearwater to economic factors – "downtown Clearwater was sagging economically and it was only a matter of time before an outside investor... took advantage of an open opportunity" (Westbrook 2019, 138).

eventually pleaded guilty to charges of conspiracy in 1979 (Reitman 2011, 123). Amidst these criminal cases, Reitman describes Hubbard's ongoing demands for secrecy and anonymity as a life of multiple secret homes, night-time meetings between Messengers using aliases and disguises, and travels using circuitous paths to throw off potential followers (2011, 127). By 1980, Hubbard secluded himself even further, disappearing from public view for the remainder of his life (Reitman 2011, 124-125).

Organizationally, Hubbard's total seclusion and the criminal charges brought against the Guardian's Office led to several major changes in the early 1980s. These changes brought individual Scientology franchises under the guidance of a global umbrella organization, the Church of Scientology International, which protected the orthodoxy of Hubbard's teachings and guided the application of Scientology technology (Melton 2009, 28; Westbrook 2019, 247n9). According to Kjersti Hellesøy, the Church of Scientology International was also responsible for translating Hubbard's texts for international Scientology centres, "ensur[ing] the uniformity of the teachings and technology" (2009, 263). Another newly created administrative body, the Religious Technology Center, took over Scientology's various trademarks, controlling licensing matters to further guarantee the organization's orthodoxy and orthopraxy (Melton 2009, 29). Rather than Hubbard directly leading these administrative bodies, the Church of Scientology International and the Religious Technology Center operated under the rising authority of a Messenger named David Miscavige (b. 1960). According to the Church of Scientology's biography of Miscavige, these reforms were the work of

a heroic church executive who cleaned the ranks of rogue staff attempting to seize control of Scientology. . . . In light of what had nearly transpired, [Hubbard] requested a corporate reorganization of the Church to ensure [it] would not fall into hostile hands (Church of Scientology International 2020a).

From a functional standpoint, the emergence of new administrative bodies routinized Hubbard's charismatic role while maintaining the authority and integrity of his teachings. Nevertheless, after Hubbard passed away in early 1986, every Church of Scientology maintains an office set up for Hubbard's use if he returns to continue his research (Melton 2009, 29). Rather than separate Scientology from its deceased founder, Miscavige explained that Hubbard had simply discarded his body to pursue new levels of research (Reitman 2011, 144). This explanation retained Hubbard as the de facto head of Scientology, and – more importantly – maintained a potential link to Hubbard's authority and ability to produce new revelations. Despite his physical absence, then, Hubbard and his teachings remain a present fixture of Scientology orthodoxy.

Hubbard's Linguistic Discontents

With Hubbard's warning to "never go past a word you do not fully understand" looming at the beginning of many of the group's texts, Scientology required both a rationale for giving such a warning and the tools for circumventing the dangers of misunderstanding. Two discontents arising from Hubbard's view of language provide the impetus for such warnings. First, Hubbard recognized that clarity and fluency could help spread his new science of the mind to a wide audience. The new and pioneering nature of Hubbard's work, however, meant that he could explain Dianetics using only new and unfamiliar language.¹¹ Second, Hubbard conceptualized language as essentially rule-governed, and thus concluded that learning language was as simple as learning to follow a set of rules. Upon closer inspection, however, Hubbard recognized that language's rules allowed for infinite variations in meaning and usage.

¹¹ See Franklin and Oakes (2016) for an analysis of Scientology's linguistic distinctiveness. Comparing Hubbard's writings to the corpora of five world religions in several text analysis experiments, the study concludes that Scientology's vocabulary is distinctive and unique.

Scientology's canon thus includes two language-based tensions. On the one hand, Hubbard simultaneously required clarity and complexity to explain his discoveries. On the other hand, Hubbard depicted language as simultaneously easy to learn and difficult to use.

To circumvent these challenges, Scientology developed a variety of written tools to teach general language concepts and to clarify specific vocabulary choices within its texts.

Paradoxically, the tools explained their existence by acknowledging the inescapability of difficult language in Hubbard's pioneering work while also outlining the benefits of clarity and simplicity. *Dianetics*, for instance, began with a section entitled "How To Read This Book." In it, Hubbard assured the reader that

this volume has made no effort to use resounding or thunderous phrases, frowning polysyllables or professional detachment. . . . "Basic language" has been used, much of the nomenclature is colloquial, the pedantic has not only not been employed, it has also been ignored ([1950] 1978, xvi).

Since "this volume communicates to several strata of life and professions," Hubbard explained, accessible or lay language best suited the text's broad audience ("How To Read This Book" [1950] 1978, xvi). If one reads *Dianetics* as a mass-market form of proselytization this deployment of "basic language" makes sense, since easy-to-grasp concepts resonate with a wider audience than technical or unique terminology.

Amidst this appeal to match its language to a general reading audience, however, *Dianetics* noted that language should also reflect its subject. "How to Read This Book" classified both its audience and its author as explorers venturing into previously uncharted territory (Hubbard [1950] 1978, xv-xvi). In 1955 Hubbard described Scientology's discoveries as "far more important than [Vasco Núñez de] Balboa's glimpse of the Southern Sea or [Christopher] Columbus' glance at San Salvador," and explained that "the trained Scientologist is the greatest adventurer of all" ("The Adventure of Scientology" [1955] 1980, 244). A 1959 depiction of "The

Man Who Invented Scientology” identified Hubbard as an “engineer, explorer, nuclear physicist and writer” whose work combined “knowledge of Eastern thought gained in his travels . . . instruction in psychology . . . [and] training in mathematics and nuclear physics” ([1959] 1976, 470). Both Hubbard and his readers occupied the roles of explorer, adventurer, and traveler.

The *Dianetics and Scientology Technical Dictionary*, published in 1975, similarly cast Scientology’s origins using the language of exploration and discovery: “in the search which brought about Dianetics and Scientology many new phenomena were encountered” (1975, ix). Even in 1979, nearly thirty years after *Dianetics* appeared in print, Hubbard reminded Scientologists that “Dianetics and Scientology are new news to the bulk of the world’s population. . . . Before 1949 Man’s knowledge of himself, the spirit and the mind was a black barbarism” (“Dianetics and Scientology are New,” [1979] 1986, 264). In each of these instances, Hubbard’s research appeared as the uncovering of totally new information gleaned from exploration and investigation.

Hubbard’s interest in proper definition grew out of his self-characterization as “an engineer, explorer . . . and writer.” Unlike the other movement leaders discussed in later chapters, Hubbard located his linguistic authority and clarity in his technical expertise as a writer. That is, Jones and Berg claimed authority as speakers or authors through their close connection to – or understanding of – God. Jones manufactured clarity through common-sense speaking, while Berg – and *Hollywood Free Paper* founder Pederson – claimed clarity through the use of popular lingo. By contrast, Hubbard’s self-characterization suggests that he claimed authority and clarity as a technical writer whose scientific expertise and authorial career enabled him to clearly convey information.¹² These identity statements are a form of Wajnryb’s

¹² Franklin and Oakes’ corpora analysis of Scientology texts, however, reveals that Hubbard’s vocabulary choices are most “comparable to academic writing and government documents” (2016, 334).

“sanctioned permissiveness.” Rather than licensing swearing, however, Hubbard’s status as explorer and engineer permitted him to use technical, new vocabulary.

The newness of Hubbard’s subject matter stimulated his creativity but threatened his clarity. Problematically, the *Technical Dictionary* acknowledged that “[any new] philosophy has always had the liability of gathering to itself a great many new words and labels” (1975, ix). In separating new Dianetics from the “black barbarism” of old technologies, and to relay his “new news,” Hubbard required a newly discovered vocabulary. To absolve Hubbard-the-philosopher/explorer’s role in authoring a canon that necessitated an entire dictionary’s creation, the *Technical Dictionary* explained that “the reason for [philosophy’s creation of new words] is that the philosopher finds phenomena . . . which have not hitherto been observed or properly identified” (1975, ix). Hubbard could only describe the new discoveries outlined in *Dianetics* and throughout Scientology’s canon, in other words, using an equally new set of terms and meanings. Hubbard deemed the extant vocabulary used by previous scholars as inadequate, separating his new explorations into the mind from the “dreams or drugs, ice picks and ice baths” practiced by the “witch pit” of “psychology, psychiatry and religious texts” (“Dianetics and Scientology are New,” [1979] 1986, 264). Years earlier, Hubbard had complained that “any early technology of the human mind was perverted” by Wilhelm Wundt’s (1832-1920) pioneering work in experimental psychology and Sigmund Freud’s (1856-1939) work in psychoanalysis (“Liabilities of PR” [1970] 1976, 393).¹³ Rather than building Dianetics and Scientology on such perversions, Hubbard instead developed a new vocabulary.

¹³ These supposed perversions affected Dianetics and Scientology by (mis)educating those psychologists and psychiatrists who critiqued Hubbard’s work. In “Barriers to Study,” he explained that “the psychologist doesn’t understand Scientology. He never understood a word in psychology [whether through poor study or confusion based on – particularly – Wundt’s problematic terminology], so he doesn’t understand Scientology” ([1971] 1986, 25).

The *Technical Dictionary* thus identified new or difficult language as the cost of discovery and correction. This cost, in fact, constituted a bargain. Hubbard's explorations generated "a workable, predictable science of the humanities. The introduction of a few words of new meaning to make this possible seems to be a small price to pay" (1975, x). The broad applicability and newfound status of Hubbard's discoveries thus created a communicative paradox: Scientology's canonical content demanded a complex and novel vocabulary, while Scientology's audience demanded conventional and comprehensible language.

Hubbard's view of language acquisition and use generated a second paradox. As an author, Hubbard viewed language as "our most useful tool of communication" ("The Theory of Affinity, Reality and Communication" [1951] 1979, 99). Conveniently, Hubbard's early writings alleged that language's rule-governed nature allowed one to easily learn new languages. Upon closer inspection, however, language's rules allowed infinite variations. Paradoxically, then, language appeared in Hubbard's early writings as both easy to learn and difficult to use.

According to Hubbard, learning a new language involved familiarizing oneself with the rules of grammar and memorizing vocabulary. He claimed to have "learn[ed] Igoroti in a single night" using this technique,¹⁴ explaining that "the point here is, that it is not difficult to learn a language" ("Randomity and Automaticity" [1956] 1980, 533). He expressed similar confidence regarding grammar: "grammar can look like a ghastly subject until one really looks at it. Then it's easy" ("Grammar" [1972] 1976, 143). As Scientology began to attract international attention, Hubbard assured Dianetics auditors that auditing could easily take place in different languages, and that auditing could restore a person's knowledge of a language that they had not spoken since infancy (see "Address of Auditor to Preclear" [1950] 1980, 23).

¹⁴ Presumably, Igoroti refers to a language spoken by the Igorot people of the Philippines.

Beneath this apparent simplicity, however, lurked inescapable confusion. In part, Scientology identified language's shared nature as a source of confusion. During communication, people borrowed and adapted, rather than created, language:

In using the English language, you are not using your own ideas, you did not invent the words. . . . There is nothing wrong with your composing these [words] into new ideas of your own, but remember you are already using somebody else's ideas when you're speaking English ("Communication Course" [1958] 1976, 337).

These claims mirror Halliday's observation that "folk linguistics" considers language as both "rule" and "resource" ([1977] 2003, 95).¹⁵ Language, for Halliday and Hubbard, offered both opportunity and constraint. Neither totally set nor totally novel, English consisted of a set of commonly accessible words that accrued new meanings over time.

Hubbard singled out homonymic language – that is, instances of language in which a single word has more than one meaning – as the major source of confusion. In a Sept. 1950 publication, Hubbard postulated that "language is aberrative in direct proportion to poor definition and homonymy" ("Language Adjustment" [1950] 1982, 355). To demonstrate the problem with homonymic language, he created the term *wook*:

Let's say that we call something a "wook," and something else a "wook," and something else a "wook." . . . When we say "wook," we could mean any one of those three things and this could become very confusing. Somebody could run in and say "I left it right on the 'wook'" and it could be here or it could be over there, or it could be on a "wook" outside ("Language Adjustment" [1950] 1982, 355).

Although "I left it right on the 'wook'" followed the rules of English grammar, confusion ensued because *wook* could have multiple meanings. English, Scientology's first language, presented language users with an endless stream of homonymic or figurative possibilities, and these possibilities highlighted English's aberrative character. Disparagingly, Hubbard concluded that

¹⁵ Elsewhere, Halliday articulates this resource/rule dichotomy – in Hubbard-esque terms – as enabling/constraining ([1997] 2003, 257).

English “has at best very poor communication symbols” (“The Part Played by the Analytical Mind” [1950] 1980, 390).¹⁶

Situation and time further undermined language’s seeming simplicity. Hubbard observed that language changed over time and distance, and that “slanguage” or colloquialisms familiar to one audience could appear meaningless to another audience (“The Part Played by the Analytical Mind” [1950] 1980, 393). Occupation and expertise further complicated language use, since a term’s general definition in common use and a term’s technical meaning in a specific field need not match (see “Types of Cases” [1950] 1980, 112). This potentially limitless proliferation of contexts, leading to potentially limitless definitions, generated potentially limitless opportunities for confusion and misunderstanding. What Halliday sees as language’s “‘creativity’... [i.e.] the potentiality of language for the indefinite extension of its resources to new contexts of situation,” Hubbard saw as a linguistic liability ([1971] 2007, 45). In Hubbard’s writings, vocabulary and grammar’s rule-governed nature fostered, rather than forestalled, complexity and confusion.

Scientology’s writings thus reflect two language-based discontents. First, Hubbard wanted to use clear and simple language to describe Dianetics but felt compelled by his new and complex subject matter to use difficult vocabulary. Second, Hubbard saw language as easily-learned thanks to its rule-governed nature, but also realized that language’s rules allowed meanings – and confusion – to proliferate. Hubbard’s increasing insistence on proper definition, discussed below, indicates that he resigned himself to the first discontent but refused to succumb to the second. Rather than simplifying complex religious ideas, Hubbard instead chose to assist

¹⁶ Hubbard also identified French, German, and Japanese as offensively homonymic languages. In the latter two cases, he identified the manipulative possibilities (German) and confusing results (Japanese) of language aberration as the cause of Hitler’s rise to power and the bombing of Pearl Harbor (“The Part Played by the Analytic Mind” [1950] 1980, 390-391). Hubbard further critiqued Japanese in “Language Adjustment” ([1950] 1982, 357).

those who embarked on the Scientology journey by teaching them the technical vocabulary necessary to utilize his technology.

Communicating with Reality

Beyond ease of proselytization, two doctrinally internal factors motivated Hubbard's emphasis on comprehending and accurately defining key vocabulary terms. First, in Dianetics and Scientology, the definitions of words played a role in establishing an individual's identity and an individual's understanding of reality itself. Second, a Scientologist's ability to correctly understand and deploy Hubbard's teachings decided the very "truth" of Scientology as a religious system. Early on, Hubbard generated the concept of "perceptics" to explain the way that the human mind interacts with reality. This chapter section outlines perceptics as a communicative encounter between the physical world and individuals, focussing particularly on Hubbard's argument that evaluating, classifying, or interpreting these communications relies on learned behavior and social consensus. This section also sketches Hubbard's allegation that wrongly defined words hindered an individual's ability to interpret perceptics, disrupting both their social affiliations and their understanding of reality.

Hubbard coined the term *perceptics* to describe communication events – specifically, data acquired through the senses – between the human mind and external reality. For instance, Hubbard asked his reader to imagine bumping into a chair in a dark room – the resultant pain is perceptics at work, communicating the chair's reality to the individual ("Relation of Affinity, Communication and Reality" [1950] 1980, 490). On one level, this communication suggests an objective understanding of the world: objects in reality exist, and human minds perceive these

objects. But the communicative process still requires interpretation of these perceptics, and for Hubbard agreement guided interpretation.

In several discussions of perceptics, Hubbard hinted that classifying and interpreting the world involved social consensus, not mere observation. Perceptics did not guarantee clear communication between the world and its perceivers, and evaluating any given interpretation of perceptics as valid or not involved consensus. Hubbard's later remarks on sanity and insanity support this assertion. In several publications, Hubbard suggested that social consensus shaped reality-categorizing concepts like sanity/insanity or success/failure. In a 1950 discussion of Dianetics, Hubbard stated that "we can call reality agreement" ("ARC and the Tone Scale" [1950] 1982, 198). In another 1950 lecture Hubbard used a brief anecdote to expand this point, saying "a cat walks in and everybody but one agrees it's a black cat. This person says, 'it's a yellow cat, obviously.' That is a misinterpretation of communication and so we have agreement that he is crazy" ("Relation of Affinity, Communication and Reality" [1950] 1980, 491). Everybody else in the room agreed, interpreting reality's communication that the cat is black, while the aberrant individual misunderstood the perceptics.

This anecdote, however, seems to suggest that the aberrant individual's error lies in their own misunderstanding of reality. A second 1950 anecdote, also concerning a group of people perceiving cats, more forcefully linked the categories of sanity/insanity to social consensus:

We don't know if there is reality. But we do know this, that you and I *agree* there is a reality. . . . A man walks in the door and says 'hey, there are 29 black cats up on the stage. Look at them.' We look up on the stage and we don't see any cats. He is insane. . . . Actually, he might be the one that is right. But he has stepped outside of an agreed reality. . . . *Majority rule is not only a law of democracy, it seems to be a law about reality. . . . What we call a rational human being is someone who is rational against the background of his current environment* ("Affinity, Reality, Communication" [1950] 1982, 39, emphasis added).

Hubbard's "we" judged the (in)sanity of the man who saw the cats based on their shared, agreed-upon understanding of the world, not on the actual presence or absence of twenty-nine cats.

In a later anecdote, Hubbard argued that failure existed insofar as social groups labelled something as a failure: "one would say, offhand, that a person who ran a car into a stone wall would have a failure. However, this is simply a social belief that one should not run cars into the wall" ("The Anatomy of Failure" [1956] 1980, 462). These assertions relate to religion's function of structuring real or imagined groups or classes, but they also suggest that individuals or social groups create the reality in which they live through agreement and belief.

Although doctrinally problematic,¹⁷ Hubbard's early teachings regarding perceptics linked an individual's understanding and evaluation of the world to their "affinity," or their ability to fit into a social group that guided interpretation. Even these groups existed due to shared beliefs: "the principles and axioms of Scientology are considerations which have been agreed upon" ("The Theory of Training in Scientology" [1958] 1976, 344). Crucially, Scientology's principles and axioms could repair or adjust broken affinity connections, thus correcting one's perception of reality – at least, according to Scientology's agreed-upon outlook ("Relation of Affinity, Communication and Reality" [1950] 1980, 493). In a 1953 lecture Hubbard chastised an imaginary individual who misperceived a tree as a sun, stating that they "would not be able to grasp Scientology" ("This is Scientology" [1953] 1979, 376). With the guidance of "some other person, helpfully inclined," however, the misperceiving individual could acquire the knowledge and certainty of reality necessary to study Scientology ("This is

¹⁷ Perceptics hindered the testable/scientific depiction of Dianetics and Scientology that Hubbard wanted to promote. By February 1959 Hubbard condemned people who based their understanding of reality on "whether or not a person agrees with everyone else," calling this approach "a very sloppy manner of accepting evidence" ("How to Study Scientology" [1959] 1976, 421).

Scientology” [1951] 1979, 376). The doctrine of perceptics and its relation to affinity meant that proper definition was a matter of agreement, belief, or consensus and could be adjusted.

Hubbard’s ideas regarding perceptics laid the foundation for crucial dimensions of language use in Dianetics and Scientology. First, perceptics demonstrates that Hubbard saw communication as a foundational element of the human experience.¹⁸ In the world of Dianetics and Scientology, observing phenomena, experiencing pain, and evaluating actions all occurred within a framework of communication. In fact, Hubbard taught that “communication is life. Without it we are dead to all” (“Communication” [1957] 1976, 104). Second, the process of classifying, evaluating, or interpreting one’s experiences in reality depended on group affiliations. For Hubbard, a person’s understanding of the world derived from their ability – or their refusal – to conform to the understanding of the world generated by their group affiliations.

Similarly, Hubbard suggested that an individual’s (in/)ability to properly define words affected their ability to properly perceive – and function in – reality. In June 1950’s “Research and Discovery,” Hubbard acknowledged the power of learning in cultivating thought processes, asserting that “a person has to be educated how to think. A person *learns* how to think” (“Research and Discovery” [1950] 1980, 438). Citing “some experiments I had made in hypnotism,” he further suggested that a person’s initial introduction to a term left a lasting impression: “the first time a word had been defined would carry more weight [than subsequent attempts to use or define that word]” (“Research and Discovery” [1950] 1980, 440).

In his comments on education, reality, and language, Hubbard worried that mis-defined words caused many of the engrams that Dianetics struggled to break down. Referring to a first-grade child who believed that the term *God* referred to his father, Hubbard explained that “I

¹⁸ Elsewhere, Hubbard describes the human mind as “a network of communications,” further situating humanity’s existence within a communicative framework (“The Parts of Man” [1956] 1980, 429).

started looking for where it [*God*] had gotten misdefined. . . . I started looking for the most hidden moment of definition, and it turned out to be an engram” (“Research and Discovery” [1950] 1980, 440). In a course text prepared a month later, Hubbard turned this discovery into a general rule for auditing children:

When all else fails on a child, when one can’t get early [that is, recover early memories during auditing], or find engrams . . . start squaring up semantics. . . . One will find that where he has improper definitions, he commonly has emotional upset or disturbance in that area (“Processing Children” [1950] 1980, 327).

These ideas about the power of mis-definition highlight a problem and an opportunity in Scientology’s conception of language. On the one hand, people joining Scientology came to the group with deeply rooted and potentially incorrect definitions influencing their thoughts and behavior. On the other hand, if Scientology could rid people of their mis-definitions and impose its own new definitions, then the group could stimulate the identity and outlook of its members.

Dictionary Clarity

Hubbard’s interest in social consensus suggests that group membership entails the ability to recapitulate, deploy, and abide by that group’s understanding of reality. Indeed, the first statement in Hubbard’s “The Credo of a True Group Member” asserted that “the successful participant of a group is that participant who closely approximates in his own activities the ideal, ethic and rationale of the overall group” ([1951] 1979, 94). Being a Scientologist, in other words, required that one act like a Scientologist. This banal statement was, in fact, a key component in Hubbard’s insistence on teaching reading comprehension and fluency, since by reading or hearing Hubbard’s teachings one learned to act like a Scientologist. Indeed, the Credo’s eleventh and twelfth points asserted that “a group member must work toward becoming as expert as

possible in his specialized technology.... [and] A group member should have a working knowledge of all technologies and skills in the group” ([1951] 1979, 94).

This section connects education, technical competence, practical effectiveness, and Scientology’s status as “true” in Hubbard’s writings. Returning to the Important Note’s directions, I explain that Hubbard protected Scientology from critique by affirming that it could fail only in practice. This protection, however, came at the cost of staking Dianetics and Scientology’s “true” status on its practitioners’ comprehension, since Hubbard taught that any ideology’s truth value directly correlated to its applicability or usability. To cope with staking the truth of Dianetics and Scientology on his followers’ ability to understand and utilize his teachings, Hubbard insisted on cultivating definitional fluency within his movement.

Scientology’s structure assisted initiates in mastering the complicated vocabulary necessary for understanding Hubbard’s teachings. In a 1954 bulletin, Hubbard warned that presenting too much information to new initiates would drive them away rather than encourage them to join: “you cannot avalanche data onto the head of partially trained, poorly comprehending people. . . . If you try to do so, you will fail, and Scientology will fail, and the people . . . will walk away from your meetings . . . and they will not tell their friends about it” (“The Use of Scientology Materials” [1954] 1980, 87). Similarly, Hubbard later warned Scientology instructors to not force students to use technology that they did not yet understand – doing so caused students to “hit too steep a gradient,” leading to confusion (“Barriers to Study” [1971 1986, 23-24). Hubbard allegedly created just such a gradient when he disseminated his *Excalibur* manuscript – an early exploration of humankind’s drive for survival that took fuller form in Dianetics – to several readers. Overwhelmed by Hubbard’s discoveries, *Excalibur*’s

readers “went out of their minds,” ensuring that Hubbard could never publish the text – or so he claimed (Miller 1987, 79).¹⁹

Luckily, Scientologists progressively encountered Hubbard’s teachings as they moved across the “Bridge to Total Freedom,” a series of classes or levels that built on one another to help humans reach a higher state of consciousness ([1993] 1998, 159-160). Since “movement across the Bridge is done gradiently . . . [one] can progress at a rate of speed that is appropriate to his ability,” and thus initiates encounter only concepts that they have been sufficiently prepared for through previous teachings (*What is Scientology?* 1978, 27). In a policy letter offering advice to Scientologists engaged in public relations, Hubbard warned that “handling truth is a touchy business. . . . You don’t have to tell everything you know – that would jam the comm line [that is, obscure or submerge the communication’s clarity]” (“The Missing Ingredient” [1970] 1976, 397). Even with carefully controlled progress and gradually revealed doctrines, however, communicative clarity remained a key concern for Hubbard.

As mentioned above, many Scientology publications warned readers to “never go past a word you do not fully understand.” Ignoring words that one could not define or, worse, making up one’s own definitions in place of organizationally sanctioned definitions caused students to fail in learning Scientology, which in turn endangered Scientology as an organization. To assist group members in building fluency, Scientology created dictionaries and published teachings on spelling and grammar, cultivated a learning style that privileged duplication over interpretation, and framed misunderstanding’s negative results as deliberate attacks on the movement.

¹⁹ For a fuller description of *Excalibur*, as well as allegations that the text never existed, see Miller (1987, 79-81, 216-217). Although never published, portions of *Excalibur* apparently appeared in later Scientology publications. For instance, Hubbard’s Technical Bulletin “Politics” salvaged a brief comparison of various political systems “taken from *Excalibur*” ([1969] 1976, 317).

As a first line of defense against misunderstood words, Hubbard peppered Dianetics and Scientology texts with glossaries and definitions. The *Research and Discovery Series* – a collection of many of Hubbard’s earliest messages and lectures – reminded readers that new or unfamiliar words were accompanied by definitions “given in the text, on the facing page, or . . . in a marginal note or footnote” (“New Words” 1980). True to its word, the table of contents of the *Series*’ first volume included seventeen annotations defining words found in the titles of the collection’s texts alone. The *Technical Bulletins* and *Organization Executive Course*, which likewise compile Hubbard’s later writings, contain missives that provided definitions – and, occasionally, redefinitions – of new key terms.²⁰ Learning the meanings of these terms constituted the core of learning Scientology. During one lecture, Hubbard affirmed that “a knowledge of Scientology first and foremost . . . is a vocabulary knowledge” (“Randomity and Automaticity” [1956] 1980, 535). He characterized Scientology’s linguistic adaptations as borrowing extant words wherever possible, and only infrequently introducing completely new vocabulary. Moreover, Hubbard told readers that “a knowledge of the exact definition of a word [brings] exact understanding of the phenomenon [being named]” (“Randomity and Automaticity” [1956] 1980, 535). Competently hearing, reading, or speaking terms such as *thetan* or *clear* in Scientology signalled one’s comprehension of the group’s key doctrines.

To cope with new terms and enable members to understand key concepts, Scientology produced three dictionaries: 1965’s *Scientology Abridged Dictionary*, 1975’s *Dianetics and Scientology Technical Dictionary*, and 1976’s *Modern Management Technology Defined*. While an early *Abridged Dictionary* comprised only thirty-six pages, *Modern Management Technology*

²⁰ See, for example, “‘Quickie’ Defined” in the *Technical Bulletins* ([1972] 1976, 93-94) or “Mission, Basic Definition of” in the *Organization Executive Course* (1971 [1976], 299). These publications provide non-Scientology dictionary definitions of their key terms, then explain Scientology’s specific definitions.

Defined – with nearly 700 pages of definitions and reference lists – reflected Scientology’s semantic growth. Correspondingly, Scientology provided users with instructions on how – and why – to use dictionaries. The *Abridged Dictionary* recursively reminded readers to ensure that they understood the definition of all the words in a given word’s definition ([1965] 1969, 2-4). The *Technical Dictionary* explained this fastidious reading practice by noting that “the exactness of Dianetics and Scientology require[s] a . . . precise approach,” linking scientific precision to reading and studying Hubbard’s writing (1975, ix).²¹ *Modern Management Technology Defined* added an organizational dimension to this precision, warning that a misunderstood or undefined word can “block further understanding of an organization, its organizing board, [or] an individual post or duties. . . . The difficulties of an organization in functioning or producing stem from [misunderstood words]” (1976, ix).

Eventually, Scientology published *How To Use a Dictionary* and *Grammar and Communication for Children* as educational books for young readers. *Grammar and Communication* separated language from physical reality, explaining that “words are symbols. . . . Words are not the thing itself,” and further warned readers that this symbolic nature meant that “there are many sounds or symbols that have more than one meaning” (1992a, 40). Dictionaries helped clarify this range of meanings, although *How To Use a Dictionary* admitted that different dictionaries could provide different meanings for the same terms (1992b, 30).

Instead of delineating “correct” and “incorrect” dictionaries, however, Scientology instructed its members to employ the appropriate dictionary for the appropriate function: “don’t depend on our dictionary alone. Use a general English language dictionary as well for any non-Scientology word you do not understand when you are reading or studying” (1976, ix). Since

²¹ See also “Randomity and Automaticity,” which likewise describes Scientology as a precise and exact science ([1956] 1980, 534).

Hubbard used common as well as technical terms, and since common as well as technical terms could cause misunderstandings, Hubbard's readers needed to ensure that they knew the meanings of both common and technical terms.

The *Abridged Dictionary* explained its existence by warning readers against semantic substitution: "to put *another* word in the place of the existing words is to mess it all up. The *correct* procedure is to look over, get defined well and understand *the* word that was used" ([1965] 1969, 3). This advice condemns linguistic substitution as a form of avoidance – creativity hides uncertainty, leaving a seed of misunderstanding in one's knowledge of Hubbard's techniques. The dictionaries themselves perpetuate this sentiment, since summaries or syntheses of previous Hubbard publications comprise the definitions.²² Collecting definitional passages from Hubbard's writings ensured a single source of linguistic creation – without being compiled directly by Hubbard,²³ each dictionary nonetheless contained only Hubbard's writing.

Scientology's three dictionaries represented one strategy for fostering comprehension and fluency within Dianetics and Scientology. Without claiming exclusive or exhaustive definitional knowledge, the dictionaries generated a canonical collection of key concepts whose specific meanings identified Dianetics and Scientology as a precise science. Hubbard insisted on "proper" dictionary definitions for adapted or invented terms to perpetuate his own doctrines, canonizing new meanings in an authoritative medium.

²² The *Technical Dictionary* and *Modern Management Technology Defined* include citations for each of their definitions. The *Abridged Dictionary* explains that its entries are "compiled . . . from the works of L. Ron Hubbard" ([1965] 1969, 4).

²³ In the *Technical Dictionary*, Hubbard wrote "despite the pressing need . . . I did not have an opportunity to personally engage upon this work of definitions. . . . Therefore I relegated any dictionary compilations to staff" (1975, ix).

Compartmentalizing Failure, Relinquishing Truth

Hubbard's second strategy to foster fluency and comprehension involved reference and repetition, and introduces a complex problem in Scientology's belief system. As the *Abridged Dictionary* suggested, adaptations of Hubbard's teachings constituted dangerous divergences rather than inventive signs of semantic comprehension. This fear of adaptation relates to Hubbard's differentiation of Scientology as a theoretical set of ideas from Scientology as a practical set of behaviors. By separating theory from practice, Hubbard insulated his ideas from criticism by suggesting that failure in comprehension led to failures in application. Although the technology and teachings themselves could not fail, faulty applications of Dianetics or Scientology could fail to bring about its stated benefits.²⁴ Hubbard's advice to "never go past a word you do not fully understand" and subsequent warning that "the only reason a person gives up a study or becomes confused or unable to learn is because [of misunderstood words]" re-targeted criticism of Dianetics and Scientology onto its members rather than its beliefs. Hubbard insisted on reference and repetition because Scientology's beliefs – the subject matter of a member's education – were always efficacious, whereas individual members were fallible. This compartmentalization guarded against criticism, but generated major concerns in light of Hubbard's teachings regarding an ideology's value and truth.

As discussed above, exact definitional knowledge of a concept's key terms allowed one to perfectly understand that concept. Imperfect knowledge of Dianetics and Scientology thus explained imperfect applications of Dianetics and Scientology – misunderstood words, rather

²⁴ The introduction to *Science of Survival* explained that "Dianetic processing has been found to deliver... a considerably heightened productivity and happiness to the individual," and claimed that Dianetics could alleviate insanity, benefit one's home life, and improve an organization's efficiency (1951, iii, xxxv). In "The Aims of Scientology," Hubbard identified Scientology's goals as "a civilization without insanity, without criminals and without war, where the able can prosper and honest beings can have rights, and where Man is free to rise to greater heights" ([1965] 2007, 3).

than flawed first principles, explained contradictions between claims and outcomes. Hubbard further differentiated organizational failure from individual failure by atomizing groups into collections of individuals. In a 1950 lecture concerning education, he asserted that “individuals make societies. . . . All education is the education of individuals, not the education of masses” (“Educational Dianetics” [1950] 1982, 256). Pre-empting his later idea that “the individuals of a group support it just as the cells work to support the body,” Hubbard argued for a relationship between, but separation of, individuals and groups (*Notes on the Lectures of L. Ron Hubbard* [1951] 1968, 137).

In some instances, this separation allowed individuals to fail without their groups failing. In a 1959 policy letter, Hubbard explained that one could usually trace “blow-offs” – members who unexpectedly left positions or organizations – to an individual’s personal failings (“Blow-Offs” [1959] 1974, 364). Blow-offs did not leave Scientology because Hubbard’s teachings failed; instead, “people leave because of their own overt[s] [bad deeds or harmful acts] and withhold[s] [hidden moral transgressions]” (“Blow-Offs” [1959] 1974, 364). Hubbard thus recast apparent organizational failures – such as individuals leaving the group – as individual failures. Blow-offs could occur without destroying Scientology because of Hubbard’s atomizing teachings: already in 1951, he taught that “individual aberrations of the members of the group do not composite into the aberrations of the group itself” ([1951] 1968, 137).

Even after Hubbard’s death, Scientology maintained that organizational failure could be attributed only to individual misunderstanding. A 1991 Executive Directive addressed to all Scientologists proclaimed that “Scientology works 100 percent of the time. . . . There has never in our history been a failure of the technology itself. The only failures have been staff or organizational failures when the technology was not known or applied” (The Scope of

Scientology” 1991, 1). This proclamation granted Scientology’s doctrines and practices an immunity to criticism or scrutiny. Practices like auditing may fail to bring about Scientology’s stated results, but those failures could be attributed to practitioners rather than to the teachings themselves. This maneuver shifted Scientology’s successes or failures from ideological successes/failures to individual successes/failures.

Since Hubbard’s teachings were always right in theory, one only had to memorize and apply them – modifying Dianetics or Scientology became a sign of misunderstanding. Hubbard’s comments regarding teaching reinforce this emphasis on fluency-as-repetition. In “Organization Misunderstood,” Hubbard warned that failure to properly educate people threatened companies, nations, and the planet as whole. Disparagingly, he observed that “basic education as well as higher general education . . . [is] crawling with bad texts and noncomprehension and used mainly by hostile elements to overturn the state or pervert the race and its ideals” (“Organization Misunderstood” [1970/1974] 1991, 362). This failure of education – whether an unintentional result of poor management or a deliberate sabotage by hostile elements – created “an extremely unstable scene for a planet” (“Organization Misunderstood” [1970/1974] 1991, 362).

To promote proper teaching techniques, Hubbard authorized a list of six guidelines for Scientology instructors in 1963 that reinforced his role as the discoverer and disseminator of Dianetics and Scientology (Sharpe, “Scientology Instructors” [1963] 1974). Affirming that “the data has been discovered and assembled by L. Ron Hubbard,” the guidelines assured instructors that “the data has been amply covered and explained by [Hubbard] in lectures and bulletins and books. . . . Training Drills have been devised and/or approved by [Hubbard] and are more than adequate” (Sharpe, “Scientology Instructors” [1963] 1974, 165). After asserting Hubbard’s role in preparing both the curriculum and its teachings, the guidelines concluded with a warning:

It is unnecessary for an instructor to explain data, training drills, or procedures either in long individual talks or in “lectures.” . . . The answer to the student’s question is contained in the published data so all an instructor has to do is to refer the student to the book chapter, bulletin or tape that contains the data. Instructor[s] should avoid giving direct answers [to questions] . . . to obviate the possibility of an instructor giving his own interpretation of data which may be an alter-is [that is, a change to something’s reality] of the correct data (Sharpe, “Scientology Instructors” [1963] 1974, 165).²⁵

Scientology’s doctrines required reference rather than explanation. In 1971, Hubbard further explained that telling a student to look up misunderstood words constituted an instructor’s only necessary interaction with students apart from providing references, since “[misunderstood words are] all that’s wrong with students” (“Supervisor Two-Way Comm Explained” [1971] 1979, 302).

“Scientology Instructors” highlights perpetuation instead of interpretation. Rather than teaching students by putting Hubbard’s writings into their own words, instructors taught students how to locate and employ the appropriate source documents, and ensured that students looked up misunderstood words. A guide to student behavior likewise warned that “if you don’t know something or are confused about course data . . . do not ask other students [for assistance] as this creates progressively worsening errors” (“Student Guide to Acceptable Behaviour” [1965] 1974, 458). In 1975, Hubbard warned that “Technical Queries,” or questions from new Scientologists, indicated misunderstood words in a student’s studies. Hubbard explained that “IT WAS FOUND IN ALL CASES THAT THE PERSON WITH THE TECHNICAL QUERY HAD MISUNDERSTOOD WORDS,” observing that “EVERY one of these ‘technical queries’ was already fully covered in the materials but the person had never bothered to clean up his Mis-

²⁵ Hubbard cancelled this policy in 1970 as part of a semantic shift from *instructor* to *supervisor*. Like instructors, a supervisor “is not expected to *teach*. . . . A Supervisor should have an idea of what questions he will be asked and know where to direct the student for the answer” (“What Is A Course?” [1971] 1979, 198). Later, he echoed Sharpe’s advice regarding instructors and misunderstood words in his own advice to supervisors (“What Is a Course High Crime” [1972] 1976, 42).

U[nderstood word]s” (“Technical Queries” [1975] 1976, 424). This observation warranted an all-caps response, since “it was further found that IT WAS ABSOLUTELY FATAL TO TRY TO ANSWER THESE QUERIES OR EXPLAIN THEM. The explanation would just dive in under the misunderstood words” (“Technical Queries” [1975] 1976, 424). In this light, students – not their instructors, and certainly not Hubbard’s teachings – were to blame for educational failings.

Hubbard did not equate inane repetition with education, however, and reminded instructors that “no axioms or logics must be learned verbatim . . . they as well as their words must be understood and the student must be able to demonstrate what they mean” (“Curriculum for Level 0-HAS” [1964] 1976, 515). Rather than simple repetition, then, Hubbard advocated referential education that focused on comprehension without fostering alteration. Students gained clarity and competence through their own efforts, receiving Hubbard’s teachings directly under the guidance – but without the interpretive lens – of instructors who identified questions as signs of misunderstood words.

Hubbard’s condemnation of *verbal tech* as an organizational crime echoed this focus on referencing texts rather than adapting or interpreting Dianetics and Scientology based on one’s own understanding. A 1979 publication described verbal tech as

giving out data which is contrary to [Hubbard Communications Office] bulletins or policy letters, or obstructing their use or application, corrupting their intent, altering their content in any way, interpreting them verbally or otherwise for another, or pretending to quote them without showing the actual issues (“Verbal Tech: Penalties” [1979] 1980, 318).

Each of these misuses of Hubbard’s teachings constituted a breach of Scientology ethics. Rather than rectifying misunderstood words or failed comprehension, “verbal tech explanations or letters which explain things enter a false data line into the scene. . . . Such actions create a squirrel scene [an alteration of Scientology caused by ignorance or misunderstanding]”

(“Technical Queries” [1975] 1976, 424). On one hand, verbal tech misunderstood the root of a questioner’s problem. Misunderstood words caused confusion, and while re-interpreting a phrase enabled a student to carry on in their study, the misunderstood words remained undefined. On the other hand, verbal tech implicitly undermined Hubbard’s claims that Dianetics and Scientology could be clearly grasped in its original form by a wide audience.

Hubbard’s insistence on accurately transmitting his writings to students taught a particular type of fluency. Adaptation or creative deployment of Dianetics and Scientology did not signal a fluent Scientologist; instead, these behaviors threatened the efficacy of Hubbard’s writings. Hubbard promoted a fluency that focussed on mastering orthodoxy. While he freely invented or adapted language to disseminate his new discoveries, his followers had to content themselves with learning, rather than creating, new vocabulary. Hubbard’s death, as a significant side note, revealed the organizational danger of this insistence on orthodoxy. Over time, some of Hubbard’s decades-old teachings became obsolete or out-dated in light of newer developments. Hubbard’s earthly absence, however, meant that he could neither correct nor redact uncomfortable or problematic doctrines. As a result, Scientology officials had to adapt Scientology doctrines without abandoning Hubbard’s written insistence on orthodoxy.

During a doctrinal overhaul in the late-2000s labelled the Golden Age of Knowledge, Miscavige accounted for adaptations to contemporary Scientology publications by referring to the importance of orthodoxy. Specifically, he explained that previous publications contained typographical errors that needed to be rectified:

The Golden Age of Knowledge constitutes the single most sustained program in Scientology history to recover, restore and verify the Scientology Scripture. . . . A two-million-man-hour project to ensure the purity of the materials further included correcting transcription errors in dictated manuscripts, removing editorial additions and alterations, identifying incorrect sequences and missing text and verifying every page as complete,

correct and true to Source (Church of Scientology International 2020b).

This explanation upheld both Hubbard's insistence on accurately replicating teachings and his separation of individual errors in execution from systemic doctrinal flaws.

Returning to fluency and education, learners became responsible for their own successes or failures. Since Hubbard's texts were sufficient for communicating his ideas, and since instructors referenced rather than reinterpreted these texts, the sole responsibility for failure to learn and progress as a Scientologist lay in the hands of its students. This focus on crafting fluency-as-reference-and-repetition raises the question of why Hubbard demanded such close adherence to his obviously inventive rhetorical style. The answer lies not just in Hubbard's explicitly-stated benefits of fluency, but – more importantly – in his evaluation of what made any particular ideology true or valuable.

Scientologists reading Hubbard's work encountered clarity and fluency as both goals and hallmarks of Scientology and its members. The Introduction to the *Scientology Abridged Dictionary* informed users that “Scientology words and their definitions are the gateway to a new look and understanding of life. Understanding them will help you live better” ([1965] 1969, 4). Elsewhere, Hubbard linked communicative fluency to one's ability to act and exist: “one can BE[,] one can DO, one can HAVE only as well as one can communicate” (“The Adventure of Communication” [1957] 1976, 92). The *Dictionary's* comment that words served as gateways to a new outlook on life gestured back to perceptics, but the link between understanding and doing – “living” – connected fluency to action.

Understanding words and their Scientology meanings promised personal and institutional growth, while misunderstandings and adaptations threatened Scientology's efficaciousness and the individual's success. Definitional clarity and linguistic comprehension at the individual level

became even more important in light of Hubbard's rubric for assessing the value of an idea or ideology. In "My Philosophy," Hubbard outlined three elements of his understanding of philosophy that connect education, practice, and truth. Contrasting the "protective coatings of impenetrable scholarliness" found in most philosophy with Scientology's accessibility, Hubbard explained that "wisdom is meant for anyone who wishes to reach for it" ("My Philosophy," [ca. 1965] 1976, 1). Hubbard's second principle evaluated philosophy's worth along pragmatic lines: "it must be capable of being applied. Learning locked in mildewed books is of little use to anyone" ("My Philosophy," [ca. 1965] 1976, 1). In an earlier critique of public education, Hubbard insisted on the practical applicability of a given field of study. Taking aim at "pure mathematics," he exclaimed that "unless you can teach someone how to figure out his grocery bill, it [pure mathematics] is not going to be much use to him" ("Education and Dianetics" [1950] 1982, 322). Real, useful education could incorporate abstract or theoretical concepts, but it must also "keep one foot on the ground" ("Education and Dianetics" [1950] 1982, 322).

Extending this pragmatic stance, the third component of Hubbard's philosophy of philosophy maintained that "any philosophic knowledge is only valuable if it is true or if it works" ("My Philosophy," [ca. 1965] 1976, 1). Scientology's strength lay in its widespread availability and applicability, but one could only call it valuable "if it is true or if it works." Hubbard deployed this axiom elsewhere as well – *Science of Survival* panned evolutionary theory as "of only limited usefulness. . . . The main test of any 'scientific' hodge-podge is its usefulness to man" (1951, 2). Hubbard's decision to cast Dianetics and Scientology as scientific discoveries and philosophies of knowledge meant that his own teachings had to meet this same criterion. Since Scientology's efficaciousness depended on individual practitioners and their understanding of Scientology's principles, the truth of Hubbard's philosophy depended on his

followers' ability to properly define key terms. Hubbard's insistence on repetition over revelation – on reference over reinvention – assured Scientology's usability and, therefore, its status as true within Hubbard's own rubric for evaluating truth.

Insanity and Opposition – *Squirrels* and Propaganda

The afore-mentioned techniques for establishing fluency in Dianetics and Scientology provide members with the tools to develop reading comprehension, and promote a mindset of individual responsibility for fostering semantic expertise. These techniques employ extra-Scientological mechanisms – like dictionaries, grammatical rules, and referential education – to counter-balance movement-specific vocabulary. The third technique that Hubbard used to encourage fluency, by contrast, relies heavily on Scientology's ideological outlook, and indicates Scientology's compliance with Murphy's notion of religions as organizations that structure asymmetrical relations between real or imagined groups and classes. Specifically, Hubbard developed the asymmetrical categories of “sanity” and “insanity” within Scientology doctrine, then linked insanity to both external criticism and internal ineffectiveness to disempower his – real or potential – opponents. This structuring of sanity and insanity rhetorically and ideologically encouraged fluency. If one did not follow Hubbard's protocols, one's own status as a sane individual became suspect.

Hubbard set up several asymmetrical binaries in Scientology doctrine. Good/bad and sanity/insanity both appear as manifestations of a more basic constructive/destructive binary within individuals (*Introduction to Scientology Ethics* [1968] 2007, 173-175). An individual's nature, according to these binaries, is visible in their behavior – this behavior is either “that calculated to be constructive [or] that calculated to be disastrous” (*Introduction to Scientology*

Ethics [1968] 2007, 174). Significantly, both natures exist in every human being, and one's behavior can change from constructive to destructive – or vice versa – within one's lifetime (*Introduction to Scientology Ethics* [1968] 2007, 175).

The goal of Dianetics and Scientology is to shift human behavior away from the destructive/bad/insane pole towards the constructive/good/sane – pole. In *Dianetics*, Hubbard characterized “clear” individuals as happy, rational, and sane beings ([1950] 1978, 56). The idea that human beings are motivated by either constructive or destructive dispositions, as well as the idea that human beings can shift from one disposition to the other, holds both a benefit and a threat. On one hand, the changeable state of a person's disposition means that Scientology can work for any individual, since everyone possesses the constructive impetus that it nurtures. On the other hand, even Scientology practitioners retain their disastrous or destructive sensibilities, and thus can potentially backslide or revert to a less sane state. As an administrator, Hubbard linked organizational errors and technical failures to misunderstood words, and in turn connected these failures to deliberately-destructive – and, therefore, insane – dispositions. In doing so, Hubbard tried to fend off criticism while minimizing internal flaws.

Scientology's texts characterize its opponents as socially deviant individuals. In a 1955 manual explaining how to disseminate Scientology, Hubbard claimed that “it has been discovered that all those who have attacked [the Hubbard Association of Scientologists International or Hubbard] . . . are criminally liable for other things” (“The Scientologist” [1955] 1976, 167). A decade later, Hubbard described the “anti-Scientologist” as somebody whose destructive disposition “oppose[d] violently any betterment activity or group” (“The Anti-Social Personality” [1966] 1974, 449). Moreover, an anti-Scientologist's attributes included anti-social behavior, which Hubbard linked to both insanity and criminal activity (“The Anti-Social

Personality” [1966] 1974, 450). In a third publication, Hubbard remarked that “groups that attack us are to say the least not sane” (“Attacks on Scientology” [1966] 1974, 492). He went on to admit that “it is greatly in our favour that we are only attacked by mad groups,” since the attackers’ irrationality and disastrous dispositions doomed their efforts (“Attacks on Scientology” [1966] 1974, 492). Finally, Hubbard argued that “the basic characteristic of extreme madness is perpetual attack” during a discussion of negative publicity campaigns (“How to Handle Black Propaganda” [1972] 1983, 419).²⁶

These depictions of external critics cast anti-Scientologists in a negative light – they are mad criminals who level irrational attacks to thwart civilization’s betterment. Their insanity, however, is somewhat excusable in Hubbard’s doctrines. External critics are, by definition, not current Scientology practitioners – they are not presently benefiting from Hubbard’s sanity-inducing techniques. Destructive and insane individuals also lurked, however, within Scientology and proved all the more dangerous by their subtlety. Specifically, Hubbard identified organizational and administrative deviation or errors as evidence of hostile intent, depicting even small slips within Scientology organizations as deliberately hostile and insane behavior.

In an early Dianetics Professional Course publication, Hubbard told potential practitioners that “plain, ordinary ineptitude” did not constitute a breach of his Auditor’s Code, a document outlining proper ethical practice of Dianetics techniques (“Getting a Case Rolling,” [1950] 1980, 223). By 1965, however, Hubbard cautioned Scientologists against mistaking covert attempts to destroy Scientology as ineptitude. He explained that Scientology’s enemies could destroy the movement in three ways – by dispersing it, by crushing it, or by ignoring it

²⁶ This argument is self-damning, since Hubbard elsewhere advised embattled Scientologists that “the DEFENSE of anything is UNTENABLE. The only way to defend anything is to ATTACK” (“The Scientist” [1955] 1976, 157).

(“Handling the Suppressive Person” [1965] 1974, 53).²⁷ Crushing Scientology took place by either overt or covert means, and covert means could take the form of apparent ineptitude. He warned readers that behavior such as leaving doors unlocked, losing equipment, or generating unreasonable expenses constituted “carefully thought out” attempts to “pull out the plug and get Scientology poured down the drain” (“Handling the Suppressive Person” [1965] 1974, 53).

Instead of recognizing such acts as deliberate sabotage, though, unobservant or charitable Scientologists attributed these threats to “‘human error’ or ‘stupidity’” (“Handling the Suppressive Person” [1965] 1974, 53). Several years later, Hubbard once again identified “people making mistakes or doing stupid things” as evidence that an insane, aberrant individual “exists in that vicinity” (“Mistakes, Anatomy Of” [1968], 1974, 219). He also highlighted anything that “stops or delays the flows” of an organization as “an enemy” of that organization (“Speed of Service” [1968] 1986, 194). In making these claims, Hubbard added gravity to seemingly innocuous mistakes that any group member could make. Improper procedures, laziness, or approximations of practice took on dire importance. By 1969, Hubbard warned his audience that “anyone who doesn’t wear his hat [that is, properly carry out their tasks] in a group and doesn’t do his job is obviously dramatizing a death wish for the group” (“Death Wish” [1969], 1974, 496). Shirking one’s duties “threatens his [the erring individual’s] own and the group’s survival. . . . Such a person is covertly murdering his fellows” (“Death Wish” [1969] 1974, 496).

In light of this severe portrayal of even minor errors, misunderstood words or poor organizational comprehension become contributing factors in killing either Scientology or its

²⁷ Dispersion involved “attributing its source to others and altering its processes or structure,” and connects to the concept of *squirreling* (“Handling the Suppressive Person” [1965] 1974, 53). Ignoring Scientology receives little treatment, perhaps because – unlike attempting to disperse or crush Scientology – this type of attack involved no direct, active threat.

members. Hubbard saw “organizational enturbulence” as a barometer of “the ignorance or absence of policy” (“Organizational Enturbulence” [1969] 1986, 48). In 1970, he issued several bulletins concerning the importance of “familiarity” with Scientology policies for organizational success. These bulletins identified fluency in proper administrative routines and correct technical processes as a necessary precursor to properly diagnosing enturbulence (“Familiarity” [1970] 1982, 22).

Crushing or dispersing Scientology using covert means – generating organizational enturbulence in the process – linked to Hubbard’s real or imagined class of *squirrels*. The terms *squirrel* or *squirreling* signified Scientologists who failed to master Hubbard’s writings and alter Scientology practices to cover their ignorance. Hubbard defined squirrels as those who “change and invent processes,” engage in “careless, incomplete, [and] messed up” procedures, and “g[o] off into weird practices or alte[r] Scientology” (“Auditing Speed” [1969] 1979, 94; “Handling With Auditing” [1970] 1979, 5; “Keeping Scientology Working” [1965] 1978, 8). Rather than following Hubbard’s stated procedures, squirrels misunderstood Scientology’s terms and altered Scientology’s practices as a result. Misattributing a squirrel’s actions to human error or stupidity mistakenly stripped agency in error away from the squirreling individual. Since Hubbard directly instructed practitioners to look up misunderstood words, “noncomprehension itself . . . is an avoidance of orders” (“Alter-Is and Degraded Beings” [1967] 1976, 193).

By identifying misunderstood words as an indicator of insanity and squirreling, and by crafting insanity and squirreling as enemies of Scientology, Hubbard ideologically encouraged followers to foster in-group semantic fluency. As described above, perceptics rendered individuals aberrant or felicitous against a particular social backdrop. Thus, inventive semantic actions or unintentional mistakes effectively demonstrated failure or deviance within

Scientology's understanding of the world. Hubbard fostered in-group solidarity and commented on attacks or criticism by demonizing deviance and categorizing non-comprehension as a sign of destruction, insanity or squirreling.

Charges of squirreling or insanity presented only minor threats to Scientology's external critics and opponents. As Hubbard himself explained, an individual's status as rational, sane, or successful changed based on one's organizational affinity. In this light, refuting charges of insanity or criminal behavior required little more than refusing to accept Scientology's worldview. To deal with external criticism, then, Hubbard rhetorically required a linguistic technique that both he and his opponents could use to equal effect. In Dianetics and Scientology, Hubbard referred to this technique as "Public Relations" or "PR" and identified one PR technique, "propaganda," as particularly important. Propaganda and PR served as both an offensive and defensive tool for shaping opinion by altering meaning, and Hubbard's comments regarding propaganda provide insight into his own process of inventing and adapting vocabulary within Scientology. Moreover, Hubbard's description of PR and propaganda outline a process of conflict management via definitional change that plays out in multiple ways in chapters 5-7.

Hubbard's description of propaganda is concentrated largely in a "PR Series" of bulletins issued in the early 1970s, not long after Australian authorities – temporarily – banned the practice of Scientology and the British House of Commons prohibited some Scientologists from entering the UK (Melton 2009, 24-25). His view of propaganda and PR took the form of a battle for public opinion, with multiple actors using similar tactics to further their own agendas while blocking their opponents. At heart, PR appeared as a process of communication involving a PR user, a message, and an audience. The goal of PR was to convince the audience to agree with the

message by “communicating an acceptable truth . . . which will attain the desirable result” (“The Missing Ingredient” [1970] 1976, 397).

To complicate matters, however, Hubbard explained that a PR message’s audience could also use PR to communicate messages, and that different PRs could deploy conflicting messages. One of Hubbard’s most concise explanations of PR highlighted its function in achieving the user’s goals or disempowering one’s opponents: “PR is employed to obtain a result desired by the PR and his group. Or it is used to cancel out the undesirable PR of others” (“The Missing Ingredient” [1970] 1976, 397). Rather than simply communicating information, then, PR actively shaped opinion and tried to achieve desirable results that benefited the user’s group. This process did not necessitate telling the complete truth; instead, it required communicating an “acceptable truth” through a carefully planned presentation of information. Instead of relying on total truth, successful PR required imagination and knowledge of one’s audience. In a 1970 maxim, Hubbard quipped that “the right message in the right form to the right public gets the result” (“Wrong Publics,” [1970] 1976, 401).

For instance, consider one of Hubbard’s earliest descriptions of propaganda, found in an internal 1957 promotion for his then-new book, *All About Radiation*. *All About Radiation* outlined Hubbard’s description of the physical consequences of nuclear fallout, and included claims regarding cures for radiation poisoning (*All About Radiation* [1957] 1976, 49). In the promotion, Hubbard explained the need for such a book by referencing American “hysteria” regarding radiation levels due to nuclear testing (“The Radiation Picture and Scientology” [1957] 1976, 44). Comparing Geiger counter readings that he allegedly took while writing the book to readings taken in 1932, however, Hubbard claimed that “the background count . . . was the same. . . . There has apparently been no general increase of [radiation levels] in London or Washington

because of bomb testing” (“The Radiation Picture and Scientology” [1957] 1976, 45). To explain American radiation fear, Hubbard advised readers that the public had reacted to a “hysteria campaign” utilizing false data deployed by “Communist propagandists” (“The Radiation Picture and Scientology” [1957] 1976, 45).

Four points about this depiction of propaganda are worth mentioning. First, the Communist PR message elicited a desired response from its audience despite using lies and false facts. Second, this propaganda succeeded because the Communist propagandists tailored their message to fit their audience. Knowing American and British concerns about nuclear testing, the Russians utilized “[fear of] radiation [which] is tailor-made to their agent provocateur techniques” (“The Radiation Picture and Scientology” [1957] 1976, 45). Third, the Communists created hysteria through propaganda to achieve a deliberate aim; namely, to “stop England from constructing H-bombs and to impede her defenses in other ways. . . . The hysteria campaign being conducted by Russia inside England and the United States was totally an effort to impede their national defense” (“The Radiation Picture and Scientology” [1957] 1976, 45). Fourth, the Communist propagandists achieved a result that benefited their own group while disempowering their opponents. Hubbard confirmed that “hysteria puts people in rather poor condition. . . . The U.S. population is being stampeded by Russia toward leaving the U.S. defenseless” (“The Radiation Picture and Scientology” [1957] 1976, 44-45). These points reinforced Hubbard’s understanding of PR and propaganda: a group created an acceptable truth to benefit itself and/or weaken its ideological opponents using a concept, event, or ideology that was important to its audience.

The major difference between this depiction of propaganda and Hubbard’s 1970s depiction of propaganda lay in the PR users and the nature of the message. The Communist

propagandists whose work occasioned *All About Radiation* relied on “brainwashing” techniques “to instill fear and bring about destruction” (“The Radiation Picture and Scientology [1957] 1970, 45-46). Moreover, their propaganda contained lies, which Hubbard had earlier identified as a flaw in propaganda’s communicative nature: propaganda consisted of “selling something that didn’t exist” (“Group Dianetics” [1950] 1982, 296-297). Propaganda of this nature worked only so long as one maintained a façade of truth – once the audience discovered the message’s falsity, their affinity faltered and the group/worldview collapsed (“Group Dianetics” [1950] 1982, 296).

In contrast to the PR/propaganda used by lying enemies, Hubbard later depicted PR/propaganda as techniques of offense or defense used by both Scientology and its opponents. He still identified PR as “lend[ing] itself to the use of unscrupulous persons and cliques,” but clarified that “PR can be used or abused” (“Liabilities of PR” [1970] 1976, 393, 395). Like Dianetics itself, PR served the interests of its users, with messages relying on lies or exaggerations receiving the label “black propaganda” just as devious uses of Dianetics received the label “black Dianetics” (“The Missing Ingredient” [1970] 1976, 396; “Danger: Black Dianetics!” [1952] 1979, 280).

In Oct. 1971, Hubbard issued a policy letter called “Propaganda by Redefinition of Words” that exemplified propaganda’s flexible nature and implicitly identifies a process repeated in Peoples Temple, the Children of God, and the Jesus People. Simply put, “words are redefined to mean something else to the advantage of the propagandist” (“Propaganda Through Redefinition of Words” [1971] 1976, 423). Like other forms of PR, propaganda through redefinition of words required knowledge of one’s social situation as well as a PR message’s recipients: these acts of redefinition are “carefully planned and campaigned in order to obtain a public opinion advantage for the group doing the propaganda” (“Propaganda Through

Redefinition of Words” [1971] 1976, 423). To achieve this advantage, propaganda through redefinition of words required repetition:

Public opinion can be altered by altering the meaning of the word. . . . The way to redefine a word is to get the new *definition* repeated as often as possible. . . . A consistent, repeated effort is the key to any success with this technique (“Propaganda Through Redefinition of Words” [1971] 1976, 423).

Although Hubbard nowhere mentioned plausibility or fidelity as components of success, he underscored the value of repetitive usage based on deliberate alterations designed to invoke a particular change in public opinion.

Hubbard directly linked language adaptation to conflict to explain the policy, noting that “this, so far as words are concerned, is the public opinion battle for belief in *your* definitions, and not those of the opposition” (“Propaganda Through Redefinition of Words” [1971] 1976, 424). Candidly, Hubbard identified Scientology’s own use of this principle. He singled out the group’s attempts to redefine certain groups as illegitimate while simultaneously redefining Scientology as desirable, suggesting that “it is necessary to redefine medicine, psychiatry and psychology downward and define Dianetics and Scientology upward” (“Propaganda Through Redefinition of Words” [1971] 1976, 423-424).²⁸

Hubbard’s texts redefined *psychiatry* by stripping the term of its connections to science and health, instead affiliating it with violence and authoritarianism. The process occurred frequently in Hubbard’s writings, but in this context a brief selection of examples is sufficient to demonstrate *psychiatry*’s adapted meaning. In an early 1950 lecture, Hubbard described psychiatrists as motivated by violence: “I could take 15 psychiatrists . . . now practicing these obscene and horrible acts [transorbital leukotomies and prefrontal lobotomies], and find in every

²⁸ See also “The Radiation Picture and Scientology,” wherein Hubbard explains that “our campaign is to sell Scientology. If we sell it well, psychiatry and psychology will collapse” ([1957] 1976, 47).

one of them an attempted abortion. . . . They kill their patients, quite often” (“Research and Discovery” [1950] 1980, 431). Ignoring the Hippocratic Oath, Hubbard instead identified death and harm as permeating psychiatric practice. Elsewhere, Hubbard recapitulated the basic constructive/destructive disposition found in all humans as the difference between Scientology and psychiatry. While Scientology tried to help the “barbarian society” in which it found itself, psychiatry demonstrated its insanity by conflating help and harm: “destroy *is* the same as help to a psychiatrist” (“How We Work on the Third Dynamic” [1958] 1976, 251). Twelve years later, Hubbard revisited psychiatry’s propensity for violence, describing psychiatric practices as “barbarism” and “insane sadism” (“Programming of Cases” [1970] 1982 14).

In addition to disconnecting psychiatry from health or benefit, Hubbard also separated it from its disputed legitimacy as a successful scientific or health practice, describing it as irrational fraud. In an aside during his comments on abortion and violence, Hubbard explained that “there is no rationality connected with [psychiatry]” (“Research and Discovery” [1950] 1980, 431). During a tangential diatribe found in *All About Radiation*’s promotion, Hubbard chided psychiatrists, saying “there is a swindle involved here. . . . Before you begin to advertise that you can do something, you should be able to do it” (“The Radiation Picture and Scientology” [1957] 1976, 47). In 1956, Hubbard forcibly differentiated Scientologists from psychiatrists, warning that association with psychiatry could doom Scientology:

Of all the drooling idiots I would never choose for bedfellows, believe me, the psychologist and the psychiatrist would be below my lowest list. Why? Because they’re fakes. They come from a long line of hoodwinks. . . . Ninety percent of the few auditors who have quit have all suffered from this association with psychologists and psychiatrists to a point where they themselves thought they were phonies (“The Open Channel” [1956] 1980, 389).

Rather than originating from Dianetics’s alleged background in engineering or nuclear physics, Hubbard asserted that psychiatry emerged from fraudulent forebears. Even considering one’s

actions to be similar to psychiatric practice led Scientologists to squirrel or conclude that Scientology must be as false as psychiatry.

These passages exemplify Hubbard's attempts to re-code *psychiatry*'s denotations and connotations by associating it with violence and fraud, thereby challenging its privileged status as a medical or scientific practice. Correspondingly, *Modern Management Technology Defined* included a substantial, scathing definition of *psychiatry*:

Developed chiefly by a Russian veterinarian named Ivan Petrovich Pavlov (1849–1946). His basic principle was that men were only animals and could be conditioned and trained much like dancing bears or dogs. . . . None of the activities of psychology or psychiatry were designed to help or cure, only to control the masses. The results of psychiatry are physically damaging, consisting of various brutalities and often injure the patient for life or kill him outright (1976, 420).

Hubbard propagandized practicing Scientologists by repeatedly providing a series of negative associations for psychiatry that cast Scientology as a true or helpful practice and exposed its detractors. While Dianetics and Scientology restored people's cognitive capabilities, psychiatry dehumanized and damaged its misled patients. By repeating this sentiment in various guises throughout his career, Hubbard adapted *psychiatry*.

Propaganda through redefinition of words provides a concrete example of religion as the structuring of asymmetrical relations between real or imagined groups or classes. Scientology crafted a worldview in which fluent, sane Scientologists stood "above" critics, squirrels, and psychiatrists. This hierarchical separation required differentiation, which Hubbard provided by linking the latter three categories to insanity, criminality, and deceit. By leveraging PR and propaganda, Scientology redefined words to defend itself against charges of pseudo-science or charlatanry, simultaneously empowering its own members while disempowering its critics. These adaptive linguistic practices formed an in-group vocabulary comprised of definitions that crafted a worldview and identity based on Scientology's ideology. Ideal practitioners signalled

their membership and allegiance by using the proper terms and techniques as part of their religious practice, shaping reality through consensus in the process.

The general contours of propaganda through redefinition of words appear in chapters 5-7. Peoples Temple, the Children of God, and the Jesus People all redefined terms as a technique of identity construction, conflict management, and boundary maintenance. Each leader deliberately selected these terms based on their knowledge of the message's audience as well as the group's goals. Through repeated reference in doctrine and practice, each movement's leader redefined these terms in such a way as to weaken their opponents while strengthening themselves.

This similarity between Scientology, the Children of God, Peoples Temple, and the Jesus People does not arise from the latter three groups adopting Hubbard's teachings or emerging as Scientology offshoots. Instead, each group seemingly deployed propaganda through redefinition of words because Hubbard's observations regarding language change and public relations approximate general ideas regarding language, group membership, conflict, and identity. Whereas the other movements' leaders engaged in this process more implicitly or covertly, Hubbard explicitly enshrined his adaptive semantic techniques in Scientology's doctrines. Outlining Hubbard's teachings regarding language and religious group membership in this chapter, in other words, illuminates persistent patterns of language change in emergent or embattled religious movements.

Some aspects of propaganda through redefinition of words appear consistently. First, each movement leader opportunistically surveyed both his audience and that audience's social context to determine which terms could plausibly be redefined to effect significant ideological and behavioral changes in members' identities, ideas, and actions. Significantly, the terms selected all relate to socially-contested concepts: powerful – but reversible – ideas with an

uncertain connotative status in a state of social flux. Hubbard's critical redefinition of *psychiatry*, for instance, emerged during a period of growing interest in – and concern over – psychiatry. In the early Cold War period, distrust of psychiatric research grew amidst a perceived lack of ethical controls or ideological constraints (Halliwell 2013, 103). Popular depictions of psychiatric care – such as Ken Kesey's 1962 novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* – and scholarly condemnations – from figures such as Herbert Marcuse and Thomas Szasz – threatened psychiatry's status as a credible science in the United States (Halliwell 2013, 205, 267-268). Controversial treatments, including shock therapy and lobotomies, and widespread/widely debated use of psychoanalysis further destabilized psychiatry's credibility (see Kent and Manca 2014, 3). Finally, some segments of American counterculture in the late 1960s and 1970s decried psychiatry's claims as social constructs designed to serve as agent of social control (Halliwell 2013, 267; Kneeland and Warren [2002] 2008, 63-64). Hubbard's selection of *psychiatry* as a term for redefinition thus mirrored larger social processes of connotative contestation in much the same way that Jones drew on evolving attitudes towards race or that Berg recognized conflicting perspectives on sexual propriety. Second, each movement's redefining efforts operated by erecting or indicating asymmetrical relations between group members and their interlocutors. More specifically, these acts of semantic adaptation took place in the context of struggles for authority or legitimacy, whether in regard to doctrines or practices.

Other aspects of language adaptation in new religions analyzed in chapters 5-7, however, diverge from Hubbard's ideas. Most notably, I focus on movement leaders adopting and adapting pejorative terms. Hubbard tried to disempower his opponents by stripping merit from their claims of expertise – revealing *psychiatry* to be violent and dangerous. The religious movements portrayed in the following chapters, by contrast, focused their adaptive efforts on rehabilitating a

pejorative term initially meant to disempower. To use Hubbard's phrasing, Scientology's redefinition of *psychiatry* moved the term "downward," while the Children of God, Peoples Temple, and the Jesus People defined pejorative terms "upward." As I demonstrate, however, these "upward" adaptations also included disempowering changes – Peoples Temple redefined the ethnic category *white* negatively, and the Children of God and the Jesus People both redefined traditional Christianity as limiting and old-fashioned. While Scientology appears as the aggressor in its challenge of psychiatry, Peoples Temple, the Children of God, and the Jesus People took a reactionary stance, absorbing and altering insults from critics.

Chapter 5

“*Nigger Means ‘Cheated’*”: Rethinking Inequality in Peoples Temple

Peoples Temple Sources: People Temple recorded more than a thousand audiotapes for internal use. The Federal Bureau of Investigation retrieved these tapes from Jonestown and assigned each tape a three- or four-digit identification number prefaced by ‘Q’ (i.e. Q662, Q1024). While these numbers do not correlate to any chronology, most recordings with numbers lower than Q932 cited in this thesis were recorded in Jonestown, while those with higher numbers were predominantly recorded in California. I obtained digital copies of these tapes from the Jonestown Institute (San Diego State University). Transcriptions as well as provisional date/location information for most tapes can be found on the *Alternative Considerations of Jonestown and Peoples Temple* website; however, all quotations that appear in this thesis are based on my own listening (Alternative Considerations 2020). I cite the tapes parenthetically using the FBI’s letter-number designation.

In a San Francisco Peoples Temple gathering in 1973, James [Jim] Jones (1931-1978) looked out over his audience – largely composed of African Americans – and shocked newcomers by remarking that “we niggers know we ain’t God’s chosen people” (Q958). On the surface, their surprise is well-founded. Jones disavowed the deity he was supposed to be preaching about and used a racial slur in front of a predominantly black audience. Most significantly, though, Jones identified all people present – himself, African Americans, and whites – as “niggers.” Had the flustered newcomers remained in their seats, they would have discovered that such identifications occurred frequently – often without challenge or surprise – in Peoples Temple.

Jones’s remark constitutes what Hubbard labelled propaganda through redefinition of words, or what Murphy identifies as religion-in-practice – structuring asymmetrical relations between real and imagined groups and classes. In this chapter, I explore Jones’s adaptive appropriation of the racial slur *nigger*, and *nigger*’s role in Peoples Temple doctrine as a site of identity construction, conflict management, and boundary maintenance. Moreover, I demonstrate

that Jones's acts of language adaptation enlarged, rather than simply overwrote, *nigger*'s connotations. Instead of erasing and then re-inscribing *nigger*'s meanings to remove negative residue, Jones simultaneously supported and subverted common connotations of *nigger* to set Temple members up as both a downtrodden minority and a noble group. This linguistic adaptation created persistent themes of asymmetry and separation throughout Jones's evolving doctrine of equality and community.

Integration and Separation

To understand the procedure, purpose, and importance of Jones's decision to include himself – and other non-blacks – in the collective identifier “we niggers,” it is necessary to first outline the history of Peoples Temple and sketch the major contours of Jones's doctrine. Like Hubbard's concept of PR, the Temple's socio-political context, audience, and message all affected Jones's adaptation of *nigger*. Since exhaustive histories of Peoples Temple already exist,¹ my summary focusses on the relationship between context, content, and communication in the Temple's development.

Jones was born in 1931 and grew up in Lynn, Indiana amidst economic hardship caused by the Great Depression and racial segregation (Moore 2009, 11).² As a child, Jones frequented Lynn's churches, exposing himself to a variety of Christianities and “playing” church with “congregations” of his friends (Reiterman and Jacobs [1982] 2008, 18-19). In 1949 Jones left his

¹ Jeff Guinn's *The Road to Jonestown* (2017) is the most recent comprehensive study of Peoples Temple. Like my historical synopsis, it focusses primarily on Jones's catalyzing presence throughout the Temple's existence. This focus has become traditional in Temple scholarship, and matches the Temple's leadership structure. It does not, however, encapsulate the wide range of experiences and motivations that characterized individual Temple members' participation in the movement.

² Jones emphasized his childhood as one of poverty, recollecting that “as a child I was, undoubtedly, one of the poor in the community” (Q134). In reality, Lynetta's in-laws helped support the family due to Jim Jones Sr.'s illness and inability to work (see Guinn 2017, 15).

job as a hospital orderly, moved to Bloomington to attend university, and began attending communist gatherings in Indianapolis (Guinn 2017, 52, 56). These early experiences with segregation and hardship, coupled with his interest in Christianity, medical care, and communism, culminated in Jones's decision to become a Christian minister and provided him with both his message's content and format. Jones recognized economic and racial inequality in American society, and identified Christianity and socialist politics as two ways to articulate and address these issues.

In 1952, Jones became a student pastor at a Methodist church, attracted by the denomination's growing interest in racial integration, social reform, and eliminating poverty (Guinn 2017, 56-57). Jones's enthusiasm, however, surpassed the congregation's tolerance for change. Inspired by black Pentecostalism, faith healing, and revival events, Jones came across as a "radicalized Pentecostal preacher" (Hall 2004, 19). In 1954 Jones founded his own Community Unity church – later renamed Peoples Temple – to apply the Protestant social gospel to racial discrimination at his own pace (Maaga 1998, 2).

Doctrinally, the Temple's Indiana gatherings emphasized sharing possessions and caring for society's outcasts. Initially, Jones carefully differentiated his commands to "give and to share and to have brotherhood and fellowship" from "communism" (Q1058-4). Instead of calling for communism's rise, the Temple community drew goods-sharing lessons from the Christian Bible to "get back to God" (Q1058-2). Characterized by faith healings and social outreach, the Temple's integrative behavior and growing civic influence on behalf of marginalized populations continued for more than a decade, attracting progressive Christians and African Americans. Motivated by nuclear war fears as well as backlash from conservative segments of Indiana

society, Jones and a core group of Temple members moved to Redwood Valley, California in 1965 (Reiterman and Jacobs [1982] 2008, 94; Scheeres 2011, 14-15).

Relocating to Redwood Valley allowed Peoples Temple to test the potential of racially integrative social gospel Christianity. Members built their own church building and began trying to participate in local affairs, demonstrating their industrious integrative efforts (Reiterman and Jacobs [1982] 2008, 103). Redwood Valley's predominantly white population, however, responded to the influx of African Americans with occasional racism, prompting a behavioral and theological metamorphosis in Peoples Temple.³ Without giving up on outreach to attract converts, Jones began emphasizing secrecy and insularity, shrouding the Temple in a paranoid, apocalyptic light (Moore 2009, 24; Reiterman and Jacobs [1982] 2008, 150). In Indiana, social mores drew the lines of separation between black Temple members and white outsiders. In California, Jones himself exacerbated the difference between the Temple and its surroundings.

Additionally, Jones's depictions of American life and the future darkened. He pointed out the United States' inhospitable and racist attitudes towards people of color, decried the country's Cold War conduct, and connected these concerns to his predictions of an imminent nuclear apocalypse (Guinn 2017, 135-136). In the face of such threats, Jones demanded increasing monetary and temporal dedication from Temple members, as well as strict compliance with his teachings (Hall 2004, 128; Reiterman and Jacobs [1982] 2008, 150-151). Although the Temple's willingness to provide for its members remained constant, the nature of this provision changed. In 1950s Indianapolis, Jones explained that "we feed and clothe fifty to a hundred people a week . . . for the kingdom work of God" (Q1058-4). After moving to California, several audiotapes refer to a cave near Redwood Valley stocked with food, clothing, and medical

³ Moore (2009, 23-24), Reiterman and Jacobs ([1982] 2008, 103), and Guinn (2017, 135) all identify racist activities directed towards the Temple's members in Redwood Valley.

supplies to sustain the Temple following “the nuclear war that will come on the day that we prophesied” (Q1057-4; see also Q1059-4). While privation in Indianapolis was a symptom of social inequality, in California privation became tied to religious prophecy.

These adaptations created a self-sufficient, insular organization. The Temple’s visible communalism attracted a new demographic as well – countercultural Californians. The Redwood Valley move thus cemented Peoples Temple’s status as an organization united in its vision for social change but differentiated according to race, social status, political affiliation, and religious background.⁴ These various audiences necessitated a flexible, multivalent message that spanned a variety of lived experiences, accepted presuppositions, and hoped-for outcomes.

In 1970 the Temple again expanded, holding services – and eventually purchasing buildings – in San Francisco and Los Angeles (Maaga 1998, 3). This geographical expansion corresponded with another doctrinal evolution to match new audiences. The Temple’s urban presence, egalitarian ideology, and black Pentecostal meeting format attracted inner-city African Americans from Los Angeles ghettos and San Francisco’s Fillmore district (Guinn 2017, 244, 249-250). Peoples Temple also attracted young, college-educated idealists searching for communalism or a collective vehicle to challenge American norms.⁵ To address both groups, Jones performed a political and economic exegesis of the Bible, encouraging “apostolic

⁴ Scholars and former members divide these sub-groups differently. Mary Sawyer bifurcates the Redwood Valley Temple into “two primary groups: a smaller and predominantly . . . white group which was committed to social justice but that was essentially secular . . . and a larger and predominantly . . . black group that was religiously oriented” (2004, 175). Mary McCormick Maaga offers a threefold division: Peoples Temple was a Christian sect that sought authentic Christianity, a California new religion influenced by multiple doctrinal and practical sources, and an American black church (1998, 74-86). Tim Stoen suggests another threefold division: “one group included superidealists. A second included middle-class religious people seeking – and finding – full-scale racial integrations. . . . A third included society’s rejects” (2016, 93).

⁵ Stoen’s description of Richard Tropp’s path to joining Peoples Temple exemplifies those young members who participated in Jones’s movement as part of a new religious quest or a search for an alternative to 1960s and 1970s American life (2016, 104-106).

socialism” while railing against capitalism and Christianity as the roots of racism, political corruption, and inequality (see Q1023; Q1059-2; Q1059-3). This reading generated two paradoxical ideological maneuvers. First, Jones authorized his message using the Bible, but condemned the Bible itself. Second, he both worked within and subverted American society.

Jones’s attitude towards the Bible represents one of his ideology’s most contradictory dimensions. Although he drew his driving principle of apostolic socialism from the text, Jones repeatedly condemned the Bible as a tool used to justify slavery and legitimate inequality. Denying its divine origin, Jones identified the Bible as a translated document full of errors, additions, and omissions. In particular, Jones criticized the King James Bible, since its patron/namesake was “a whoremonger, alcoholic, and a slave owner. . . . [who] did every devious thing you could think of” and “took out sacred earlier translations and added lies” (Q962; Q953). These lies found expression in both American history and contemporary life.

For instance, Jones taught that the Bible justified gender-based wage discrepancies: “a man’s average salary is nine thousand dollars, but a woman’s average salary is four thousand. . . . Why? Because the women are taught by King James to obey, to be subject to their husband” (Q962).⁶ Produced to support its translator’s whims, the Bible sanctioned social inequality as sacred text. Alternately, “The Letter Killeth, but the Spirit Giveth LIFE” – one of Jones’s few publications – listed several pages of “Great Truths in the Bible” that supported Peoples Temple’s emphasis on sharing possessions and faith healings (“The Letter Killeth” 19[??], 5-7). Jones spoke approvingly of Jesus as a “revolution” whose parables promoted an early form of socialism (Q1059-5). He explained, furthermore, that he could separate original biblical truths

⁶ Jones made a similar argument regarding gender-based wage discrepancies in Q1059-6.

from exploitive later additions by virtue of being “a prophet sent from God” (Q1059-3).⁷ His ability to expose the Bible’s errors, ironically, demonstrated his knowledge of Jesus’ true socialist teachings.

A similar paradox appeared in Jones’s simultaneous work within and against American society. On one hand, Jones advocated social reform, economic equality, and racial integration. The Temple offered free meals, legal advice, medical assistance, and counselling for attendees (see Guinn 2017, 245-246). Jones ingratiated himself to local politicians and – in 1976 – joined the San Francisco Housing Authority, demonstrating his belief in governance’s ability to shape citizens’ lives (Moore 2009, 29-30; Hollis 2004, 92). While Jones petitioned for change, he did so within established systems and using sanctioned methods.

On the other hand, Jones emphatically denounced American society. He depicted the government as a rising fascist dictatorship, warning that the CIA meddled in government takeovers as part of Cold War proxy conflicts.⁸ He condemned America as “an ugly land,” teaching that national pride submerged persistent racism: “don’t talk to me about a ‘land of the free and the home of the brave’ until everybody’s free” (Q1015; Q987). Damningly, Jones unmasked organizations that claimed to help or protect people as hypocritical and dangerous, citing police officers harassing innocent Americans, refusing to stop racial violence, and torturing and abusing prisoners (Q1019; Q1053-4). Finally, Jones railed against Christian

⁷ In Q1059-5, Jones echoed this sentiment: “I know what’s good in the Bible. I know what’s rotten in the Bible, because I am the Alpha. But more than that, more than that, I am the . . . Omega.”

⁸ Jones drew on President Richard Nixon’s Watergate scandal, for instance, as evidence that “the winds of dictatorship [are] blowing” (Q960). He further bereted American politicians as “fools,” “slave-holders,” and “demons” (Q233). For a condemnation of the CIA’s foreign involvements, see Q1015.

churches, claiming that clergy gathered earthly wealth from laity while preaching that happiness and comfort awaited Christians in the afterlife.⁹

These paradoxes created and separated two groups: outsiders who witnessed the Temple's participation in social gospel initiatives, and insiders who learned to see these initiatives as damning evidence of America's flaws. A 1973 sermon exemplifies these dual layers of knowledge. Jones announced that California Representative George Brown had entered a note into the Congressional Record praising the Temple's support of embattled journalists as a sign of the group's "commitment to the principles on which this country was founded" (Q233). While happy for this publicity, Jones pointed out Rep. Brown's ignorance in mistaking a group that "recommend[s] that the class system be done away with" as supporting America (Q233). Public perception and insider knowledge differentiated the Temple from its interlocutors.

People's Temple's actions also generated controversy and resulted in internal divisions. In late 1971, an *Indianapolis Star* reporter wrote a skeptical article after attending a Temple healing service in which Jones claimed to resurrect the dead (Guinn 2017, 206).¹⁰ The following year, Lester Kinsolving of the *San Francisco Examiner* prepared an eight-article expose on Peoples Temple, highlighting questionable practices such as healings and resurrections, armed guards, and Jones's claim to be God. Although the *Examiner* printed only four of Kinsolving's articles, their emphasis on unusual elements portrayed the Temple unfavorably.¹¹ In 1973, Jones

⁹ Jones condemned classism in Christian churches in Q987, arguing that wealth and status blocked ministers from preaching "the truth." In a 1976 sermon Jones encouraged visiting Christians to leave their churches, saying "just let that preacher go – he's just wanting your tithes anyway" (Q162).

¹⁰ Jones claimed to resurrect the dead as an ultimate expression of his ability to keep Temple members from harm (see, for instance, Q1055-1). These claims matched his message that the Kingdom of God's perfection should be achieved in the present, rather than postponed until the afterlife.

¹¹ Condemnatory accounts explain that complaints by Peoples Temple forced the *Examiner* to discontinue the series (for instance, Scheeres 2011, 54). More tolerant depictions of Peoples Temple clarify that these complaints stemmed from Kinsolving reporting inaccurate information (for instance, Guinn 2017, 260).

encountered major opposition from within the Temple, when eight young members left. These eight defectors openly criticized racial discrepancies in the Temple's leadership – noting that a predominantly-white staff led a predominantly-black membership – and claimed that the leadership's interests prioritized sex over socialism (Guinn 2017, 275; Reiterman [1982] 2008, 225). These critiques challenged the Temple's sincerity as an integrative socialist organization.

In the wake of these challenges, Peoples Temple founded an agricultural settlement named Jonestown in Guyana in 1974 (Moore 2009, 43). Jonestown, like Redwood Valley a decade before, provided a refuge from antagonism and an opportunity to demonstrate the potential of apostolic socialism. Unlike Redwood Valley, however, mid-1970s Guyana – an English-speaking socialist nation with a large black population – welcomed the Temple.¹²

Describing Jonestown as a “Promised Land,” Jones invoked biblical imagery to identify Guyana as a place of safety from coming ruin.¹³ He warned that America had exhausted its oil resources, leading to immanent mass starvation due to increased oil prices (Q952). Luckily, Jonestown's neighbor “Venezuela, right where we're sitting, has the richest oil of any one area . . . in the world” (Q952). Jones further noted critical treatment of the Children of God and charismatic faith healers in America as evidence that “it's only a matter of time. The government of this country wants to break down every kind of group outside of Big Brother” (Q952). Most bleakly, Jones warned of racist governments that slowly constricted the Temple's opportunities

¹² Conversely, Jonestown met Guyana's Prime Minister Forbes Burnham's needs. Situating Jonestown's American inhabitants near the Guyana-Venezuela border functioned as a deterrent against Venezuelan attempts to encroach on Guyana's territory. Jonestown served as an exemplar of Burnham's call for settlement in Guyana's hinterland. Economically, Jonestown could contribute to Guyana's austerity programs. For discussions of Guyana's suitability as a home for Peoples Temple, see Guinn (2017, 292-295), Nugent (1979, 47, 71-72), and Stoen (2016, 4-6).

¹³ Jones referred to Jonestown as a refuge away from racism or poverty (see, for example, Q612; Q952; Q965; Q1053-1; Q1058-2). This use of *Promised Land*, present in African American identity construction since the time of slavery, represents another act of sociolinguistic appropriation (see Levine [1977] 2007: 22, 33, 136).

to move abroad: “as of this week Canada is passing a racial exclusion law that will not allow any Asiatics, Indians, or blacks to immigrate into Canada. . . . It’s already in England” (Q952).

Jonestown’s necessity became apparent in Jones’s call to escape the United States “out of the interest for the survival of our children” before deprivation, intolerance, and closing borders doomed Peoples Temple (Q952). Between 1974 and mid-1977, approximately sixty Temple members moved to Guyana and, assisted by hired laborers, began constructing Jonestown (Guinn 2017, 353).

As the 1970s drew on, Jonestown’s function as a haven became increasingly urgent. Bad publicity, member defections, and legal issues plagued Peoples Temple in 1976 and early 1977. *New West* magazine published “Inside Peoples Temple,” drawing together testimonies by defectors about faked healings, staged attacks on Jones’s life, duplicitous fundraising techniques, inequality within the Temple’s hierarchy, and Jones’s attempts to infiltrate civic government (Kilduff and Tracy 1977). This article worried Jones for at least two reasons. First, it drew on former members’ testimony – some of whom possessed considerable knowledge of the Temple’s operations – and “checked the verifiable facts of their accounts” to add credibility to their claims (Kilduff and Tracy 1977, 34). Second, *New West* printed the story despite the Temple’s efforts to block its publication.¹⁴ These factors indicated a growing counter-voice to Peoples Temple – namely, former members banding together with investigative media – which complicated Jones’s doctrine of differentiation: insiders became outsiders, retaining their insider-trait of knowledge while gaining the outsider-trait of suspicion.

Additionally, some defectors launched legal suits against Peoples Temple, including a paternity suit against Jones himself (Moore 2009, 61-62; Stoen 2016, 147). If Temple members

¹⁴ These attempts included breaking into *New West*’s offices and a “letter-and-telephone campaign” (Kilduff and Tracy 1977, 31).

found it difficult to believe in nascent fascism or African American concentration camps, magazine exposes and paternity suits provided a tangible threat.¹⁵ In response, Jones accelerated the Temple's resettlement process. By September 1977, nearly a thousand individuals – including Jones – occupied Jonestown (Reiterman and Jacobs [1982] 2008, 337; Maaga 1998, 3).

In Jonestown, the Temple's socialist identity overshadowed its religious origins, and biblical references disappeared almost entirely from Jones's speeches. Instead, he promoted "working class solidarity," berating those who still talked about "your god-damn religious God shit" (Q342). This shift in message corresponded to shifts in audience and authorization. In the United States, the Temple's Christian features provided social legitimation. In Guyana, by contrast, Jones's attempts to demonstrate his prowess as a faith-healing prophet failed to garner a positive reaction (see Guinn 2017, 304-305). The Temple's political tenor, however, resonated with the socialist Guyanese government, and thus Jones foregrounded the movement's political nature while downplaying its religious ties.

Providing news commentary in Jonestown, Jones depicted the world in stark Cold War terms: American fascists clashed with Soviets in multiple proxy conflicts.¹⁶ As an outpost against American fascism, living in Jonestown took on dangerous ramifications. Jones told his followers that they may suffer invasion from enemies, particularly American media and politicians roused by a group of Temple defectors and relatives of members called the Concerned Relatives. These Concerned Relatives drafted an "Accusation of Human Rights Violations," alleging that Jones practiced a "mind-programming campaign," prohibited residents from leaving the commune, and

¹⁵ Jones mentioned these concentration camps as early as 1973 (Q972). Descriptions of concentration camps prepared in the United States to contain blacks appear in Q741 and Q637.

¹⁶ For example, in Q397 Jones cast memorial rallies in Japan, changes within the Portuguese military, and Chilean copper exports as pieces in a larger Cold War drama.

restricted freedom of association and communication (1978). Moreover, the group highlighted the possibility of mass suicide, referencing a March 1978 Peoples Temple letter to US Congress that asserted “we are devoted to a decision that it is better even to die than to be constantly harassed from one continent to the next” (“[Letter] To All U.S. Senators” 1978).¹⁷ These concerns catalyzed California Congressman Leo Ryan to visit Jonestown to examine conditions in the commune (Moore 2009, 88-89).

Joined by media personnel and Concerned Relatives, Congressman Ryan arrived in Guyana in Nov. 1978, proving – for Jones – the Temple’s inability to escape persecution. In Jones’s 1978 discourses, Ryan became a microcosm of the flaws that earlier characterized America as a whole: Ryan appeared as “one hostile racist congressman . . . [who] represents all anti-black feeling. . . . He is so far right you can call him nothing but fascist” (Q175). Jones cautioned residents against trusting any former members who accompanied Ryan, explaining that “they are now as high in their salutations for fascism as they once were in their devotion for socialism” (Q175). In light of this invasion, Jones’s message again took on apocalyptic dimensions. Just as Ryan became a microcosm for America’s evil, Jonestown’s potential dissolution become a microcosm of the world’s immanent end.

Jonestown meetings increasingly focused on the proper response to major threats. Even before Ryan’s announced visit, Jones vacillated between violence directed outwards – to repel or destroy invaders – or inwards – to destroy the community rather than allow others to dismember Jonestown. Jones likened Jonestown to armed revolutionary groups like the Red Brigades in Europe or MOVE in the United States.¹⁸ In doing so, he emphasized the active consequences of

¹⁷ The letter cites attempts by “the IRS and Treasury Dept. and even the Federal Communications Commission . . . to initiate ways of cutting off our lifeline” by investigating Jonestown’s financial and broadcasting practices as examples of persecution (“[Letter] To All U.S. Senators” 1978).

ideology, reminding listeners that “revolution is a struggle for power, and this is a most practical activity” (Q284). The Red Brigades exemplified action-based ideology, since they had “a good balance of thinking and violence” (Q284). MOVE’s year-long state of siege in Philadelphia, similarly, demonstrated Jonestown’s potential to harry its opponents: “that gives some point to what we could do if anyone was threatening our eternal freedom here. We’ve certainly got a better capacity to resist, and more bodies, and more arms” (Q284).

More frequently, however, Jones adapted Huey Newton’s concept of revolutionary suicide as a fitting response to persecution. In Q050, he described death’s ease compared to moving to another new location. In Q051, Jones promoted dying “with dignity” to get people’s attention, since “they don’t understand when you’re talking nice to them.” Finally, Jones associated death with victory and bravery rather than defeat: “we are not gonna be defeated. . . . If you want to defeat us, we shall overcome. . . . There’s one advantage we have. We are not afraid, some of us, to die” (Q161). Self-inflicted death promised simplicity, dignity, and victory.

Ryan’s visit – during which twenty-six residents requested assistance in returning to the United States – precipitated both types of violence (Guinn 2017, 432). Although these defectors represented only a small fraction of the commune’s population, Jones interpreted Congressman Ryan’s presence and their choice to leave Jonestown as proof that Peoples Temple could never escape American meddling. To prevent the Ryan delegation from leaving Guyana, Jones sent armed residents to the Port Kaituma airstrip to ambush the Congressman and his entourage. The gunmen killed Ryan, three news media employees, and one defector (Moore 2009: 95; Reiterman and Jacobs [1982] 2008: 528-530). Back in the commune, Jones declared that

¹⁸ MOVE, an anti-urban/modern communal group in Philadelphia comprised primarily of African Americans, clashed with police and civic leaders repeatedly (see Assefa and Wahrhaftig 1990). The Red Brigades, an Italian anti-fascist terrorist organization, engaged in political assassinations and other crimes throughout the 1970s (see Orsini [2009] 2011).

American forces would avenge Ryan's murder by violently dismantling Jonestown, and told his followers to commit "revolutionary suicide" as a final way to "protes[t] the conditions of an inhumane world" (Q042). The subsequent mass-murder suicides ended the Temple's twenty-five-year transition from social gospel Christianity to revolutionary socialism.

Practicality and Posterity: Temple Recordings

Jones relied on inequality as a catalyst for his message, identifying and creating real or imagined groups/classes to articulate this asymmetry. Hypocritical Christians clashed with true recipients of Jesus' revolutionary message, utopian socialists struggled against nascent fascism in American cities, and Jonestown pioneers held out against intercontinental persecution in Jones's worldview. Evidence of this inequality comes in a different textual form than the periodicals and communiques covered in chapters 4, 6-7. Peoples Temple members encountered Jones's doctrines during regularly scheduled services in the United States and during both broadcasts and meetings in Jonestown. Unlike Hubbard, Jones wrote few doctrinal tracts or monographs. Instead, he communicated his message using black Pentecostal Christian church service patterns (see Hollis 2004, 95). This communicative framework matched Jones's early encounters with faith healers and progressive Christians in Indiana, and was familiar to African American Christians in California. From a social movement studies perspective, Jones's reliance on a pre-existing social format familiar to a major contingent of Temple members is an example of what McAdam terms "indigenous organizational strengths" ([1982] 1999, 43).¹⁹ In McAdam's work, a

¹⁹ McAdam identifies members, group rewards and goals, communication networks, and leaders as examples of indigenous organizational strengths ([1982] 1999, 44-48). In most instances, Jones drew only on the products of these extant communities, such as familiar meeting formats and standardized discourse practices. One notable exception to this caveat is Jones's interactions with Father Divine's ([187?]-1965) Peace Mission. Jones tried to attract large swathes of Divine's followers, and claimed Divine's authority by depicting himself as spiritual successor (see Guinn 2017, 207-211).

social movement's success depends in part on its ability to tap into pre-existing administrative structures, social networks, or other organizational tools familiar to its members. Jones's communicative process relied on familiar tools matched to target audiences.

This face-to-face, oral communication affected Jones's message in several ways. First, Jones's approach lent itself to spontaneity, generated a sense of intimacy, and forced Jones to incorporate current events. Instead of relying on impersonal, highly polished publications aimed at a general audience, Jones presented his doctrines as an extemporaneous product delivered at a particular moment to a present audience. His sermons appear to have little internal structure, and ricochet between time periods and foci.²⁰ As a result, Jones's discourse lacked consistency but emphasized contemporary relevance.

Second, Jones's communicative approach allowed audience participation through discussion, antiphonal responders, and miraculous aides. In some sermons, Jones referred directly to members whom he had helped, inviting doubters to confer with the healed individual.²¹ Elsewhere, Jones made theological points by discussing ideas with attendees.²² Rather than passively listening to Jones's message, Temple members exemplified or generated portions of Jones's doctrines. Even attendees who were not singled out could support Jones's theological productions through the Temple's antiphonal, call-and-response style.²³

²⁰ Jones's sermons possessed a rhetorically curated casualness to balance listeners' ease against an uncomfortable message. For instance, Jones regularly flagged false endings in his sermons, using phrases such as "In closing," "I'll give you this in closing," or "I'll say that in closing," but then continued to criticize the Bible or sketch America's inequalities (Q612; Q945; Q1053-1). These recurring phrases crafted an apparent off-the-cuff attitude – he spoke as things come to him, succumbing to his own spontaneity. This flagging also underscored the importance of what Jones said next. He violated his own promise to close because of his message's urgency.

²¹ In Q956 and Q965, Jones asked recently healed individuals to demonstrate their return to health. In Q962, Jones pointed out a man whom he had saved from several gunshot wounds, encouraging Temple attendees to "put your hands right in the wounds – he'll show it to you."

²² In Q1023, for instance, Jones engaged in a discussion with a Temple attendee to explain the problem with conceiving of God as a distant, inactive deity instead of an earthly, present force of change.

Third and finally, Jones's use of Pentecostal worship patterns – including healings, testimonies, and call-and-response interaction – allowed him to introduce unfamiliar concepts in a familiar framework. Many of Jones's key doctrines in the Temple's American phase radically departed from mainline Protestant theology. He condemned Christianity's God and the notion of heavenly perfection after death, saying that "it's wonderful that we have done away with the illusions of heavens that are for tomorrow or gods that are out in space" (Q1022). He ruthlessly pointed out contradictions in the Bible, identifying it as a source of ignorance: "you're reading the Bible, [but] you oughta start reading the world around you" (Q1057-4). Jones furthermore made amazing claims about his identity – "I'm the only God there is" – and abilities, asking listeners "how many of you have seen me raise the dead, not once but hundreds of times?" (Q1059-6; Q1053-1). A familiar service structure, however, cushioned this radical message.

Rather than canonizing these teachings in written texts, Jones's acts of language adaptation are preserved in audiotapes created for practical and historical purposes. Pragmatically, Peoples Temple recorded Jones's sermons to cope with the movement's growth relative to its authority structure. In the early 1970s, Jones opened Temple buildings in multiple California cities and travelled throughout the United States. The group's leadership structure, however, failed to expand to match its growing geographical presence. Although Jones worked alongside co-pastors and upper-level administrators, he remained solely responsible for creating and presenting doctrine. Even though Jones toured regularly between Redwood Valley, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and other destinations, he could not be physically present at every Temple meeting. To resolve this difficulty, the Temple recorded Jones's sermons and replayed them during his absences.

²³ See, for example, Q987, in which Jones repeatedly paused to encourage audience reactions.

This practical purpose is both helpful and challenging for studying Peoples Temple. The early/mid-1970s recordings are helpful insofar as they preserve the Temple's doctrines at the height of Jones's syncretic efforts. Moreover, Jones delivered these messages to insiders, providing a picture of Temple life not always available to non-members. This internal function, however, resulted in frequent redaction. In many recordings, Jones or subsequent redactors cut out content deemed redundant or unnecessary. Since Jones did not need to be physically present for personal testimonies, community announcements, or congregational music, these items appear infrequently in recordings. Instead, the recordings focus almost exclusively on Jones.²⁴ Moreover, the Temple's need for Jones to address multiple audiences at once only arose late in its American phase. Recordings of Redwood Valley or Indianapolis services in the 1950s and early 1960s are, therefore, rare. The recordings thus represent only a partial picture of Peoples Temple. They depict Jones appealing to multiple sub-populations within the Temple's membership, and working to synthesize two decades of theological development that incorporated social gospel Christianity, the civil rights movement, and socialism. Jones's represented doctrines are thus wide-ranging, complex, and precarious.

Peoples Temple also recorded audiotapes to preserve their decision-making processes for posterity. Jones worried about media's ability to shape public perceptions through its selective depiction of events. In California, he described television as a means of social control, explaining that "television can make a person think according to the lines that the state dictate[s] essential to itself and survival" by distracting people's revolutionary nature and disempowering dissenters

²⁴ Healing services are an exception to this statement. During healing services, Jones asserted his mystical or prophetic omniscience by telling the healing recipient various personal details about their life. In these rituals, the recipient spoke into a microphone to affirm the correctness of Jones's statements. Healing recordings thus provide brief, random glimpses into the lives of various Temple members.

(Q663).²⁵ As his local fame grew, Jones worried about the persistence of media criticism despite geographic separation. Observing that a news source in Indiana continued to speculate on his activities after the Temple relocated to California, Jones asked “we’re two thousand five hundred miles away from those assholes – why can’t they talk about something else other than us?” (Q1024). In Jonestown, this question took on even greater significance, since the commune’s remoteness made it difficult to correct misinformation. Jones complained that the Temple’s enemies could “abuse” and “twist” facts to deliberately and persistently mischaracterize Peoples Temple across time and space, using a communicative medium that disguised ideology as information (Q951). Jones’s concern with misrepresentation intensified as Jonestown’s leadership gradually accepted mass suicide as a solution to persecution. To provide a “true” record of the commune’s history, Peoples Temple recorded audiotapes that contained an audible account that would continue to speak beyond the group’s end.

As sympathetic narratives, these recordings render Jonestown as a free, democratic space. Q245 exemplifies this purpose: it records residents articulating their support or condemnation of mass suicide. Jones asked those in favor of collective death to explain “why have you chosen this way [committing suicide] which is difficult – I’m sure – for the world to understand” (Q245). Rather than depicting the decision to die as a unanimous choice, Jones recorded dissent as well. When Harriet Tropp suggested that kidnapping a politician might serve socialist change better than mass suicide, Jones reminded her that “I hope you understand, comrade, that you are not obligated to follow our decision . . . your conscience must lead you” (Q245). Q042, a recording

²⁵ In Q767, Jones explained that television could disempower political dissenters by refusing to air news coverage that depicted protesting social groups.

of the mass-murders/suicides,²⁶ likewise worked democracy into its depiction of Jonestown's end. Before beginning the poisoning, Jones requested that "anyone that has any dissenting opinion, please speak," and then engaged in a lengthy discussion with resident Christine Miller about alternative options (Q042).

Q042 and Q245 demonstrate Peoples Temple's concern with "accurate" representation of "true" accounts of the Temple's decisions. Both recordings, however, also inflect ideology as information. The Temple's recordings preserve historical events, but they archive a consciously selected depiction of Peoples Temple. The audiotapes provide scholarly access to a movement rendered inaccessible by its lethal end, but they do so as pragmatic tools to achieve ulterior motivations. Redeployed as data, the audiotapes offer insight not just into Peoples Temple's history, but also the intricacies of Jones's doctrinal constructions.

"Cuss With a Purpose"

While Hubbard's *Technical Bulletins* deployed complex phrasing, Jones ignored the King James Bible's stiff speech. Instead, he relied on casual, common vocabulary to transmit his message. In this section, I analyze two communicative maneuvers that Jones relied on. First, he characterized his speech as plain, unadorned, and direct. Second, he addressed his frequent use of profanity by explaining cussing's utility.

To facilitate entry into Peoples Temple, Jones claimed to use familiar, non-technical language that everybody could understand.²⁷ Admitting that "I [can] speak in tongues," Jones

²⁶ Q042's very existence – a recording that Jonestown's residents, by virtue of their death, could never hear – speaks to Jones's concern with posterity, and to his desire to preserve an "accurate" record of events.

²⁷ This focus on simplicity does not mean that the content or ramifications of Jones's doctrine were easy to follow. Rather, it means that Jones claimed to speak plainly about difficult subject matter. In one sermon Jones categorized his doctrines as "hard sayings" (Q1055-2).

nevertheless maintained that “I would rather speak five words with the understanding of what Pentecost performs. . . . than ten thousand words in an unknown tongue” (Q1058-2).²⁸ Rather than communicate his divine power through unintelligible phrases, Jones preferred to let his social gospel program of achieving concrete change speak plainly for itself. Unknown tongues and complex theology, according to Jones, obfuscated rather than liberated. He condemned preachers whose sermonizing merely distracted listeners from their woes or hoodwinked parishioners into a greater state of discomfort:

[Christian preachers use a] lot of ‘hallelujah’ gibberish and ‘glory to God’ gibberish that doesn’t say a thing . . . while you go on hungering, go on without love, go on in your loneliness. . . . [They’re] sweet talking you all the way out of your money. Sweet talking you in their fine garb and robes. Sweet talking you as they drive around in their Cadillacs (Q1016).

Jones chose simple speech that led to action over sweet words that deepened suffering.

Moreover, Jones relied on common language to soften and simplify his radical message. In one sermon he apologized, saying “I’m gonna back up now, start the backward motion, so that everybody won’t quit. ‘Cause if I kept on [and] said all I had to do, and all that I want to say tonight, we’d only end up [with] only about a hundred here” (Q1059-6). The complexity or unexpectedness of Jones’s message opened the door to misinterpretation or rejection, and thus Jones spoke simply to prevent confusion. Ironically, Jones noted that his frank speech actually caused misunderstanding: “it’s very hard to understand me, ‘cause I talk so simple. People don’t like simple talk. . . . They want it all complicated. . . . I’m so simple, anybody [who] can understand simple shit can understand me, but most people don’t” (Q1059-6).

²⁸ As Yelle, Handman, and Lehigh point out, this expression of “linguistic iconoclasm partly represents a displacement of many of the poetic, performative, or otherwise pragmatic functions of language in favor of its semantic function” (2019, 16).

Jones, however, equated fluency in specialized language with the benefits of Temple membership, particularly receiving healing. He warned that his ability to heal operated “on the basis of people knowing all that I’m saying” (Q1059-6). Healing, Jones reminded his audience, hinged on proper understanding: “if you’re sympathetic to socialism and master my teachings, I can teach you how to master death” (Q1059-3). During a question-and-answer service, he explained that healing worked “if you have faith and understand the teachings . . . and think along the lines of my teachings” (Q1015). In another sermon, Jones warned members who asked him to heal family members who did not attend Peoples Temple that “[if] cousin Johnny wants my help he’ll have to get his ass here. . . . Or he’ll have to listen to my tapes and understand what I’m saying” (Q1057-2). The simple speech of sermons in Peoples Temple provided the key with which members could understand their lives and receive membership’s healing benefits.

Once, Jones warned listeners that “some of you are comin’ here for a healing, you won’t get healed. Because you don’t know Jesus” (Q1054-3). Temple members with a Christian background would certainly recognize Jesus, but by *Jesus* Jones meant more than a biblical figure. He explained that, when used by Christians, *Jesus* was a corruption of the name *Zeus* and represented ignorance that resulted in religious oppression (Q1054-3).²⁹ When Jones spoke of Jesus, however, he referred to a “revolutionary” force that manifested itself as concrete social change – Jones’s version of “heaven” (Q1054-3).

Jones borrowed rather than invented *Jesus* or *heaven*, but he re-defined each term in such a way that only knowing group members would be able to parse his message or share in its benefits. Re-definition required care, though, as seemingly positive words had taken on negative connotations in contemporary society. In 1973, he expressed concern over calling Jesus’

²⁹ Jones taught that Christianity incorporated pagan practices, particularly by celebrating Christmas and Easter at times normally reserved for “the Sun God” and “the Goddess Eostre” (Q1054-3).

teachings apostolic *socialism*, lamenting that the term had “been badly abused by Nazi Germany. . . . The word communism’s been badly abused. But on the day of Pentecost, they had all things in common. Perhaps we should call it commonism or communalism” (Q1023). In Jonestown, he similarly condemned the “National Socialist Party of America” for “discrediting the word socialist to try and confuse the working class” (Q732). Finally, Jones warned residents against describing the commune as a *family*, saying that “family’s a word I wouldn’t use, because they stuck that with the . . . Moonie-ites [Unification Church]. It’s a good word, but they’ve used it . . . the Manson family – they tried to make the word look dirty” (Q191). Through their actions and ideologies, Nazis and Charles Manson re-coded positive terms like *socialism* and *family* in negative ways. Jones engaged in similar adaptive work, condemning the Christian meanings of *Jesus* but condoning – and elevating – *nigger*’s connotations.

In Temple recordings, profanity – what Jones called *cussing* – served as one of Jones’s most frequent tools for deploying familiar, non-technical language. In Jones’s vocabulary, *swearing* referred to an affirmation of truth – “I swear on your life . . . they said it’ll never heal” – and *cursing* denoted an imposed state of being with negative consequences – “I’ll curse you” (Q1035). Jones reserved *cussing*, however, to describe uncouth terms.

Jones connected cussing to simplicity and honesty. In one sermon, he linked cussing with frankness: “I find a pile of shit and I call it what it is” (Q1059-3). In another sermon, he dismissed cussing as contextually necessary, saying that “I have to talk plain. When you’re in Rome, you talk like the Romans” (Q162). He likewise equated coarse language with truth, warning listeners that “I’m speaking the truth using some four-letter words that you understand” (Q1059-3). Criticizing those who equated polite speech with upright character, Jones scoffed “Mr. Nixon says he’s never said a cuss-word. . . . He said he’d always been clean-mouthed. But

he's a criminal" (Q1059-3) Similarly, doctors hid dishonesty behind politeness. Lambasting "rat finks" who used vocabulary expected of medical practitioners but refused to properly examine patients, Jones told a story of how he saved one elderly patient from predatory doctors by taking him to see a "Dr. Whitaker" who "can cuss like a fishwife" (Q1032). Dr. Whitaker did not utilize the profession's expected vocabulary, but his cussing honesty properly and promptly diagnosed the patient.

Jones went so far as to redefine cussing to separate honest speech from dishonest platitudes. In a 1972 Los Angeles meeting Jones called out hypocrites who spoke duplicitously, talking about peace and love but acting violently and selfishly (Q1016). Anticipating a counterargument based on his coarse language, Jones said,

[You] say 'oh, you're up here cussing. You said ass.' That's not cussing. When you cuss is when you say 'peace' but you mean 'war,' when you say 'I bless you in Jesus' name' and you mean everything else but blessings. . . . Don't you worry about that old fella saying 'son-of-a-bitch' (Q1016).

In this reversal, Jones's coarse speech indicated greater morality than those speaking of peace and Jesus' blessings.

Usually, though, cussing in Jones's doctrines referred to saying *ass* or *son-of-a-bitch*, and served larger purposes than simply signalling honesty. Cussing expressed Jones's freedom and power, and offered liberation to oppressed Americans. Furthermore, cussing connected to healing – Jones claimed to gain spiritual power from profanity, and deployed vulgar vocabulary to beat back death. Finally, Jones used cussing as a technique of separation, purposefully testing his audience's conception of propriety to identify hypocrites and imposters. Throughout, he rebuffed listeners who balked at cussing with biblical passages that supported his behavior.

Although California Temple recordings are replete with cussing, Jones warned Temple leadership against flippant profanity. He claimed to be an expert cusser, and entreated the

Temple's staff to "cuss with a purpose. I don't like cussing just to be hearing it. . . . I know exactly when to do it and when not to" (Q1021). In another sermon, he elaborated further on speaking opportunistically: "I just act good. I got some . . . straight [mainstream Christian] folk comin' tomorrow and I gotta behave" (Q1059-3). Flippantly, though, Jones waved away concerns that straight folk had about cussing, saying "don't bother about the cussing. The cussing'll probably leave just as quickly as it came, when it serves its purpose" (Q1018). Jones cussed deliberately, considering his audience and also the purpose of his language.

In some instances, Jones cussed to get an audience's attention, claiming that coarse language could hold one's attention longer than the Protestant phrasing that Christian Temple members expected. Chastising listeners who sat unresponsively while he talked about doctrines and scriptures but laughed when he said *ass*, Jones explained that

I talk in religion – didn't get nobody's attention. I said 'I hit somebody in the ass with a big stick,' then they listened. That's why sometimes you have to speak that way to get people's attention. You could pray and you could peal and you could sing, and you won't get their attention. . . . But if I'll get you to wake up by cussing, I'll cuss 'til you wake up (Q1016).³⁰

In his larger theme of liberation, cussing's shock value awoke listeners to the possibility of nonconformity to previous religious, racial, or cultural patterns.

Jones cussed as an exemplar of freedom, rescuing straight folk from prudish constraints. Pointing out one Temple member as a success story, Jones noted that "Joy was religious: she wouldn't cuss, [but] she can cuss like a trooper now" (Q1059-1). Even if straight folk did not begin cussing themselves, just hearing another free person cuss could bring liberation. During his condemnation of careless cussing, Jones admitted that "I think there's a necessary freedom [from] repression. But do it through me vicariously" (Q1021). The benefits of vicarious cussing

³⁰ In Q1057-5, Jones similarly explained that he claimed sacred origins to expedite reception of his doctrines.

continued in Guyana. In Jonestown, Jones told one elderly resident that “I always love to hear your cussin’ out” (Q743). When the woman admitted that cussing “feels good . . . it just heals me or something,” Jones affirmed that “I think you heal a lot of us, ‘cause we all . . . feel like cussin’, and you cuss for us” (Q743).

Elsewhere, Jones linked cussing to physical wellness. In several recordings he cited cussing and healing as his two principle vocations, calling himself “the same one that cusses, the same one that heals” and stating that “I’m a goddamn cussin’ healer, that’s what I am” (Q1024; Q966). In one instance, Jones claimed that cussing – as a form of truth-telling – provided the power that he used to heal:

The more I curse out your buzzard Skygod the better I feel! That’s where I get my energy from. That’s how I can heal the sick and raise the dead: by telling the truth. And the more truth I tell, the more power I get (Q1057-5).

Like Dr. Whitaker who cussed like a fishwife, Jones wove cussing into his healing.

During a sequence of 1973 California sermons that he referred to as “cussing week,” Jones described a resurrection he had performed where cussing constituted the miraculous act itself. He told listeners that “on Sunday, there was a Holiness woman in our Temple who died. I told her . . . this has been a week of cussing. . . . I cursed her from the floor. I said ‘you cannot die here’ . . . and she immediately got up” (Q1059-3). In another version of the story, Jones’s healing command grew even more profane: “[to] that Holiness sister . . . layin’ on the floor there dead this last service Sunday – I said, ‘get your ass off that floor goddamn you, you can’t die here’” (Q1059-4). In both accounts, Jones neglected to note that the Holiness sister supposedly died from the shock of hearing him cuss in church (Q966). In his account of reviving the Holiness sister, cussing held the power to both end and restore life.

To counter the perception that church leaders could not cuss, Jones drew on biblical characters and passages. He reminded listeners that “Jesus cursed. Paul cussed. . . . Solomon talked about a dung hill” (1059-3). Staving off attempts to moderate his speech, Jones warned “don’t tell me how to talk, because [figures in] your Bible [cussed:] Paul, Solomon – all of them cussed. Solomon, [a] great prophet – he was a type of god in the Old Testament – talked about pissin’ over a wall” (Q1059-4). Reminding Christian Temple members that “you used to say God could do anything, just as it please him,” Jones asserted his divinity by stating that “it pleases me to cuss” (Q966). By the same token, Jones used the Bible to justify strategic deployment of both cussing and straight speech: “‘He that winneth souls is wise.’ ‘He becomes all things to all men, that by any means he might save the more’” (Q1059-3).

Finally, Jones cussed to root out hypocrisy in Peoples Temple. Those who balked when hearing Jones cuss betrayed their self-righteousness, duplicitous moral standards, and attachment to outmoded Christianity. During his explanation of cussing with a purpose, Jones recounted a moment of self-awareness experienced by “Mother LaTourneau” (Q1021). After hearing Jones cuss, LaTourneau “said ‘when I was so upset about this cussing, I realized it was self-righteousness. It was hypocrisy.’ She got the message” (Q1021). Since Jones opined that everybody cussed, Temple attendees who condemned his language were hypocrites.

Challenging members who “sit there like you’re a damn hypocrite,” Jones asked “if you don’t like it, why don’t you walk out?” (Q966). Answering his own question, Jones accused people of putting up with his language “‘cause you know damn well I’m the one who’ll heal you when you need to get healed” (Q966). Refusing to spare those who endured – rather than internalized – his views, Jones continued to cuss until they left. Injecting a separating motif into his profanity, he complained that “I don’t want to [cuss profusely], but goddamn it to hell I’m

gonna get it out ‘til I get rid of everybody I was supposed to” (Q966). Clarifying who he was supposed to get rid of, Jones singled out “people [who’ve] got that Christian religion that’s sold us out, [and] took us over here [as] slaves” (Q966). In this instance, Jones used cussing to separate – rather than save – Christians who attended Temple services.

Jones re-conceived cussing as a multi-faceted tool in Peoples Temple, signalling his role in the vanguard of liberation through his rejection of American cultural stereotypes. Just as he brought submerged processes of racial, religious, and economic oppression to light in his sermons, he deployed coarse language in Temple discourse as an exemplar of veracity. By characterizing cussing as frank and honest, Jones could underscore core doctrinal ideas using a linguistic framework of honesty. Like the Temple itself, cussing served as a mechanism of both liberation and separation, sifting people into groups based on speech patterns. While everybody cussed, not everybody cussed purposefully.

Jones’s conception of cussing both supported and subverted cussing’s role in 1960s and 1970s American speech. On one hand, he retained coarse language’s stigma to shock listeners and drive away hypocrites. On the other hand, he inverted cussing’s status as profane by connecting it to miraculous events and biblical figures. Mirroring his other interactions with the Bible, however, Jones used biblical texts to justify behavior that delegitimized the Bible’s authority. By appealing to Jesus, Paul, and Solomon, Jones likened himself to heroes of faith. By revealing Jesus, Paul, and Solomon’s habits of cussing, however, Jones rendered these figures as prone to the same speech patterns as any members.

“Nigger Means ‘Cheated’”

Cussing played several calculated roles in Peoples Temple discourse to destabilize popular notions of propriety and profanity, overlay identities of liberation and hypocrisy onto language-users, and develop complex links between traditional religious authority and emergent adaptations. Jones’s cussing also demonstrated his willingness to create paradox and contradiction. As a cussing healer Jones simultaneously embodied sacred and profane identities, performing miraculous tasks associated with holy figures using power derived from condemning those holy figures. In an evocative recollection of an early 1970s service, Jones added a racial contradiction to his status as a cussing healer, identifying himself as a (white) “nigger”:

This is the same creature that raised that woman up on Sunday. . . . It’s the same one that told the woman to leave the wheelchair, same one that came up to that stiff-legged Church of God preacher and said ‘straighten your leg and walk away from your crutches’ and they were walkin’ Sunday with crutches in their hand. . . . It looked like we were in a parade with crutches and canes! And it’s the same old cussin’ nigger that was doing it (Q1059-3).

At his most insistent or incensed, Jones used *nigger* in his preaching. Sometimes he moderated his language, but this moderation constituted a concession made for ignorant outsiders – “I woulda said ‘a nigger,’ but [some audience members] . . . wouldn’t have understood it. That’s a problem” (Q1059-3). In Jones’s preaching, *nigger* referred to a worldview characterized by unfair oppression and disadvantage in Peoples Temple doctrine. While the color of one’s skin could contribute to this oppression, it was not necessary to be black to be a “nigger.” Jones went to great pains to explain that being a “nigger” in mid-twentieth century America had more to do with economic and social subjugation than being an African American.

Even though Jones appropriated and re-coded *nigger* in his preaching, he retained its negative connotations to portray Temple members as a persecuted minority who lacked power. In Murphy’s terms, the asymmetrical relations Jones set up between the Temple and the rest of

America took the form of a lack of social opportunity as well as economic exploitation. Because they were “niggers,” Peoples Temple members never would partake equally in the United States’ Christian capitalist systems. The classes in question – Christians, business owners, politicians, and “niggers” – are, in this worldview, both real and imagined. Access to wealth and political power in America created imagined hierarchies that generated real differences in lifestyle and opportunities. Jones, in turn, extrapolated these real differences into an imagined existence in which increasing deprivation – and finally violent death – awaited the world’s “niggers.”³¹ Peoples Temple provided salvation from such a fate, according to Jones: “I came to save you from jails, torture, concentration camps, [and nuclear war]” (Q637). This doctrine of salvation depended on upholding asymmetrical relations between the real-and-imagined classes of “niggers” and other Americans.

Using a homonymous – and erroneous – sleight-of-hand, Jones argued that being a “nigger” meant being treated niggardly. This expansion of *nigger*’s meaning allowed the term to serve as a catch-all, covering a wide range of both disenfranchised individuals and social activists. In Jones’s redefinition, then, “nigger means to be treated niggardly, to be low-rated” (Q1059-2; also Q1019 and Q612).³² In most instances, Jones’s use of *nigger* carried connotations of being cheated or treated badly (Q987; Q1028A; Q1057-5; Q1059-1; Q1059-6), lacking the means or opportunity to retaliate against oppression (Q932; Q987; Q1032), or suffering undeserved abuse at the hands of American social systems (Q612A; Q960; Q1019; Q1027; Q1028A; Q1053-3; Q1057-2; Q1059-2).

³¹ Jones foresaw violent forms of segregation for minority groups, including ghettoization and concentration camps (see, for example, Q255; Q637; Q962; and Q987).

³² By the same token, a particular skin color did not absolve anyone from being racist. Speaking about the Ryan delegation’s visit to Jonestown, Jones said that “they are a . . . racist element through and through, though mixed with black and white” (Q323).

As a result, *nigger* no longer designated a specific racial group. Responding to a Jonestown resident whose son had been fired due to epilepsy, for instance, Jones affirmed that “everybody[’s] treated like a nigger that’s got handicaps” (Q781). Addressing *nigger*’s usual racial connotations, Jones warned that “anyone in America who’s poor – white, brown, yellow, or black – and does not admit that he’s a nigger is a damn fool” (Q612). Even in the Temple’s final year of existence, Jones differentiated capitalism’s wealthy promoters from their employees, explaining that “we’re not against the American people – they’re working class. . . . [They’re] niggers just like us” (Q259). Summarily, Jones quipped that “everybody [who’s] not Rockefeller is a nigger” (Q987).

Nigger thus ignored national, religious, or ethnic boundaries. Jones explained that “niggers” could be Italians, Jews, or indigenous Americans as well as African Americans (Q162).³³ Addressing one reluctant listener, Jones asked “are you low-rated? Can you get in the best hospital? Can you get in the best home? Can you get in the nicest neighborhood? Can you get the best job? Haven’t you worked your knees to the bone? Then, my honey, you’re a nigger just like me” (Q 1059-2). Although Jones addressed this string of questions to an African American woman, white audience members could respond in the negative – affirming their “nigger” status – as easily as blacks (Q1059-2).

Some black Peoples Temple members balked at Jones’s use of *nigger*. He, however, insisted that blacks in his audience needed to accept the label to understand apostolic socialism: “as long as some of these Aunt Janes and Uncle Toms sitting in here don’t know they’re niggers, I’m going to have to keep on preaching” (Q1059-3). Specifically, Jones chastised blacks who believed that they have circumvented oppression by ingratiating themselves to whites or

³³ In another sermon, Jones hoped that “the Mexicans’ll wake up, [and] they’ll find out that they’re dirty black niggers just like us too” (Q1057-4).

achieving apparent social parity with other Americans. Adopting a plantation bifurcation, he called black Temple members who resisted *nigger*'s designation "house niggers" or "establishment niggers," differentiating them from the "field niggers" who refused to commiserate with racist, capitalist America (see Q960; Q968; Q1032). As a parting criticism of blacks who left one 1973 service, Jones called out "you don't like to come over here because I'm a field nigger. You want to get around one of th[o]se house niggers. . . . You've been hanging on to some of those house nigger churches" (Q968).

Attending a "house nigger church" that parroted, rather than resisted, capitalist Christian culture had no real effect on one's social status, since "whether we've got on fine clothes or old robe[s], they don't think any more of us" (Q932). In fact, the seemingly ostentatious wealth displayed in church paraphernalia harmed black Christians, since it exacerbated suffering:

We got no food. We got no medicines. But we got gold [religious ornaments and vestments], honey! We got crosses. We got Cherubims and Seraphims. . . . All us niggers, we're trying to act like we are free, [but] we're not gonna get free with choir robes (Q1032).

Blacks who left Peoples Temple because of Jones's plain-speaking, unadorned gatherings – "I'm not good-looking. I'm not bright. I'm just an ordinary field nigger" – in favor resplendent churches "don't have enough good sense to know you're a nigger" (Q945; Q932). In addition to pointing out racial disparity and its effects in the United States, Jones employed shame and division to convince African Americans to accept his modified embrace of racial slurs.

While Jones struggled to convince African Americans to accept the label *nigger*, his task of convincing whites was both more difficult and more necessary. Jones insisted that "a lot of whites don't know who they are. We're all niggers. 'Nigger' means 'cheated'" (Q987). While acknowledging that "it's harder for some of you white people to identify with this [being targeted by racial slurs] than it is for black people," Jones nonetheless warned that "they're

giving you the same road” (Q1032). Again swapping economic exploitation for skin color as *nigger*’s defining feature, he insisted that “the people of this country – white, black, brown – that have been dispossessed, that are losing their properties; the poor have got to realize that they are the niggers” (Q987). In another sermon, Jones reminded his audience that since “we know Indians and blacks and poor whites have been cheated,” whites – no less than blacks – were “niggers” (Q612). Taking aim at Christianity as a source of oppression, Jones warned that “black people are gonna have to get rid of the white man’s religion, then they’ll get freedom,” but added “the white man’s gonna have to get rid of it too, because he’s a nigger also” (Q953).

Indeed, Jones found biblical evidence of niggardly treatment stretching back to the creation of the world. Commenting on Adam and Eve’s expulsion from the paradisaal Garden of Eden in Genesis 3, Jones re-cast Adam as the first “nigger”: “because Adam ate the apple that his good wife brought him, he must work from that day forward and earn his bread by the toil and sweat of his brow. He had to be a nigger from that day forward” (Q1059-6). If the mythical first human fit the criteria to be a “nigger,” then all of Adam’s descendants – black or white – possessed the potential to be “niggers” are well.

Finally, Jones hinted at his subversion of *nigger*’s negative connotations, telling white Temple members that even famous white Americans like Mark Twain could possess “a wonderful field nigger heart” (Q932). Since being a “nigger” was a matter of social status as well as internal disposition, Jones declared that “I believe you can be a nigger and be as white as milk” (Q1057-5). In a less poetic affirmation, Jones praised movement members who “look more nigger than me and you’re as light as . . . this light” (Q638).

Since *nigger* meant cheated, people who were as white as milk could still experience the harmful effects of niggardly treatment. Skin color offered little protection against economic

woes: “We’re all niggers. . . . And a lot of white folk that think they’re Rockefeller . . . don’t know where next week’s food’s gonna come from” (Q987). Moving beyond poverty, Jones ultimately pointed to the workplace as the site where whites could recognize their niggardly treatment. Referencing a deadly 1972 fire at the Sunshine Mine in Idaho, Jones explained that the mine’s owners ignored safety protocols in the interest of maximizing profit (Q162). This prioritizing of income over human safety showed niggardly treatment and allowed Jones to conclude that “they were all white in the Sunshine Mines, but they were niggers” (Q162).³⁴ In another reference to an early 1970s mining disaster, Jones again referred to the victims as “white niggers [who] were blown to hell and gassed” (Q1059-1). The disaster’s working-class white victims were “niggers” because they were exploitable and ultimately expendable. Prophesying a time when “[the president] will put serial numbers and a mark of the beast right on you. . . . And every black and brown and poor white will be done away with,” Jones equated the mark of the beast with greedy capitalists: “the slave system, the monetary system, the love of money” (Q962). More explicitly, Jones explained that “the love of money – that is, the root of all evil – is called capitalism” (Q987). By 1978 Jones opined,

in the wake of automation, and rising unemployment, new and frightening economic theories are being prepared. . . . If implemented, [they] would return blacks and even poor whites – up to 40% of the population, according to the *Newsweek* article – to a state of servitude. . . . And if it’s 40%, that means that a whole lot of white folk better wake up and realize that they’re niggers (Q1028A).³⁵

³⁴ In Q1028a Jones likewise referred to white workers as “niggers.”

³⁵ Jones identified these theories as “cliometrics,” and was likely referring to concerns that some new economic history theories – like Alfred Conrad and John Meyer’s 1958 *The Economics of Slavery in the Antebellum South* – appeared to offer positive evaluations of slavery.

When disenfranchised white adherents finally acknowledged their precarious role as “niggers” in capitalist society Jones praised them, saying “you’re the bravest of all. . . . You’ve become a part of us, and you’re more a part of us than some of these Uncle Toms and Aunt Janes” (Q1019).

Another rhetorical tactic for convincing non-blacks that they were “niggers” invoked the logic of the Temple’s racist opponents. In multiple recordings, Jones taught that people who used *nigger* derisively also used it – ironically – indiscriminately. During a 1972 discussion of the Ku Klux Klan, Jones explained that the group’s hatred surpassed skin color: “their hate is against Catholics, Jews, blacks, Indians, Mexicans, anybody from lower Europe, Greek, Latin, Spanish. So honey, you didn’t know it, but the Ku Klux Klan calls you a nigger” (Q1057-5). Less organized racists cast a similarly wide net. According to Jones, “in the average redneck’s mind, any Chicano, a[ny] black or Indian” could be described using *nigger* (Q242).

Jones’s argument that being a “nigger” had less to do with race and more to do with being exploited by Christians or capitalists became most tenuous when he identified himself as both black and a “nigger.” Appealing to white Temple members, Jones claimed that “some of you whites are just as much of a nigger as I am” (Q1032). This logic could easily have backfired by virtue of its ironic accuracy – white audience members were as unlikely a target for the slur *nigger* as Jones himself. Yet Jones continuously referred to himself as a “nigger,” “nigger Jim,” or “nigger Jones.”³⁶ This self-identification was an act of solidarity or familiarity (see Culpepper 2011, 117), but also set Jones – a person exploited by capitalists and Christians – up as a model for *nigger*’s new meaning.

³⁶ See, for example, Q953; Q1019; Q1032; Q1053-4; Q1057-5; Q1058-3; and Q1059-1. See also Chidester (2003, 71).

In several sermons, Jones used his own family tree to suggest that he had black ancestors (Q612; Q1019).³⁷ On one occasion Jones explained that his mother, desiring a “black child” who would bring “freedom” and “liberation,” gave birth to him after contacting another planet (Q1022). Elsewhere, Jones hinted that his ancestors included both African Americans and Native Americans (see Q612; Q1025). In another sermon, Jones licensed his “nigger” status by placing the designation in the mouth of an African American “Baptist deacon” from Watts (Q162). Expressing his gratitude for hearing about apostolic socialism, the Baptist deacon regretted that Jones had not come earlier: “he said, ‘I wish you’d have come along a long time ago, you black-haired nigger’” (Q162).

Jones employed mystification, genealogy, and/or recognition to legitimate his status as a “nigger.” Interplanetary communication in search of a savior child introduced the potential for other anomalies in Jones’s birth and identity, relativizing the oddity of a white-skinned “nigger.” A genealogical account provided a more realistic legitimization of Jones’s identity as a “nigger” and epitomized the classificatory challenge of America’s multi-racial reality, creatively invoking the “one-drop rule” – a principle in the antebellum American south whereby “anyone with any known trace of black blood was considered black” (Khanna 2010, 98). Although designed to exclude, Jones implicitly inverted the one-drop rule for inclusive purposes.³⁸ Jones’s story about the black deacon from Watts depended, in turn, on a similar principle of inclusivity stemming from social – rather than physical – similarities. With neither family tree nor blood sample in hand, the deacon nevertheless recognized Jones as a “nigger.” This technique of recognition –

³⁷ In Q1019 and Q1057-5 Jones claimed Native American ancestry as well.

³⁸ Jones discussed the demise of the one-drop rule in Q1053-3, explaining that blood donations during World War II resulted in all Americans having at least one drop of black blood. As such, the concept lost its utility as a racist segregation tool. Jones’s implicit inversion of the one-drop rule for inclusive classificatory purposes mirrored wider civil rights movement deployments of the rule (see Khanna 2010, 99).

like the one-drop rule – looked beyond surface-level characteristics and operated within Jones’s larger program of redefinition.

To further bolster his claim, Jones moved the term’s meaning beyond skin color and even niggardly treatment to action, saying “I’m not going to stand and . . . look at somebody’s color, I’m going to look at their actions. Man looks on the outward appearance, [but] God looks on the heart” (Q1057-5). Jones contrasted his white appearance with his actions, describing his attempts to combat racism as “black magic”: “ain’t no white magic goin’ on in here, but there’s black magic goin’ on in here” (Q1053-4). By acting on behalf of “niggers,” Jones himself became a “nigger.” By the same token, Jones accused black Temple members of “acting white” if they showed insufficient enthusiasm for his message of liberation (Q1058-3). By insisting that identity could be based on behavior and association rather than looks, Jones created rhetorical space in which he could identify as both black and as a “nigger.”

Jones appropriated *nigger* for Temple usage and revised its meaning to delineate Temple members as a persecuted minority in American society. His re-coding, however, of *nigger* – to designate economic or social oppression rather than racial affiliation – depended on retaining the negative connotations of *nigger* found in its common form as a racial slur. In other words, Jones’s new definition of *nigger* retained the dominant connotations of the term while revising its denotations. In this way Jones upheld *nigger*’s ability to signal weakness or minority status – that is, asymmetry – while changing its referents.

“The Most Beautiful People on the Earth” and King James

At the same time, Jones subverted *nigger*’s negative connotations. In his preaching, *nigger* indicated a legacy of strength and nobility, and created a sense of purpose or rectification.

Once again, asymmetrical relations between real or imagined groups or classes characterized Jones's rhetoric. Those who Jones identified as "niggers" could lay claim to an ancestry of freedom and look forward to a similar freedom – accessed through socialism – in the expected realities of Peoples Temple and Jonestown. The prestige Jones found in African American history, however, was romanticized and imagined. The ancestors of present-day *niggers* took on the qualities of ideal heroes in Temple rhetoric, just as American capitalists and Christians became ideal villains.

Jones's subversion of *nigger* separated people into asymmetrical categories not based on who used the word, but rather on how people used the word. Consequently, Jones elaborated on his instructions to cuss with a purpose, explaining how *nigger* should be used. Redefinition took the form of inoculation, with Jones changing *nigger*'s associations to avoid pain. On two occasions, Jones referred to his African American adopted son's sadness at being bullied and called *nigger* as the impetus for change. In Redwood Valley in 1974, Jones confided that "he said that word hurt, so I turned that word around in my home.... I said 'yes, we're niggers and we're proud.' And now we say that word and our children don't get worried" (Q612). During a 1977 visit to Philadelphia, Jones reprised the story: "[my son] used to cry so when they'd call him a nigger. I said, 'son, that is a good word. Nigger means cheated'" (Q987). In these inversions, Jones combined education with pacification, severing *nigger* from the negative connotations presumed by his son's bullies.

Jones performed a similar severance in Peoples Temple. On one occasion Jones said "you say, you don't like that word 'nigger' outside. No. Inside, though, our children have been hurt with it so much, we kinda joke about it – that takes some of the sting out of it, and we're glad to

be niggers” (Q1057-5; see also Q1057-4). In a similar gesture, Jones reversed the direction of the pain that resulted from using the word *nigger*:

I don’t use that word outside. We’ll talk about being ‘us niggers’ inside but you call [us] niggers outside and we’ll run over you. We’ll take it from one another – [because] we know where it’s at – but we don’t want none of them folk that’ve been runnin’ over us and stomping us down calling us that. (Q1059-3)

Elsewhere, Jones forbade derogatory labelling of any kind, confiding that “I don’t believe in labeling anybody. . . . We don’t like to be called niggers, except when we do it to each other friendly. So we should not call anybody [a] name” (Q1058-3). While remonstrating a Jonestown resident who had spoken derisively to a fellow Temple member, Jones asked “do you realize the wrongness of calling [the Temple member] a pussy? That’s like calling somebody a nigger – that’s a degrading word . . . It’s derogatory. . . . It’s a put-down” (Q807). When “outside” non-members designated Temple members as “niggers” the word took on an offensive tone, but when “inside” group members used the term – either as a “joke” or in a “friendly” manner – it made Temple members “glad” or bolstered their pride. By appropriating *nigger* Jones and the Temple effectively neutralized the slur’s power to harm its intended target while simultaneously demarcating social boundaries.

Jones’s subversion of *nigger* counter-balanced his insistent emphasis on suffering. As an all-encompassing shorthand for being cheated, *nigger* highlighted oppression but provided no real solution to suffering. Since much of Jones’s preaching centered on injustice and unfairness, his message needed a hopeful counterbalance. In his subversive rhetorical redefinitions, Jones turned *nigger* into a designation of hope and progress leading to a reversal of fortune. Having related *nigger* to exploitation and denial, Jones told his son to “go right back there and you tell ’em: ‘yes, I know what has happened to me. I know that I’ve been cheated and I’m gonna get back what’s coming to me’” (Q987). This rejoinder insinuated forthcoming restitution.

The mechanism for this restitution – embracing a new definition of *nigger* after identifying a legacy of oppression – mirrored Jones’s adaptation of Christianity. In a 1973 Redwood Valley sermon, Jones rallied Temple members to reject the Christian beliefs and terms that had been used to justify slavery, saying “We’ve got to get rid of all the remnants of the old stuff. . . . Let’s not use any of those old words. Let’s not talk about those old concepts. Let’s let those things be behind us” (Q1019). In the sermon, the remnants of the old stuff included words like “lord – lord means owner of slaves,” but *nigger* received similar treatment (Q1019). By moving beyond the vestiges of slavery and wresting *nigger*’s denotative power away from racists, Jones offered a subversive and hopeful path forward.

This hope came in the form of preservation from three types of destruction. First, Jones promised to preserve Temple members from nuclear war or cataclysmic societal failure. This promise materialized in Jones’s physical movement of the group to California and to South America – both locations he apparently believed would be sheltered from nuclear bombs and fallout (Maaga 1998, 2).³⁹ Second, Jones promised to preserve Temple members from American capitalism and exploitation by offering a new economic and political reality. This promise materialized in the Temple’s various social services, culminating in constructing and developing Jonestown. Third, Jones promised to preserve adherents from perceived persecution. This promise materialized in Jones’s attempts to keep critical outsiders from entering Jonestown, as well as the Temple’s secrecy.⁴⁰ In each case, Jones claimed to protect Temple members from forces that would degrade or destroy their quality of life while giving members the opportunity

³⁹ Jones further claimed to be stockpiling supplies and medicine so that Temple members would be able to survive a nuclear catastrophe (see Q1059-3 or Q1059-4).

⁴⁰ References to the community’s ability to stave off attacks by enemies or visits by unwelcome parties appear in Q051. As time went on, however, Jones became increasingly convinced that he was unable to preserve Jonestown residents from unwanted scrutiny and visits.

to actively take part in changing the economic, political, racial, and religious systems that perpetuated oppression.

These forms of preservation, however, did not explain why Peoples Temple members should accept their designation as “niggers” in any positive way. To explain the power of being a “nigger,” Jones looked into the past to create an idealized ancestral heritage in which the slur’s targets could find strength. Literally, if not figuratively, Jones argued that “niggers” were a chosen people with a unique heritage (compare with Levine [1977] 2007, 33).⁴¹ Partaking in this noble ancestry served to strengthen group identity while denigrating rivals and critics.

Jones developed this noble ancestry by re-telling the story of slavery. His re-telling focused on – and inverted – four intertwined elements: Africans as slaves (with present-day “niggers” as their descendants), Europeans as slave-catchers (with present-day wealthy Americans as their heirs), Africa as the initial site of encounter between these parties, and Christianity (here a shorthand for white/European civilization) as a cultural transference emerging from this encounter. In Jones’s re-casting of slavery’s history, Africa supplanted Europe/America as the site of great civilization, and Africans supplanted Europeans as upstanding nobility.

Jones began by discussing Africa, characterizing the continent as the Temple’s homeland: “black people’s homeland – our homeland – was Africa” (Q302). He encouraged audience members to personally associate with this African heritage, referring to “our roots in Africa” and reminding listeners that slavers “brought you here from Africa” (Q987, Q1057-5). Jones described the African kingdoms that Europeans invaded in glowing terms. He characterized Africa as a center of culture that thrived while other civilizations lay dormant, calling it “a

⁴¹ In Jones’s worldview, the ancestors of “niggers” were literally chosen by slavers for their desirability. In Q958 and elsewhere, Jones distanced the idea of being God’s chosen people from being a “nigger.”

continent . . . with a great history of peace, that had a great civilization in Timbuktu and other places. . . . Everybody else was living under glaciers [during] the ice age” (Q259). On another occasion, Jones underscored the ancient origins of African civilization’s appreciation for art, asserting that “no people on earth has the beauty of drums and rhythm and dance like the Africans. [This beauty emerged] long before this so-called Christian civilization” (Q612). Both depictions of African civilization relied on contrast and age to produce a paradisaal memory. Jones’s ancient Africans mastered art and beauty long before Christians began injecting religious aesthetics into civilization, and the continent as a whole cultivated civilized peace as other locales lay frozen and inactive.

In Q259 and Q612, Jones went further, describing Africa as a land that resisted oppression in favor of freedom while inscribing an appreciation for beauty and peace into its people. Listing poisonous animals and diseases one could encounter in Africa, Jones re-purposed these threats as defense mechanisms against European incursion: “[there’s] monkey fever that wipes out white man. . . . The tsetse fly. A snake that can go . . . the speed of a fast automobile: one bite and your ass is dead. White man don’t like that shit” (Q259). Alongside myths about cannibals, Jones used diseases, flies, and snakes to explain why European slavers operated mostly on the coast, avoiding the continent’s interior (Q259). Further exposing the white fear of Africa, Jones noted that “the United States’s only gonna fit in . . . one part of the Sahara Desert. That’s how big that great continent is. It’s so big that they won’t even show it at its full size on the world maps, because it threatens the hell out of them” (Q259). Even cartographic depictions of Africa rendered non-Africans vulnerable to its prowess.

Adopting a genealogical stance, Jones suggested that “niggers” could locate this submerged history of Africa’s prestige and power by examining their own qualities. He

admonished white Temple members who doubted their “nigger” status to consider their deep-rooted African identity:

You’ve got that . . . in-soul spirit, you feel that vibration for freedom and you’ve got that love for, oh, justice, and . . . there’s an intrinsic appreciation for art and aesthetics and rhythm. And you feel it in you. . . . Every step, every move, the harmony and the great worship that is expressed in African dance and African song. And some of you white, you danced. You look white, but honey, you a nigger like Father Jim (Q612).

These proclivities for freedom and justice bolstered an earlier list of characteristics that Jones associated with blacks. In a 1974 San Francisco sermon, he explained to listeners that “black is a consciousness. Black is a disposition: to act against evil, to do good” (Q974). In these excerpts, Jones mythically crafted an ancient civilization that thrived where whites suffered and persisted in the hearts and aptitudes of those who loved beauty and fought for justice.

These depictions inverted racist perceptions of Africa as a savage or uncivilized land, recasting the continent as a space of heritage and power. Such inversions, however, only implicitly subverted *nigger*’s association with subservience. Jones turned this association on its head by explaining that the first people taken from Africa were the nobility. In one conflation of these descriptions, Jones noted that “we [Africans] were the proudest and the freest. We had a great culture. We had a great civilization. They brought our princes and our kings here [to America]” (Q974).⁴² Elsewhere Jones described the first slaves as “the pride of Africa – princes, kings. They took the best of our people” (Q1057-5). In one recording, Jones contrasted the claim that Africa was a land of “pagan darkness or savagery” with “our [niggers’] heritage of democracy, freedom, justice and equality” (Q1028a). Or, most tellingly:

All of our ancestors were from the best of the tribes. Royalty! They picked only the best. You’ve got the best ancestry in the world. . . . You’re not niggardly! You’re not low! . . . You are the special people. You came from people of the greatest background in Africa. They didn’t take any little old pipsqueaks – they picked the kings and the queens and the

⁴² In Q1019 and Q1057-5 Jones overlaid a similar narrative of Christian destruction of an originally great civilization onto indigenous American history.

princes and princesses. That's who they wanted for their slaves. They wanted the smartest and the strongest and the most beautiful! So your ancestors are the most beautiful people on the earth (Q1019).

Jones thus linked “niggers” with a noble ancestry. American whites subdued blacks by emphasizing their history of enslavement and then capitalizing on this asymmetrical free/enslaved relation, submerging the first slaves’ nobility. Jones’s inclusive understanding of *nigger* allowed all Temple members to graft themselves into this idealized family tree.

Jones used a heroic or romantic depiction of pre-enslavement African life to re-code *nigger* from a designation of subservience to one of royal lineage. In the same way, Jones re-coded American – and particularly Christian – identity using early European slaving practices. In a protracted deluge of disgust, Jones identified King James I of England and the Good Ship Jesus as the ancestral lineage of American Christians. Just as Peoples Temple members understood *nigger* to convey a certain group of meanings, so too did Temple members understand references to *King James* and the *Good Ship Jesus* in a particular, negative light.⁴³

Jones identified King James with textual incongruities in – and cultural misuses of – the King James Bible. Citations of contradictory biblical passages or fanciful biblical stories frequently preceded references to King James in Jones’s preaching.⁴⁴ Jones took these textual elements as evidence of the Bible’s fallibility or falseness; rather than the inspired word of God, the Bible was a political construction designed to consolidate its authors’ power and mislead readers. Worse, King James “was an alcoholic. He was a sexual pervert. He molested children and men in his court. He was an evil man. . . . Everything, all of our trouble comes out of [King

⁴³ See Sugirtharajah (2013) for a discussion of the link between global exploration, colonialism, and the King James Bible. The *Good Ship Jesus* is a play on the *Jesus of Lübeck*, a ship sailed by Captain John Hawkins and a figurehead for the early English slave trade (H. Thomas 1997: 155-156).

⁴⁴ See, for example, Q956; Q1019; Q1035; Q1057-5; Q1059-4; and Q1059-6.

James's character flaws]" (Q1019). In less severe instances, Jones admitted that the Bible originally contained good advice, which King James occluded or effaced during translation.⁴⁵ Speaking frankly, Jones concluded that the "Bible['s] just written by a whole lot of liars. [They] wanted to make a little bit of money and keep the people slaves" (Q1059-6).

In Jones's retelling of the story of slavery, religion played a pacifying role. Masquerading as salvation, Christianity served as a tool of misdirection used by slaveholders to control blacks. Since European slavers initially took "princes and our kings," they kidnapped a strong-willed labor force that refused to obey orders; thus "they couldn't do anything with the first lot. . . . But the next lot – they set 'em down and gave 'em a dose of white man's religion" (Q974). In another version of the story, Jones added intelligence to nobility:

They got . . . the pride of Africa, princes, kings. They took the best of our people. . . . They got 'em off the boat, and they were fightin'. They said, 'we're not gonna pick your cotton.' . . . So they killed off the smart ones. Then they got the dummies (Q1057-5).

Jones then elaborated on religion's pacifying function: "how did they get them quiet? They put them in church. . . . How did they get our proud field niggers to listen and to quit fightin' them? [They] set them down with the Bible" (Q612). This technique constituted the origin of black Christianity. In Q1032, Jones told his audience that "that's why they made you a good Baptist . . . so that you'd be good. . . . They wanted you to be a good house nigger" (Q1032).

Although these stories were set in the past, Jones found examples of wealthy capitalists using religion to pacify "niggers" in the present. In the summer of 1976, Jones warned listeners that "we have been given religion to blind us so that [the] rich can make money – the rich can get richer and the poor can get poorer" (Q162). In Jones's sermons, figures such as John Rockefeller

⁴⁵ See, for example, Q162; Q1021; Q1032; Q1035; Q1053-6; Q1059-2; and Q1059-3. It is doubtful that James I himself played a major active role in the translation project that he authorized, although evidence of his translation abilities exists (Nicolson 2003: 150; Norton 2011: 83).

and Henry Ford – although themselves irreligious – promoted Christianity to control the population. In late 1977, Jones unmasked Ford’s altruism to his audience:

Ford didn’t believe in no . . . afterlife. He didn’t believe in no heaven. He circulated Bibles to get people to believe in it. . . . They said, ‘why do you do that, Ford?’ You don’t ever do anything for anybody.’ He said, ‘it’s nigger control’ (Q998).

As Ford paid out “a million dollars . . . [for] Bibles. . . . Rockefeller stood back there and just laughed . . . ‘look at them fool niggers’” (Q998). This story mirrored an earlier lesson Jones taught in 1974: “the first major Bible publication was done by the Rockefellers and DuPonts in a foundation together. Now I wonder why they would print a Bible – to keep poor white and black niggers slaves” (Q953). Even a close analysis of Billy Graham’s evangelism revealed wealthy American business owners’ support for Christianity’s spread. Jones observed that Graham received “contribution from Ford, contribution from DuPont, contribution from Mellons, contribution from Rockefeller. The rich man knows the way to keep us asleep” (Q953). Like European slavers from centuries past, American business magnates deployed Christianity not to promote a religion whose tenets they personally followed, but rather to promote a religion whose tenets allowed them to control and exploit others.

Jones used a second phrase to construct white Christian ancestry: *the Good Ship Jesus*. In Peoples Temple recordings, *the Good Ship Jesus* connoted deception, relating institutional Christianity to racism and murder through the slave trade.⁴⁶ In Q1057-5, Jones combined Christianity, education, and deception in his commentary on slavery: “that’s how they got us to come over here – just wanted to give us an education. And our folks came over here, thinking they were gonna get an education, and they brought us over here in the Good Ship Jesus”

⁴⁶ See, for example, Q356; Q162; Q974; and Q1055-1.

(Q1057-5). Beneath its guise of education and religion, *the Good Ship Jesus* carried duplicitous and repressive ideologies.

Jones's explanation that "King James is the one that brought you here. He's the one that started it. He sent the first Good Ship Jesus under his orders to bring blacks here in chains. . . . That's why we're in such a mess" typifies the link between Christianity and slavery in Temple recordings (Q1059-4). Strikingly, Jones even appealed to American patriotism to condemn King James. In addition to being the person who "sent the Good Ship Jesus to Africa to bring back the blacks in chains," King James likewise "persecuted the American colonists, [and] persecuted the Indians" and "murdered people all over the world" (Q1055-1; Q1035; see also Q974).

King James and *the Good Ship Jesus* provide additional examples of Peoples Temple adding new or specialized meanings to phrases borrowed from wider American society. More importantly for this thesis, however, these phrases demonstrate the way Jones subverted *nigger's* diminutive connotations. By looking back into ancestral origins, Jones reversed the power balance between "niggers" and those who called people *niggers*. The "niggers" – broadly, anyone harmed by European expansionism – could lay claim to blameless civilizational roots while *nigger*-callers – broadly, wealthy whites who benefited from Christianity – found only deception and debasement in their King James ancestral roots. In this model of history descendants of European Christians, rather than "niggers," should feel ashamed of their ancestry.

Jones both supported and subverted *nigger's* traditional connotations/denotations in his preaching. He preserved its sense of persecution and minority status but used a particular rendering of history to wrest power and moral superiority from racist outsiders. Understanding *nigger's* nuances in Temple doctrine, as well as employing the worldview encapsulated in these nuances, constituted an important mark of group identity and boundary construction for the

Temple community. The practical outcomes of this re-coding extended beyond the California Temple into Jonestown. Audiotapes recorded in Jonestown, however, highlight uses of *nigger* that link the slur to pragmatic action.

Crazy Nigger Tactics

In Jonestown, Jones discussed revolutionary activity around the world, as well as the commune's own behavior, through the lens of acting like a *crazy nigger* or using *crazy nigger tactics*. In these instances, *nigger* became associated with sacrificial or confrontational Cold War acts of solidarity against America. By examining recordings that discuss proper Jonestown conduct and revolutionary behavior in light of *crazy nigger tactics*, I show how Jones's construction of group identity through language appropriation affected group solidarity in the Temple's final years. Specifically, I suggest that *nigger*'s precarious power required group cohesion to be effective. This emphasis on cohesion culminated in a focus on collective guilt. Jones promoted an understanding of *nigger* that balanced the reality of deprivation and racism against a claim to noble lineage. By supporting *nigger*'s negative connotations Jones associated it with weakness, and by subverting those connotations Jones associated it with strength.

Standing united as an apostolic socialist community, Jones maintained, would tip the balance from weakness to strength. He noted that "it takes a lot of niggers to make one man to be heard. We who are poor have to get together because they don't listen to us unless we get together – but if we get together they'll listen to us because there's more niggers than there are them" (Q1059-3). To recall an earlier citation, Jones remarked that capital by itself was insufficient to sway the attitudes of Americans: "to the white man we're the same nigger, whether we've got on fine clothes or old robe[s]" (Q932). Instead of accumulating wealth, Jones

encouraged Temple attendees to find strength in unity, saying “we’ve got to get together and unify, or we’re gonna be overwhelmed by a common enemy” (Q974). Apart from amplifying the voice of the disenfranchised, group unity also served a safety function: “If we weren’t a big strong organization, this town [would] get up and act and tar and feather us” (Q1059-3).

For Jones, solidarity was paramount to effectiveness. He asserted that “a group must stand together. . . . Unless people get together in a group and stand up for each other, they’ll be rolled over by the oppressive forces that are taking away liberty” (Q1053-1). He used disunity’s danger to curtail potential criticism: “if you let one word of criticism come in, if you let one little thought get in – if you let anything divide you, you’ve been finished” (Q 1053-4). Chastising anarchists, Jones suggested that “if we’re gonna stop poverty, war, and mass genocide we’ve got no room for people to do their own thing any time they please! We need some organization, and we need some discipline. . . . [errant, individualistic Temple members] are just as much of a problem as [those who attack minorities]” (Q1059-2; see also Q396). Individualism in Peoples Temple did not just undermine apostolic socialism, it threatened the group’s very survival.

When Jones took up permanent residence in Jonestown, Temple doctrine changed in three significant ways. First, Jones trimmed the last vestiges of Protestant Christianity from his teachings; in Jonestown, Peoples Temple completed its excision of the crosses, robes, Cherubim, and Seraphim that Jones condemned as misused resources in favor of a predominantly socialist community. Some authors suggest that this loss of Christian terminology and ritual indicated Jones’s charlatanry – with no proximate outsiders left to hoodwink through a Christian masquerade, Jones dropped his act (see Morris 2019, 343). From a processual perspective, however, Jones’s transition from relying primarily on “religious” terminology to primarily “political” terminology highlights the Temple’s doctrinal adaptations in light of new contexts,

challenges, and goals.⁴⁷ Rather than negating Peoples Temple's status as a religion, Jones's Jonestown preference for politics over Protestantism demonstrates the group's processual nature.

Second, this increasing politicization affected the terms used to describe Temple members. In particular, *comrade* replaced *nigger* as the primary lens through which Jones encouraged Jonestown residents to construct their identity (Q 396; Q596; Q814a; see California usage in Q1059-2). Although *comrade* allowed for the same flattening of hierarchy and emphasis on solidarity that *nigger* affected, this new designation moved the locus of identity squarely into the realm of political affiliation.⁴⁸ Jones's etymology of *comrade* mimicked his homonymous relation of "nigger"/niggardly – he linked "comrade" to "community" (Q396). Being comrades brought Jonestown's residents into a larger socialist family, assuring safety in the process. In Q401, for instance, Jones confided that Soviet Consular Feodor Timofeyev – a 1978 visitor to Jonestown – "calls me 'comrade Jim Jones'" (Q401). Rather than an empty honorific, Jones connected *comrade* to a guarantee of Soviet protection against hostility from the Temple's enemies: "he gave us the absolute assurance that a move against us would be a move against the Soviet Union" (Q401). Like *nigger*'s implications for solidarity, *comrade* implied responsibility to other oppressed individuals. Mixing a glowing review of Jonestown with a lament for anguish elsewhere, Jones taught that "when one is an internationalist . . . we all must be our brother and

⁴⁷ As mentioned above, Peoples Temple's legitimacy in Guyana grew thanks to its socialist identity, not Jones's religious qualifications. In terms of goals and challenges, Jones saw the Temple's exodus from the United States into recently independent Guyana as analogous to revolutions and independence movements in other parts of the world. As seen in Jones's conception of *crazy nigger tactics*, the connection between Jonestown and other liberation struggles lay in political solidarity. To situate the commune in the wider world, therefore, Jones emphasized its political aspects.

⁴⁸ In one instance Jones went so far as to deny the importance of race at all. Discussing the 1976 film *Harlan County, USA* and its portrayal of murderous labor conditions, Jones said "isn't no difference what color it [the dead worker] was. They were working class people. . . . That's the issue. And you bring this color shit into this. I'm tired of it" (Q380).

sister's keeper. We're all comrades of one world. It's painful to realize that we eat so well here, that we have the best medicine in the world [when child slavery exists in Thailand]" (Q181).

Third, the importance of the past receded in Jones's construction of the Temple's identity and purpose, while present events became more crucial. Jones interpreted Jonestown's existence in terms of contemporary political developments, particularly liberation movements and Cold War clashes. His connection of *crazy nigger tactics* to solidarity in Jonestown discourses relied on drawing inspiration from emergent or contemporaneous political struggles.

Jonestown's jungle remoteness seems to exemplify Halliday's notion of an anti-society, insofar as such societies are "cut off" and "forced to close in on [themselves]" ([1975a] 2003, 85).⁴⁹ This cut-off and closed-in nature, however, does not preclude continuity between the linguistic choices Jones made in the United States and the choices he made in Jonestown. Despite the changes listed above, *nigger* continued to appear in Jones's discourses, particularly with an emphasis on solidarity as necessary for the commune's success. Jones told residents to "regard other members of this community as your loved ones," suggesting that shared experience counted for at least as much as blood ties (Q342).⁵⁰ Failing to act properly in Jonestown became not just a personal flaw but a crime against one's family. Indulgence and carelessness demonstrated a lack of communal concern and had dire consequences: "[wasteful behavior] adds up day after day, [and] it'll mean one life that we'll not be able to get out from under the brunt of fascist terror when the chopping block finally falls" (Q188). In another recording, Jones

⁴⁹ This isolation is tempered by Halliday's conception of an anti-society as a persecuted or threatened body. Anti-societies are a product or result of – rather than totally separate from – dominant society. This quality of being cut off from, but produced by, society creates "an uneasy continuum" between society and the anti-society and, correspondingly, between language and anti-language (Halliday [1975a] 2003, 85).

⁵⁰ The conception of family in Peoples Temple is linked to Jones's reinterpretation of terms like *Dad* or *Father* for the purposes of establishing group identity and boundaries. In particular, Jones's broad redefinition of *nigger* created a simultaneously multi-racial and mono-racial family out of Peoples Temple members.

condemned unsanctioned sexual relationships as selfish acts that endangered the movement's reputation. This damaged reputation could lead to the community's destruction, which in turn endangered the lives of "little babies" and all members (Q384). Speaking of his own failing health, Jones warned that "if I die [those] that are guilty are those who've taken privilege, those who walk around like cocks of the walk" (Q598). Leaving the group was likewise damaging, and the danger of defection revealed the powerlessness of individuality: "many of our former members are now in jail, and some are dead. Some have been sentenced to death" (Q323). Even in their besieged state, Jones reminded Jonestown residents that their niggardly status meant that they were safer together than on their own.

Many 1978 audiotapes discuss the question of how to respond to perceived persecution, whether from American fascists generally or from the Concerned Relatives in particular. In these tapes, Jones referred to "acting like a crazy nigger" or "crazy nigger tactics" as a viable – and demonstrably successful – form of retaliation (Q757; Q644). Although he never offered a formal definition of *crazy nigger* and never identified the phrase's origins, its presence compliments his earlier adaptations of *nigger* in American sermons.⁵¹

In response to perceived persecution and threatening situations, Jones exhorted Jonestown residents to "live the crazy nigger life all the time, in order to maintain your life" (Q741). Living the "crazy nigger life" involved threatening or perpetrating varying degrees of system-disruption or self-harm unless outsiders met certain demands or retracted certain challenges. These threats involved the community as a whole. Instructions to act like a "crazy nigger" usually came during one of Jonestown's "White Nights," or extended periods of high

⁵¹ One potential source of inspiration for the phrase is comedian Richard Pryor's 1974 recording *This Nigger's Crazy*. Although the FBI identified multiple Pryor recordings in Jonestown, Jones never directly refers to *This Nigger's Crazy* (see Q368 and Federal Bureau of Investigation 1979).

alert occasioned by the threat of immanent attack, troubles with the Guyanese government, negative press coverage, or defections. This rhetorical situation re-deployed Jones's structuring of asymmetrical relations between the Temple's "niggers" and their various oppressors.

Although he confirmed that "crazy nigger tactics" "has worked many times for us," Jones warned residents against overconfidence and reminded them that "we're not playing picnic" (Q644). Residents discussed refusing to work, going on a hunger strike, or deploying military "tactics" as forms of "crazy nigger tactics" (Q642; Q644). During one White Night, Jones explained that acting like a "crazy nigger" involved committing suicide, refusing to eat, or generally "rais[ing] hell" (Q757). Additionally, acting like a "crazy nigger" entailed threatening to harm others. Concerning a news conference between Peoples Temple and its opponents in the United States, Jones asked residents how to disrupt the event or prevent it from happening. Amidst suggestions to throw tear gas, plant bombs, or phone in false gun violence threats, one resident suggested that "maybe Pearl Walton could do a crazy nigger act" (Q592). While most of the suggestions were far-fetched or generated laughter, the resident's suggestion aligns "crazy nigger tactics" with outward-directed violence.

Crucially, Jones reminded the community to modulate its tactics to match its threats. Since "crazy nigger tactics" ranged from "ask[ing] for immediate asylum" to a "sit-down strike" to "mak[ing] a display of one of our people . . . giving their body to be burned," residents needed to choose their actions carefully (Q642). In some settings, the Temple's "crazy nigger" image could result in success; in other settings, it could alienate Jonestown from potential allies. During Q642's White Night, Jones differentiated the tactics necessary to move to another socialist country from the tactics necessary to request favors within Guyana:

You can qualify your demands based on what you want to do. If you want to get out of here to go to Cuba or to Russia . . . then you'd have to make your demands not so crazy.

[If you make] demands just in the internal sector of the country, you can make your demands more stringent (Q642).

Although acting like a “crazy nigger” required a constant willingness to suffer or harm, these threats needed to be attuned to the commune’s goals.

Since Jones broadened *nigger*’s range of referents to include all oppressed people, anybody could act like a “crazy nigger.” In fact, Jones applied *crazy nigger* to a variety of political contests discussed in Jonestown news commentary. By referring to actors in these conflicts as “crazy niggers,” Jones cast the commune’s actions in the same light as international clashes between capitalists, socialists, and developing powers, rhetorically elevating its role in the Cold War world. Additionally, Jones wove seemingly unrelated political struggles into the Temple’s worldview, adorning various political figures with the title of *nigger*.

For instance, Jones referred to liberation forces in Africa as “crazy niggers.” In one news commentary, Jones promised that “Namibia will have its full independence, because of SWAPO’s [South West Africa People’s Organization] crazy nigger tactics of eliminating the puppets, doing away with those counter-insurgency forces, [and] killing the racist police” (Q991). These disruptive challenges to racist power and puppet governments qualified as “crazy nigger tactics.” Since SWAPO’s founders and members fought in an ongoing struggle against white incursions into Africa, they fit neatly into Jones’s conception of *nigger*. Other politically active opponents of American capitalism likewise fit the designation.

In several 1978 recordings, Jones discussed the Torrijos-Carter Treaties, which transferred control of the Panama Canal from the United States to Panama. According to Jones, General Omar Torrijos – commander of Panama’s National Guard – used “crazy nigger tactics” to convince the United States to relinquish control of the Canal. Explaining Torrijos’ political maneuvering, Jones stated that “Torrijos is left-of-center, distrustful of US capitalism, and did

pull a crazy nigger tactic and said that he would die and his army would die and the people would die if they [the American government] didn't sign the Panamanian Treaty" (Q284). In a longer explanation of "crazy nigger tactics" effectiveness, he asked,

you see how small Panama is, in Central America? Hardly a dot on the US map. But they realized they're niggers – niggers means 'being cheated.' They took a crazy nigger stance and said, 'we'd rather die,' we'll have a White Night, in other words. 'We'll go in, invade the Panama Canal, and if it means the death of the entire Panamanian armed forces and people we'd rather live our national pride of liberation than allow US domination any long.' Well, it worked (Q753).

In light of Jonestown's context, several parts of this story are noteworthy. First, Jones separated Panama's size from its ability to secure a favorable outcome. Even though Panama was "hardly a dot" on the map, its "crazy nigger tactics" "worked" to convince the much larger United States to sign the Treaties. Second, Jones highlighted the totality of destruction that Torrijos' threats promised. In Jones's account, Torrijos' "crazy nigger tactics" would sacrifice the lives of "the entire Panamanian armed forces and people" to ensure that "US domination" of the Canal ended. Moreover, Jones claimed that these militants and citizens' death impossibly allowed them to "live with our national pride of liberation." Third, Jones translated Torrijos' threats into Peoples Temple-specific vocabulary, converting "we'd rather die" into "we'll have a White Night." Each of these maneuvers helped rationalize or normalize Jones's increasing certainty that Jonestown could best defend itself against overwhelming oppression through self-inflicted death.

In relation to Jones's redefinition of *nigger*, however, referring to Torrijos – and the Panamanian armed forces and people – as *crazy niggers* relied on *nigger*'s link to oppression. Despite lacking a majority black demographic, Panama's armed forces, populace, and leadership could still employ "crazy nigger tactics." Indeed, Jones linked Panama to other groups that he identified as "niggers," warning that "Panama should look with a wary eye to USA. . . . United States has nothing but a series of broken treaties with the Indians and black people" (Q989).

Finally, Jones linked *crazy nigger* to socialism by using the phrase to describe Nikita Khrushchev (1894-1971), former First Secretary and Premier of the Soviet Union. Jones admired Khrushchev's willingness to act unexpectedly, recounting a story in which Khrushchev banged his shoe on a desk at a 1960 United Nations assembly in protest (Q833). Lamenting Khrushchev's replacement by Leonid Brezhnev (1906-1982), Jones taught that "when you modify crazy nigger tactics, you're liable to lose the revolution. Khrushchev, though white, was not afraid to be a crazy nigger" (Q833). In this remark, Khrushchev's brashness served as a model for "crazy nigger" behavior in Jonestown. Immediately following this appraisal, Jones warned Jonestown residents that they could not sit back and expect to "inheri[t]" a revolution; instead, they had to act decisively and memorably (Q833).

Although involved in smaller concerns than United Nations assemblies, controlling the Panama Canal, or liberating Namibia, Jones encouraged his listeners to deploy "crazy nigger tactics" to respond to Jonestown's problems. He noted that the Concerned Relatives, in particular, should fear the Temple's "crazy nigger" disposition: "the conspiracy [Concerned Relatives] knows how crazy niggers we are. . . . [They think they're] winnin' with a thousand of us here, and two or three hundred crazy niggers back home?" (Q963). The overwhelming numbers of Temple members equipped with a "crazy nigger" disposition countered the Concerned Relatives threat.

Jones similarly claimed that the Guyanese government was susceptible to "crazy nigger" pressure. In one recording, Jones confided that Guyana's Foreign Minister "seemed to understand crazy nigger talk. . . . The Minister of Home Affairs and immigration seems to understand a lot of it, too, 'cause every time we get crazy nigger he also bends" (Q642). More specifically, Jones praised residents for using "crazy nigger tactics" during a conflict regarding

the licensing of Dr. Larry Schacht, Jonestown's doctor. Explaining that "normally, all nations require one solid year of internship with a hospital in one of their major cities" prior to licensing a physician, Jones announced that "a miracle has broken through. . . . Dr. Schacht will be given full license after two weeks of orientation with one consultant in Guyana, and then he will be allowed to finish his internship here on the project" (Q737). Although he referred to this leniency as a miracle, Jones bragged that "no doctor in the history of Guyana has been granted full licensing without serving one year of internship. . . . So White Night wild nigger completely-dedicated communist stands saying 'we will not give up our doctor' appears to have paid off" (Q737). In other recordings, Jonestown residents affirmed that using "crazy nigger tactics" seemed like "the only way to win" against oppression, or that "it's only because of [Jones's] bravado and acting . . . as a crazy nigger, that we've come through" (Q734). Whether facing off against government restrictions or battling the Concerned Relatives, Jones taught Temple members to behave like "crazy niggers."

Crazy nigger or *crazy nigger tactics* depended on Jones's earlier adaptation of *nigger* to effect Jonestown life. On one hand, "crazy nigger tactics" were only necessary in situations of oppression, conflict, and asymmetry. Jonestown's constituency, SWAPO's militants, and the Panamanian people exercised these tactics to combat larger, more powerful opponents. The Guyanese government, Namibia's puppet leaders, and President Jimmy Carter all occupied the actual or perceived dominant position in terms of political or military power, creating an oppressed Other. On the other hand, "crazy nigger tactics" drew on the "nigger power" that came from solidarity and triumphed over the moral depravity of established authorities (Q963; see also Q1059-6). Jones's "White Night wild nigger completely-dedicated communist stands" contrasted sharply with the colonially entrenched treaties and policies deployed by governments, much as

Jones's noble African ancestors contrasted with the submerged racism of European slavers and their big-business descendants.

Sticking Together: Guilt and Protection

Perhaps most importantly, *crazy nigger tactics* situated Jonestown in a Cold War constellation of global conflict where Jones occupied the same plane as national leaders such as Torrijos or Khrushchev, and Jonestown residents existed analogously alongside SWAPO's vanguard revolutionaries. Despite its geographical isolation, Jonestown gained credibility and hope through its rhetorical solidarity with "niggers" the world over. The commune and its residents, in turn, formed a microcosm or epicenter of a perceived socialist revolution.

Collective participation constituted a persistent theme running through "crazy nigger tactics." In Namibia and Panama, "crazy niggers" challenged larger powers by working together, with citizens and militants joining forces. Although Khrushchev's replacement by Brezhnev seemingly swapped one leader for another, Jones worried that top-level Soviet political changes would affect "the revolution" as a whole. In the remainder of this chapter, I demonstrate that Jones relentlessly demanded that Temple members consider their actions as part of a collective struggle for survival, culminating in Peoples Temple's denouement on Nov. 18, 1978. During this event, Jones drew on the rhetorical sentiments that he stoked in his teachings regarding "niggers" to justify Jonestown's response to Congressman Ryan's visit.⁵²

As shown above, Jones warned that "niggers" needed to stick together to avoid succumbing to a common enemy. Already in 1973, Jones explained that ethnic atomization

⁵² Since Jones rarely linked *nigger* to suicide, my connections are provisional. One exception appears in Q974, where Jones told a story about a captured African slave who jumped off the Good Ship Jesus, choosing to kill herself rather than "be any white man's nigger." In the tape recorded during the mass-suicides/murders, Jones made a reference to residents being "black, proud, and socialist," but nowhere mentions *nigger* (Q042).

hindered revolution. He recounted a meeting of California Governor Jerry Brown's administration regarding "the blacks and the Indians and the Mexicans [who] were about to get together" (Q1057-5). To divide this alliance, the governor promoted categorization: "'we're gonna have to divide these people, so we'll say the Mexicans can be called white, and the Indians can be called white, and we'll call the blacks Negro because if we don't they'll get together'" (Q1057-5). In Jonestown, Jones tried to create unity by overlaying each member's individual responsibilities on every other member.

One ramification of mutual support was an emphasis on collective guilt. In California and Guyana, Jones punished individuals in front of the entire group for disobedience, but in the final days of Peoples Temple he encouraged each individual member to take on the guilt and punishment of any other Temple member. In one Jonestown address Jones warned his audience that "I hope we don't have a whole community that would not take on guilt and assume guilt – like I have – for others" (Q384).

To encourage assuming others' blame, Jones taught that repressing guilt or understanding it in negative terms served capitalism's individualist goals. He explained,

it is taught from the beginning of this [vicious, fascist American] psychological approach to life, 'don't entertain guilt.' . . . From Christianity, all through the institutions of learning – '[you] must not be guilty!' . . . Because you will indulge yourself and justify everything you do, unless you feel guilty about the things you do wrong! But . . . not America – guilt is a bad thing (Q757).

Jones set this condemnation of refusing to admit wrongness in a longer reflection on American guilt towards capitalism, racism, and religion's casualties. In Q757, Jones explained that guilt facilitated growth and betterment. He identified his own sense of guilt as a source of creativity and healing, remarking that "I'll take my guilt, because it's produced more goodness than those sons-of-bitches ever will produce" (Q757). In Peoples Temple, guilt – and *nigger* – took on

positive qualities. Additionally, Jones de-stigmatized guilt – as well as *nigger* – by arguing that Americans only paid attention to its negative qualities. In Peoples Temple and Jonestown, guilt became a tool for promoting apostolic socialism through group solidarity by preventing the justification of individualistic indulgences.

In Q757, Jones used guilt as a check and balance on “crazy nigger tactics.” Several times, he imagined killing Temple defectors, only to immediately express guilt over such feelings. After relaying a fantasy of tying a defector to a pole to be eaten by jungle animals, Jones admitted that “I feel guilt for feeling that. You know, I don’t like to feel vengeance. . . . Don’t get caught up in vengeance – let’s be caught up in [socialist] principal” (Q757). He warned that the Temple needed to channel its tactics, like its cusses, appropriately: “[don’t] go against the movement, for Christ’s sakes – don’t be a crazy nigger just for your own right to act nasty and mean. But be a crazy nigger when you’re dealing with a class enemy!” (Q757; see also Q191). “Crazy nigger tactics” benefited the organization when enacted communally but hampered the group if deployed for individualist purposes.

Collective guilt, then, could motivate actions, while socialism offered stability and safety. Jones assured Jonestown’s residents that “there is no safety in doing your own thing – in individualism. But when you collectively organize and stand behind each other . . . then, and then alone, you have safety” (Q606). In another recording, he similarly claimed that “we have the greatest protection on earth: our own strength, our own solidarity. . . . [We have] thousand-strong protection guarantees you have that you will eat, because of this being a society of an extended family” (Q737). Praising apostolic socialism, Jones claimed,

that’s what you get in a communist society – that kind of protection with a communist leader that’s pure. A structure! You’ve got a thousand people that’ll defend you when they come for you. . . . There’s a thousand people guaranteeing that you eat tonight, there’s a thousand people guaranteeing tonight that you have the best medicine (Q757).

In these remarks, Jones connected the Temple's apostolic socialist solidarity against niggardly treatment to security. Rather than simply depending on Jones's presence for survival, Jonestown residents collectively took on the responsibility of ensuring the community's safety: "this is important, that each of you. . . . Look constantly, as a watchful sentinel set on a hill" (Q430).

The Jonestown community provided safety only so long as the whole group showed their willingness to support any particular individual who was in trouble. Jones appealed to this logic on 18 November 1978 following the assassination of Congressman Ryan. Repeatedly Jones refused to "separate" himself from the gunmen's actions, saying "I'm standing with those people. They're a part of me. . . . I never detached myself from any of your troubles" (Q042).⁵³ Responding to a resident who advocated escaping to the Soviet Union instead of committing suicide, Jones claimed that escape would sidestep the incumbent communal guilt that came from shooting Congressman Ryan. He told the resident that "I've always put my lot with you. One of my people do something, it's me. And they say [that] I don't have to take the blame for [killing the Congressman], but I don't live that way" (Q042). Even though Jonestown's gunmen allegedly had gone to kill Congressman Ryan without Jones's permission, he refused to separate the many's innocence from the few's vengeful behavior. Emphasizing shared culpability over his own well-being, Jones encouraged his audience to do the same: "I don't know who fired the shot, I don't know who killed the congressman. But as far as I'm concerned, I killed him. You understand what I'm saying? I killed him" (Q042).

⁵³ Jones said "I cannot separate myself from the pain of my people," "I can't separate myself from your actions or his actions. If you'd done something wrong I'd stand with you – if they wanted to come and get you they'd have to come and take me," "we can't separate ourselves from our own people," and "you can't separate yourself from your brother and your sister" (Q042).

Persistent Asymmetry

This chapter traced Jones's appropriation of the racial slur *nigger* in Peoples Temple doctrine, focusing particularly on the definitional adaptations that accompanied its use. In light of Murphy's conception of religion as a process of structuring asymmetries between actual or perceived groups, and despite the Temple's focus on racial harmony and fairness, *nigger* reveals Jones's persistent emphasis on inequality, separation, and difference. In Peoples Temple, Jones crafted a system of signification whose elements wove together a narrative of suffering, nobility, opportunity, and community.

By maintaining *nigger*'s pejorative sense, Jones reconstituted Temple members' identities in relation to an oppressing Other. From the slave trade to the Sunshine Mine, he encouraged all Temple members to recognize their niggardly treatment at the hands of religious, political, and economic authorities. In Jones's rhetoric, these oppressors – rather than Jones's audience, the oppressed – crafted the Temple's identity. These negative connotations, however, still allowed Jones the definitional room to enlarge the field of referents that *nigger* indicated. By shifting *nigger*'s association from a primarily racial designation to a primarily economic/social designation, he widened the scope of people who could suffer as “niggers” without evicting African Americans from the category. This denotative expansion let Jones promote apostolic socialism to a wide range of potential members.

Nigger thus served as a polyvalent term in Temple discourse, addressing multiple sub-groups. To those blacks invested in the civil rights movement, Jones offered *nigger*'s appropriation as a means of unmasking and questioning oppressive authority, wresting definitional control away from the term's racist origins. For non-blacks looking to participate –

or benefit – from the civil rights movement, Jones offered *nigger*'s expanded sense of economic hardship for participatory purposes.

By inverting *nigger*'s pejorative sense, Jones reconstituted Temple members' identities in relation to an imagined past. This retelling of history inverted the hierarchy of oppressors and "niggers" in the present. To reverse *nigger*'s connotations, Jones told the story of Europeans capturing slaves in Africa as an encounter between a noble and cultured society – the indigenous population – and an uncivilized group – the Europeans – that used religion as a guise to generate profits. As a primordial site of art, aesthetics, and nobility, Africa served as a virtuous ancestral home for Peoples Temple's members, beliefs, and practices. In the same vein as *nigger*'s de-racialized denotations, Jones ignored actual ancestral heritage and instead identified qualities – like an appreciation for fine arts – or dispositions – like a love for justice – as proof of African ancestry. Beyond elevating the earliest African slaves – in Jones's rhetoric, the ancestors of present-day "niggers" – to positions of nobility and power, this re-telling of history portrayed Europeans – in Jones's rhetoric, the forerunners of present-day Americans – as greedy, conniving, and invasive. This denigration, furthermore, unmasked American business magnates as latter-day slave owners who peddled Christianity as a tool for controlling their workforce.

These connotative and denotative subversions constructed Temple members' identities – and guided their actions – in relation to both real and imagined circumstances. Mirroring Jones's gradual rejection of traditional Christianity, *nigger* oriented Peoples Temple in relation to concrete economic, racial, and political realities rather than the supernatural. This identity construction relied on identifying and responding to actual or perceived racism, mounting fascism, and Cold War binaries by participating in Peoples Temple. To some extent Jones – with his claims to be God, his willingness to accept veneration from followers, and his appeals for

financial help in exchange for security or healing – replaced Christianity’s deity. *Nigger*, however, introduced a new myth, orienting Jones’s followers and their behavior in relation to a noble African past rather than a deferred paradisaal future.

Jones’s rhetorical maneuvers both supported and subverted *nigger*’s pejorative connotations. Despite his advice to cuss with a purpose, Jones’s acts of language adaptation changed his audience’s perception of the world and accordant behavior, not just their speech patterns. Indeed, there’s little audio evidence that Jones’s followers began referring to themselves as “niggers,” even within the confines of Temple gatherings. *Nigger*’s role in Temple doctrine and practice, instead, affected members’ worldview, which in turn affected their behavior as practitioners of apostolic socialism. The final section of this chapter, consequently, examined Jones’s use of the phrase *crazy nigger* in Jonestown to situate the commune in a larger world of Cold War skirmishes.

In doing so, Jones classified Jonestown’s problems, members, and activities as microcosms of global conflicts. Localized matters like Larry Schacht’s licensing took on similar gravity to international treaties, residents joined revolutionaries like SWAPO in fighting for liberty, and hunger strikes mirrored United Nations antics as unconventional disruptive tactics. Jones’s decision to use *crazy nigger tactics* as a descriptor for both the commune’s activities and socialist activities reported in international news created a sense of importance and interconnectedness in Jonestown. Guarded from persecution by the jungle but linked to the outside world through “crazy nigger” status, Jonestown became a localized site of socialist resistance to the global capitalist threat. Contrary to casting Jonestown as a totally isolated locale designed to escape the world, then, *crazy nigger*’s presence in Jones’s Guyana discourses played a connective role, inserting the commune into a global geo-political web of identity and conflict.

In part, this elevation of Jonestown's status contributed to its drastic conclusion. Congressman Ryan's visit, supported by an alliance of the Temple's media and Concerned Relative opponents, took on international significance in the Temple's rhetoric. The tactics deployed by other "crazy niggers" in the socialist world, moreover, affected the commune's range of responses to Congressman Ryan's visit. *Crazy nigger tactics*, combined with Jones's insistence on solidarity and community-based behavioral choices, thus recasts the mass-murders/suicides as an echoing of perceived tactics by the Temple's global analogues.

Jones's appropriation of *nigger* to highlight inequality and posit noble origins demonstrates the structuring of asymmetrical relations that Murphy identifies as a defining quality of religions to a greater extent than the acts of language appropriation covered in the following two chapters. The effectiveness of *nigger*'s persistent asymmetry – in comparison to the adaptive linguistic maneuvers seen in the Children of God and the Jesus People – lies, at least partially, in the different audiences that each group addressed. Whereas David Berg's *Mo Letters* and Duane Pederson's *Hollywood Free Paper* targeted discontented youth in the 1960s and 1970s, Peoples Temple built its support base in the twilight of the social gospel and the advent of the civil rights movement. Developed as a melding of social gospel rhetoric and civil rights movement ideology, Jones's rhetoric presupposed inequality or disadvantage. The plasticity of the disadvantages that *nigger* referred to – ranging from name-calling to hazardous workplaces to congressional investigations – ensured that Jones's offer of solidarity-based apostolic socialism appealed to a variety of audiences in a variety of settings.

Adam Morris's recent book, *American Messiahs*, calls into question the viability of religious movements (including Peoples Temple) that highlight suffering or inequality to attract members from marginalized population. Commenting on these "left-wing social movements,"

Morris explains that such groups “are notoriously fractious because they rely on tenuous alliances between vulnerable and disenfranchised members of society” (2019, 9). A disenfranchised participant base with weak social ties and a focus on suffering, in other words, is more likely to break apart into constituent sub-populations than coalesce. On the surface, Peoples Temple seems to partially support this thesis: the Temple’s incessant focus on unequal relations morphed into paranoia that saw any outside probing as a movement-ending threat. On Nov. 18, 1978, the pressure of Congressman Ryan’s visit caused Jonestown’s community to begin atomizing, and the resultant defections led to the group’s denouement.

My analysis of *nigger*’s presence and transformation in Temple doctrine, however, allows for an alternate reading of the mass-murders/suicides in Jonestown. In particular, the ability of the concept *crazy nigger* to weave a variety of socialist actors and causes from around the world into a web of signification curtailed the Temple’s atomization in a time of crisis. *Nigger*’s vulnerable connotations, moreover, provided Jones with the rhetoric to argue for the necessity of sticking together. Although Peoples Temple serves as the capstone of Morris’ ambitious project of tracing the fate of America’s self-proclaimed messiahs, *nigger* challenges his theory that religious groups that address deprivation to gather followers will inevitably disintegrate.⁵⁴ Rather than presupposing a trajectory of inevitable downfall and failure, explaining the social functions of language adaptation in Peoples Temple in relation to identity formation, conflict management, and boundary maintenance casts the movement’s infamous end in a more complex light.

⁵⁴ Although the mass-murders/suicides certainly ended Peoples Temple, *nigger*’s adaptive rhetorical legacy – including its emphasis on vulnerability and disenfranchisement – served as a coalescing tool. To his credit, Morris acknowledges Jones’s redefinition of *nigger* as “exercise in race-craft,” explaining that “he began to identify himself and all those who genuinely worked to separate themselves from bourgeois capitalist society as ‘niggers’” (2019, 312).

Chapter 6

“What’s In a Name? – Plenty!”: Labelling Promiscuity in the Children of God

Children of God Sources: From 1969-1979, David Berg wrote more than 750 *MO Letters* addressed to both Children of God members and potential converts. These letters were later collected into multi-volume collections arranged chronologically. I obtained these collections from the Stephen A. Kent Collection on Alternative Religions (University of Alberta). For ease of reading, my quotations adapt all-caps/underlined/bold passages in the *MO Letters* but retain Berg’s capitalization and punctuation. The Children of God gave each letter a sequential identification number that corresponds roughly to publication order (the earliest letters received an identification letter A-Z) and gave paragraphs within each letter sequential numbers as well. I cite the *MO Letters* parenthetically in the following format: (Letter Number. Paragraph Number). For example: (123.5).

In 1974, Jones introduced an unusual piece of evidence in his diatribe against American fascism: a poem called “Mountin’ Maid” written by David Berg (1919-1994), founder of the Children of God. To his audience’s amusement, Jones read stanzas of mountainous metaphors celebrating women’s breasts, pausing to quip that “no wonder it says if you want to have any questions, write Children of God in care of Switzerland” (Q1024). Jones read the poem to demonstrate America’s intolerance of groups that derided American authorities and promoted communalist living. Even Berg, whose writings contained nothing more than “sex and malarkey,” had the “intelligence to see that it’s fascism that’s coming into America” (Q1024). The Children of God’s pamphlets “say just enough that New York has got them investigated, and Colorado is investigating them and every newspaper is lambasting them because they called America one word: fascist” (Q1024). Jones, however, lambasted the poem’s “silliness,” stating that “this [erotic poetry] doesn’t make a revolution,” and ultimately discarded Berg as “a pure, raving nut” (Q1024). With nothing to support it other than Berg’s sexual frustrations, the Children of God’s communalist vision hindered Peoples Temple’s attempt to promote apostolic socialism as a viable alternative to American political, racial, and religious reality.

In December 1978, Berg reversed this criticism, lamenting that the Jonestown mass-murders/suicides besmirched the reputation of alternative communalist religious groups. He wrote that

[before Jonestown] they just looked the other way because we were not a nuisance, not causing any particular trouble, nobody was complaining and some people even liked us, and we were getting along fine and everybody was happy. – But not now! – Not since Jonestown! (750.19).

Peoples Temple's lethal deployment of *crazy nigger tactics* led to a "smear campaign that's on against the cults," forcing Berg to warn that "it's not going to be possible to have as much freedom as we've been having" (750.40). While both leaders predicated their apocalyptic critiques of American society on a reimagining of the Christian Bible, Jones and Berg unintentionally frustrated one another's efforts in their deployment of different revolutionary techniques and foci.

The acts of language appropriation found in Berg's *MO Letters* likewise echo and differ from those in Peoples Temple. Like Jones, Berg deployed pejorative terms in seemingly catachrestic ways to shape asymmetrical relations between real or imagined classes, drawing boundaries, mitigating conflict, and crafting identity in the process. Unlike Jones, however, Berg's acts of redefinition focussed on sexual propriety rather than race, and encompassed a suite of sex-related terms rather than a single keyword.

This chapter analyzes language use in Berg's *MO Letters* during the first decade of the Children of God's existence, focussing particularly on Berg's interest in biblical and contemporary perspectives on sexual promiscuity. After summarizing the group's history and outlining the format and content of the *MO Letters*, I explore the complicated role that being a *whore*, *harlot*, or *hooker* played in Berg's teachings. On one hand, Berg supported the negative connotations associated with these terms in his frequent denunciation of *America the whore*. This

condemnatory label blended prophetic doom with a stringent critique of American Christianity, equating promiscuity with immorality and degradation. On the other hand, Berg encouraged sexual promiscuity amidst members as a pragmatic proselytizing tool instead of relying on empty speech. Although being called a *whore* in the *MO Letters* signified Godless evil, acting like a *hooker* spread God's message of love.

Tracing language adaptation and its effects in the Children of God requires a different approach than in Peoples Temple. Rather than focussing on the redefinition of a single, central term, I pull together three rhetorical strands from Berg's publications to explore his appropriation of sexual language. First, the *MO Letters* enacted a hybrid linguistic identity in which Berg sourced terms and ideas from both revolutionary/youth protest and the King James Bible to appeal to his target audience and legitimate his claims. Second, Berg's struggle to inflect "profane" terms to defend his "sacred" sexual program, as well as his rejection of *Systemite* status through renaming,¹ created a complex understanding of definition that linked names/titles to action and identity. Third, Berg reconceptualized morality by reflecting on the shared tools and opportunities available to the forces of both good and evil. These three strands all contributed to Berg's creation of the real and imagined groups/classes *whore*, *harlot*, and *hooker* in the Children of God.

God's True Church

The Children of God emerged as a discrete organizational entity in the Jesus People movement that existed briefly in the United States during the late 1960s and early 1970s. While the label "Jesus People" applies to the evangelistic efforts of different leaders in different parts of

¹ Berg's capitalization of *Systemite* lacks consistency. I preserve his capitalization in direct quotes, but capitalize the term in my own text.

the country, the label “Children of God” refers specifically to Berg’s followers. In fact, Berg’s followers went through several major organizational upheavals with corresponding name changes – properly speaking, the Children of God refers specifically to Berg’s organization from approximately 1969 until 1978. This section outlines the group’s history and basic beliefs to contextualize his appropriation of sexual slurs, focussing especially on major organizational, practical, and doctrinal transitions during Berg’s lifetime.

As a child and grandchild of Christian evangelists, Berg’s conviction that he had a gospel message to share with the world appeared as a normal vocational choice in his familial context (Wangerin 1993, 14). Indeed, he participated in proselytizing tours of the United States with his parents, as well as a brief stint from 1949 until 1951 as a preacher in Arizona (Kent 1994, 144).² In the early 1950s, Berg met Fred Jordan, a televangelist who operated a youth outreach organization (Cowan and Bromley 2008, 121). Entering into a precarious working relationship that would last more than a decade, Berg helped promote Jordan’s television programming and youth ministry (Bromley and Cowan 2008, 122). In 1961, however, Berg received a prophetic revelation condemning American Christianity as ungodly traditionalism and distanced himself from church work supported by mainline Protestantism (Bromley and Cowan 2008, 122). In 1966, Berg began a multi-year itinerant ministry to promote a vision for religious revival modelled on the early Christian church (Chancellor [2004] 2014, 13).

By 1968, Berg’s roving revival led him to Huntington Beach, California, where he began working at the Light Club (Wangerin 1993, 14). As a Jesus People establishment, the Light Club bridged the gap between social dropouts looking for purpose and religious youth interested in the

² Berg explained that his tenure as a preacher ended because “the whites didn’t like me because of my integration policies and radical preaching that they should share more of their wealth with the poor” (351.15). The resultant lack of congregational financial support, apparently, forced him to move.

counterculture by promoting Jesus as a revolutionary figure. Mixing sentiments of rebellion against traditional authority with a radical depiction of Jesus as a loving hippie, Berg's ministry crystalized as an extreme version of the Jesus People movement (Wangerin 1993, 16). To enact their rejection of godless traditional systems, Berg encouraged some new converts to donate their possessions or money to his ministry and live communally (Chancellor [2004] 2014, 14). Amidst apocalyptic predictions and conflicts with local authorities, he uprooted these communalist followers in 1969 to further spread his radical reconsideration of Christianity (Wangerin 1993, 20). During this trip, the group acquired the name Children of God.

This phase of Berg's movement introduces three themes that became organizational mainstays. First, Berg travelled to disseminate his message. Rather than establishing himself in a single geographic community, Berg put down temporary roots across the United States and Canada, ministering to a focussed demographic – young people – in disparate locations. Second, Berg separated himself from mainline Christianity, mirroring American counterculture's disinterest in traditional social forms. Third, Berg encouraged converts to act in ways that reflected their faith. Sharing possessions, living with like-minded people, and travelling around the country all constituted visible signs of one's religious convictions.

In the early 1970s, these three foci – geography, critique, and communalism – crystalized in the Children of God's organizational structure and behavior. Initially, Berg tried to settle the Children of God on several of Jordan's properties, but by 1971 Jordan had evicted the group and broken ties with Berg (Enroth, Ericson, and Peters 1972, 26-28). Disagreements over leases, the Children of God and Jordan's mutual responsibilities towards one another, and pressure from detractors affected this final fallout between Berg and his former colleague. Instead of moving the Children of God to a single new home, Berg advocated "colonisation," whereby small

communities of Children of God members would settle in various locations. In his own words, “we are going to divide like the amoeba” (C.11). This colonization process dispersed members to cope with Berg’s twin concerns for safety and outreach.

Regarding safety, Berg situated his pronouncements of doom on American society and traditional Christianity at the immanent end of history. Coupled with his tumultuous relationship to the Jesus People as well as counter-organizations formed to oppose the Children of God (charging that Berg kidnapped underage youth),³ Berg’s apocalypticism created an atmosphere of urgency and persecution. By geographically atomizing his revolution, Berg ensured the Children of God’s safety: a disparate target would survive attacks better than a single, concentrated community. Berg modelled this approach on his understanding of early Christian practices during periods of persecution in the Roman Empire (C.39). Later, Berg traced this lineage back even further, linking biblical heroes from “Abel to the prophets” to “coffee-houses and communes in California” as sites of revolution and danger (S.1-2). Regarding outreach, Berg’s apocalyptic urgency encouraged migration. To best disseminate the group’s message around the world, the Children of God established colonies both in the United States and abroad. In 1970, Berg slipped into seclusion and – by 1971 – left the United States for Europe. Despite encouraging colony leaders to handle local concerns, Berg retained ultimate authority in spiritual and practical matters, disseminating his doctrines in missives called the *MO Letters*. These letters allowed Berg to communicate directly with colonies from a distance, disseminate new revelations, and shape his image.⁴

³ See Enroth, Ericson, and Peters (1972, 29-30).

⁴ Berg’s absentee status contributed to a mythic persona that emerged amongst local colonists (Wangerin 1993, 145) For instance, drawings and photographs in the *MO Letters* often depicted Berg with the face of a lion, building his character using biblical imagery while censoring his actual facial features (see, for instance, 149). Other depictions obscured Berg’s face with the face of a wise old man, re-making Berg’s middle-aged status into a caricature of wisdom rather than a generational barrier (see, for instance, 795).

Between Berg's European sojourn and the Children of God's international presence, the group's doctrines and practices shifted to appeal to a non-American audience. Rather than billing the Children of God as an American protest movement, Berg began experimenting with a doctrine of embodied love. As early as 1974, Berg and his female consort, Maria, laid the groundwork for "flirty fishing," an outreach method that "convert[ed] people by first attracting them sexually and then gradually introducing other ideas: love, God's love, being saved, and, finally, joining the Family" (Wangerin 1993, 49). Rather than depending on hippie dissatisfaction, flirty fishing addressed a more global problem: loneliness. Flirty fishing also appealed to a wider, more financially lucrative, audience. Rather than attracting only youth, flirty fishing also enticed wealthy or influential individuals.

In 1976, Berg officially announced flirty fishing as a group proselytization technique (Shepherd and Shepherd 2011, 9). This announcement constituted a significant shift in both the group's outreach work and its attitudes towards sex. Previously, the Children of God distributed tracts and *MO Letters* – "litnessing" – in exchange for donations as their primary means of spreading Berg's message and generating income. Doctrinally, the earliest converts identified abstinence or celibacy as virtues (Wangerin 1993, 53). Flirty fishing thus precipitated change and conflict in the Children of God's beliefs and behaviors.

The group's diffuse colony model, combined with Berg's central doctrinal control, likewise generated conflict. The Children of God's upper-level leadership consisted of Berg's family members, as well as an inner circle of devotees (Cowan and Bromley 2008, 126). Each local colony also possessed a leadership hierarchy with divisions of labour and authority. To ensure that colonists adhered to leadership divisions, and that colony leaders deferred to Berg's ultimate authority, Berg introduced a "chain of co-operation" doctrine that encouraged leaders to

be flexible while forbidding insubordination. An early *MO Letter* emphasized the importance of following orders in this structure: “if you can’t persuade your superior that you’re right, you still have to obey, because right or wrong, he’s still the boss” (59.57).

While the chain of cooperation helped Berg introduce doctrines that colonies were reluctant to adopt, it also led to abuses of power and feelings of resentment between colonists and colony leaders, on the one hand, and between colony leaders and Berg, on the other hand (Shepherd and Shepherd 2011, 9). By the late 1970s, external problems compounded these internal difficulties. Combined with popular concern about NRMs following the mass-murders/suicides in Jonestown, critical press coverage of flirty fishing as a form of prostitution pushed Berg to introduce the “RNR,” or “Reorganization Nationalization Revolution” in 1978 (650). With the RNR, Berg attempted to mitigate flirty fishing’s impact on colonies and overhaul the movement in light of both a delayed apocalypse and an increasingly international presence.

Berg defended these changes by citing “many abuses of power and authority of the various overseers . . . on down to the Shepherds of the local colonies, and unauthorised taxes” (650.5). Beyond lining their own pockets with donations gathered by rank-and-file members, errant leaders distorted Berg’s new teachings about sex: “Family members were forbidden to supply each other’s sexual needs, FFing [flirty fishing] was in many instances prohibited or at least discouraged” (650.6). A reluctance to recognize the *MO Letters* as sacred texts underwrote both of these concerns. Echoing Hubbard’s concern for fidelity, Berg wrote that “leaders changed the meaning of my letters. . . . My letters mean exactly what they say, literally, and they don’t need explaining away, spiritualizing or re-interpreting” (650.7). To solve these problems, RNR abolished much of the Children of God’s hierarchical bureaucracy (Berg announced that “you’re all fired. . . . Each Colony should have an immediate worldwide new election”), granting

greater local autonomy to local colonies (650.23). He also encouraged local converts to feature more prominently in colony life, internationalizing the movement rather than supporting enclaves of American expatriates by decreeing that “no more than 50% of any non-U.S. homes membership can be U. S. Americans” (650.63). Finally, to reflect the fundamental changes taking place, Berg changed the organization’s name to The Family of Love, later shortened to The Family and, finally, expanded to The Family International (650.28).

In the late 1970s, and throughout the 1980s, the concepts of “family” and “love” characterized Berg’s revolutionary, apocalyptic vision. In the Family of Love, flirty fishing and sexual experimentation served as a major source of movement growth, especially since Berg’s early teachings prohibited birth control.⁵ James Chancellor reports that, after 1981, children born into the Family of Love constituted the majority of new members (2014, 17). While the group continued to attract some adult converts, the second generation of members generated by Berg’s sexual teachings became the dominant source of movement growth. With this proliferation of progeny, however, came a corresponding concern for sexual health within the group as well as a corresponding suspicion of sexual misconduct from beyond the group.

By 1983, Berg warned colonists against excessive sexual sharing to curb the spread of sexually transmitted infections within and between colonies (Chancellor 2014, 19). In the mid-1980s, critics attacked the Family of Love on two sex-related fronts. First, critics accused the group of publishing and distributing indecent literature (Wangerin 1993, 57). Second, critics attacked Berg’s belief that children – not just adults – were sexual beings, claiming that he promoted adult-child sexual relationships (Wangerin 1993, 57). In 1987, amidst widespread

⁵ In “Revolutionary Sex,” for instance, Berg wrote that “God is obviously diametrically opposed to any form of birth control whatsoever” (258.25). Later letters (see 589.85), however, back-pedaled as a result of increased sexual encounters between devotees and non-members/other colonists.

AIDS concerns, the Family of Love formally discontinued flirty fishing (Shepherd and Shepherd 2011, 10; Vance 2015, 89).

The proliferation of births that flirty fishing caused – to say nothing of the group’s decades-long existence – clashed with Berg’s immanent apocalypticism. The arrival of a second generation of members turned discontent rebels into parents and required Berg to incorporate childcare into the Family of Love’s theology. In her study of Berg’s movement, Ruth Wangerin notes that more men than women joined the Family of Love and identifies single male members as particularly uninterested in taking care of children (1993, 97). To encourage adequate care, Berg framed childcare as a godly virtue as well as a valuable contribution to the movement (Wangerin 1993, 106). As the second generation grew up, the Family of Love developed educational curriculum to teach their children without re-integrating them into secular society through public schooling (Chancellor 2014, 20). As Gary Shepherd and Gordon Shepherd emphasize in their research on The Family’s increasing institutionalization, the infrastructure and organizational mindset needed to teach second generation children differed from the tools necessary to proselytize to outsiders (2011). First generation members became sources of institutional memory and The Family developed educational resources that mirrored mainstream schooling, moving the group further from its countercultural warnings of immanent doom (Shepherd and Shepherd 2011, 133).

As his organization changed, Berg aged. In the late 1980s his long-time partner, Maria, took over The Family’s spiritual direction, and devotee Peter Amsterdam – who eventually married Maria – assumed administrative control (Chancellor 2014, 21). In 1994, Berg died (Chancellor 2014, 21). The group’s global spread, organizational reforms, and commitment to training and retaining youth born into The Family effectively routinized Berg’s charisma,

ensuring that the Family did not dissipate as a result of the founder's death. Although Berg had been the primary conduit for prophetic messages from God during his lifetime, Maria and Peter Amsterdam claimed that they continued to receive new revelations, including messages from Berg himself (Shepherd and Shepherd 2011, 12). In this way, the organization's new leadership worked Berg's – departed – status into their own authority.

In fact, Shepherd and Shepherd's interviews with The Family International leaders and administrators reveal that, following Berg's passing, alleged prophetic contact between supernatural forces and the group increased substantially. Rather than becoming the sole (new) recipient of prophecies, Maria encouraged members to seek out prophetic guidance, and to prophetically confirm other members' prophecies (Shepherd and Shepherd 2011, 43, 203; see also Chancellor 2014, 24-25). The prophetic character of Berg's doctrines, in other words, has been democratized and disseminated within the Family, and now serves as a method to both craft and test new developments in the movement.

A Worldwide Revolution: The *MO Letters*

In – and with – the *MO Letters*, Berg developed a proselytization solution to decentralization, translation, and restriction that promoted promiscuous sexual encounters. He also used the letters to cast himself as a spiritual revolutionary, and to promote a hybrid linguistic identity that mixed religious authority with countercultural awareness.

In format and claimed authority, the *MO Letters* are reminiscent of the Christian Bible, complete with numbered lines and paragraphs. Berg frequently interwove biblical quotations into his own writing,⁶ and in 1971 asserted that “the Mo Letters, like Paul's Epistles” contained

⁶ See, for example, Q; 83.12-53.

advice sent from God in the form of correspondence (127.28). The textual cues of incorporating biblical quotations, using a numbering system found in the Bible, and casting Berg as a modern-day apostle Paul granted the *MO Letters* familiarity and legitimacy in the eyes of Berg's Christian audience. While the first *MO Letters* emerged in 1969 to disseminate Berg's condemnation of American Christianity, they took on a new role following his seclusion, mirroring the communicative strategies used by biblical figures. In "I Gotta Split! (Part 2)," Berg noted that "half the New Testament is the epistles of the men who had to go away," further noting that Jesus' teachings were recorded only after he physically left his followers (29.21-22).

Berg's seclusion indicated both his pious and revolutionary nature. He assured readers in 1970 that "every great man of God, from Moses to Jesus, had to get away alone . . . to have time to meditate, pray, and produce, from communion with God, the laws of God" (24.7; see also 28.9). Solitude or absentee leadership thus served as a prerequisite for receiving divine messages. Elsewhere, Berg called himself "an instrument in the hand of God! . . . A Wirephoto and Teletype machine. . . . God's means of communication," underscoring his conductivity (161.41). In "Prophecy Against Our Enemies," Berg wrote "O God, put words in the mouth of David that he may know the thought Thou dost think, and that he may have the words Thou dost speak . . . that he may share them with Thy Children" (188.10). Received as a divine message through a prophetic conduit, the *MO Letters* took on a status equal to that of the Bible.

Like Hubbard, Berg identified his texts as repositories of orthodoxy: "nearly every question you do ask me has already been covered in detail in some Mo Letter, or in the Bible! So your main problem . . . is, that you're either not studying your Bible or the Mo Letters" (127.29). A 1974 letter clarified the relationship between the two corpora, teaching that Berg's letters "clear away the church rubble, to try and uncover for you once again what the Bible really says

and means” (329.15). While some followers balked at Berg’s additions to the Bible, “it’s a damnable doctrine of church devils to confine all the truth and revelations of God strictly to the Bible! True prophecy won’t teach anything contrary, but it surely can fill in a lot of gaps” (329.22). Berg’s missives supplemented the Bible while drawing on its authority.

In revolutionary terms, Berg explained that doctrines produced in exile demonstrated the radicalness of one’s message. Calling himself “a fugitive in exile,” Berg wrote that his opposition to American Christianity made him “a religious refugee in hiding . . . something almost every leader of every revolutionary movement has had to do at some time” (24.4). Drawing on secular history, he named Karl Marx and Vladimir Lenin as revolutionary leaders whose most important work occurred in exile (31.2-3). He further noted that vilification and persecution surrounded significant figures and revolutionary zeal, citing the lives of Julius Caesar, Giuseppe Garibaldi, Abraham, Moses, Paul, Benedict Arnold, and Aaron Burr (12.3-4, 6, 9, 13; see also 67.6). Berg’s self-description as an absent object of persecution thus paralleled that of major historical and biblical figures, and re-purposed his absence to cast his message as God-sent, revolutionary, and historically significant.

Berg used the *MO Letters* as a way to connect with colonies around the world, a persistent repository of doctrine, and a vector for admonitions and advice. Instead of emphasizing distance, Berg’s missives positioned him equally close to all colonies: “while I was with you, I could only be in one place at a time. . . . Now I’m equidistant from all of you and closer to all of you in spirit” (28.7-8). Indeed, a subheading in the “General Epistle to Leaders” assured readers that “all of MO’s [i.e. Berg’s] letters are personal and written personally from him personally for you” (24). In a 1975 re-appraisal of his decision to split, however, Berg emphasized the movement-wide relevance of these personal responses: “I ‘had to split’ from . . .

personal correspondence and direct administrative duties in order to write general basic Letters of overall counsel and guidance to everyone as well as the whole world” (330B.38).

The *MO Letters* outlived the circumstances of their creation and extended Berg’s opportunities to proselytize and instruct. One letter exhorted secretaries to work diligently, since “written words endure forever while others fade away” (22.10). “Letters, Part 1,” an early 1971 text, likewise explained that correspondence helped writers “extend their ministry far beyond their physical presence” (51.10). This propagational nature compensated for the group’s small size and disparate geographical arrangement: “we must duplicate and multiply ourselves, and propagate, not only through personal disciples and those reached through personal contact, but also through . . . the mighty and massive ministry of the printed word” (51.2). Even if the *MO Letters* emerged in response to specific issues, they extended the movement’s proselytizing capabilities through time and space.

The benefits of an easily-reproducible canon that converted personal/situational responses into movement-wide orthodoxy counterbalanced the challenges that the *MO Letters* – as a persistent, physical record of teachings divorceable from their original context – created. Censorship, distribution, and security all complicated Berg’s primary means of disseminating doctrine. These issues contributed to the movement’s creation of real or imagined groups or classes and paved the way for flirty fishing.

The *MO Letters* expressed a double set of fears pertaining to censorship and distribution. On one hand, Berg worried about letters falling into the hands of non-members who lacked the fluency needed to parse the Children of God’s more radical beliefs, or into the possession of criticized groups. On the other hand, he worried about growing censorship and policing of

religious communities that distributed literature. These concerns emphasized boundaries between insiders and outsiders and introduced gradations within these broad categories.

In 1973, Berg introduced a classification system wherein “all the [letters] are now being divided into five major categories... to help you know what to do with every one of them” (229.2). These categories grouped the *MO Letters* into letters to share with the public, letters reserved for group members (further subcategorized based on one’s role and spiritual maturity), and letters that could not be reprinted (229.2). These gradations organized the world according to knowledge and language. Group members possessed tools – including colony leaders, other *MO Letters*, or the opportunity to contact Berg by mail – for parsing the *MO Letters*’ apocalyptic, visionary, sexual, and condemnatory content. Within the Children of God, Berg divided readers based on one’s tenure in the group and communal responsibilities. Colony leaders and established members – “older brethren” – could view Berg’s more daring doctrinal claims due to their entrenchment in the group’s worldview, while new initiates – “babes” – needed to encounter teachings graded to their lack of knowledge (48.10). Recounting his own error in sharing extreme teachings with a new member, Berg recalled that the initiate

couldn’t stand the shock of the truth! It shattered his frame of reference, his cherished traditions of men, it threatened his faith . . . it left too big a hole in his nice little preconceived notions . . . so he was terrified by the sight, exploded and walked out (48.14).

Although Berg called the *MO Letters* “shocking,”⁷ he recognized that new converts benefited from gradually introducing concepts instead of revealing “risky” revelations (48.14).

Berg also restricted access to the *MO Letters* to prevent the Children of God’s enemies from collecting evidence of Berg’s condemnations. Interpreting a 1973 vision, for instance, Berg concluded that “this dream was a warning to some of you kids who don’t realise how dangerous

⁷ See, for instance, 193.3 or 560.25.

some of my Letters are. . . . You should do your best to keep [restricted] letters from falling into the hands of outsiders and enemies” (275A.59-60). He worried that those condemned would retaliate rather than repent: “like the message of every true prophet of God, the truth often hurts, and some people may resent it bitterly and blame you for what God said!” (274A.2). Blending the need for gradual proselytization with a concern for secrecy, Berg warned colonies that

I certainly don’t think it’s wise to read many of them [i.e. *MO Letters*] to Systemites or outsiders. . . . Some have very foolishly read strong meat [i.e. shocking letters] . . . when strangers and even enemies were present. . . . Please read them at a time when visitors are least likely to be present (155.49)

Berg’s radical, harsh teachings lived uncomfortably in a physical format that could be widely distributed. He tried to address this issue by separating real and imagined groups or classes: insiders/outsiders, new converts/colony leaders, and criticizers/criticized.

Regarding language, The *MO Letters* relied on vocabulary that resonated with multiple audiences. Some letters deployed formal and archaic terms that recollected the King James Bible, while others used informal and current jargon. These two sets of linguistic markers constructed a hybridized style that gestured towards both timeless sacred authority and present secular concerns.

Particularly when transmitting prophecy or translating glossolalia, Berg used language that emulated the King James Bible. For example, 1970’s “Prophecies of the Handmaiden of the Lord” – restricted to members – concluded with an exhortation to “think thou therefore to prepare the way, for though the blessing tarry, it will come!” (19.42). 1971’s “Mountainslide” – written for the public – used similar language to conclude a prophecy spoken by Berg’s grandmother: “wherefore, comfort ye one another with these words! For we shall comfort one another with the same comfort wherewith we are comforted” (120.25). Although rare in contemporary American speech, *thou*, *tarry*, *ye* and *wherewith* were reminiscent of the King

James Bible, Berg's translation of choice. He suggested that the King James version "had the most believing translators and therefore, is the most inspired English translation, and the most beautiful in the English language" (62.11; see also 671.15). Using terms common in the King James version overlaid qualities of belief, inspiration, and beauty onto Berg's message.

Amidst his efforts to emulate the King James Bible, Berg liberally deployed profanity in *MO Letters* for both internal and external consumption. "Let's Talk About Jesus!" – an alcohol-induced diatribe restricted to group members – is replete with *shit*, *damn*, *ass*, and *fuck*, and ends with Berg saying "damn all that other shit. . . . I don't want anybody but Jesus to fuck me!" (20.23, 25). He used similar language in "Sock it to Me!", a public letter describing the Children of God's music. "Sock it to Me!" claimed that the movement's songs "sometimes violently fuck you" (32.17). Continuing his explicit sexual focus, Berg commanded musicians to "fuck the daylights out of [worldly listeners]" (32.20).

Like Jones, Berg advocated cussing with a purpose. On multiple occasions, Berg admonished members who overused vulgar language out of habit or to add force to their speech (123; 154). Warning readers against overusing "words like shit, damn, [and] fuck," Berg insisted that "they are not necessarily part of every sentence" (123.8). Admitting that some "leaders" used such language, Berg nevertheless cautioned readers against "us[ing] this kind of language continually in vain in your daily conversation" (154.44).

Berg used *shit*, *damn*, and *fuck* strategically, equating profanity with clarity and frankness. In defense of the "good plain and simple little four-letter Anglo Saxon word" *fuck*, Berg accused "the System" of "try[ing] to obliterate all those simple little four-letter words with a lot of great big words like intercourse and copulation" (154.44; 818.5). He tied this obliteration into a larger web of indoctrination:

What good is all that trouble you went to, to get an education, if you couldn't use a lot of big words that nobody could understand? Fuck is too easy a word to use! It's too short, too simple, everybody understands it! (818.6-8).

While the system justified itself through obfuscation, the *MO Letters* relied on simple, understandable language to signal “righteous indignation” against such indoctrination (154.44).

Berg encouraged his audience to “use this kind of language to show that damn System that you are not a part of it!”, and to establish common ground with young dropouts (123.8). He insisted that “there must be some things in common in order for people to communicate. If it takes fuck, damn, shit, to get the point across – Use it! If it takes sweeter language, even church language, use that!” (123.9). In 1972's “The Revolutionary Rules,” Berg further encouraged communicative commonality: “the equipment, uniform and appearance of a revolutionary depends largely on the field of battle. ‘To the Jew as a Jew, the Greek as a Greek, the Roman as a Roman’ – or the hippie as a hippie” (S.12). Finally, Berg warned against removing too many four-letter words when reprinting letters, since their familiarity helped him “reach the world” (229.5). This strategic selection of vocabulary created continuity and familiarity between the group's teachings and the target audience's comforts.

Whether prophetic or profane, Berg expressed fear in the *MO Letters* regarding censorship and security. “The Revolutionary Rules” warned members that “the love of Jesus is more taboo in some places than violence, nudity, and obscenity,” further claiming that “freedoms of religion, speech and press are often ignored by local governments” (S.3). These governments used censorship to reign in dissident groups. Already in 1970 he urged caution, warning that “we are not even too sure of the mails, or how much censorship or spot checking may be involved” (24.12). The *MO Letters* discouraged putting colony names on return addresses, adding religious titles to Berg's name on envelopes, or sending “very thorough description[s] of our entire

organization and the location of its units and the names of its leaders” (47.29-31). Suppressing creativity, Berg chastised members who adorned their mail with “scriptures, scripture references, or witnessing slogans” (47.39). He deemed his own letters “strictly classified information” (49.66). In a letter about letters, Berg called a colony’s mailbox “one of your lifelines, which could be severed by an enemy,” and held “highly personal, classified, important and valuable mail, which no one else should even touch” (51.37, 34). Berg’s conception of the Children of God as an underground group with a “clandestine mission” fueled this postal paranoia (67.32; 24.12). He repeatedly expressed fear of government censorship,⁸ explaining that the Children of God taught “too great a condemnation” of social and religious authorities (J.64).

Through *the MO Letters*, Berg established the Children of God’s identity as pious revolutionaries whose message combined the King James Bible’s spiritual authority with youth protest’s contemporary candour. In doing so, he projected a hybrid linguistic identity, laying the groundwork for dual senses of *whore*, *harlot*, and *hooker*. As a persistent physical record of the group’s attempts to condemn America/Christianity, however, the *MO Letters* fueled Berg’s fears of censorship and persecution by the group’s real and imagined opponents.

“What’s in a Name? – Plenty!”

Berg fostered in-group fluency by underscoring the connection between names/titles and the referent’s actions/nature. In the *MO Letters*, Berg re-named dominant religious and political groups or figures to expose their oppositional status. Most notably, Berg used the term *Systemite* as an overarching label to describe anyone who actually or potentially hindered the Children of God. At the same time, Berg encouraged his followers to adopt new names that highlighted their

⁸ See, for instance, 24, 26 and 47.

actual or anticipated characteristics or ambitions. These acts of (re-)naming disempowered the Children of God's opponents and empowered its members.

For instance, Berg refused to call Christianity *Christianity*, instead using the portmanteau *Churchianity* (see, for instance, C; 107).⁹ As Irving Lewis Allen notes in his sociology of slurs, groups can “protest the ranking [of society], by replacing the proper, preferred name of a group with an altogether different name with negative semantics” (1990, 67). Furthermore, Allen identifies “blend words, which make a new word from syllables of usually two words” as an inventive way to deny a referent group's speech standard and, in doing so, diminish that group (1990, 99). Churchianity accomplished this semantic denial by separating Christians from true Christ-followers. Explaining his choice to abandon Churchianity, Berg invoked a biblical parable that supported revolution instead of reformation:

It is impossible to reform the old for they will not accept it, and in the attempt the bottle will be broken and the contents lost, which is why God had to take young ‘new bottles’ today, strong to contain His Spirit (I.3).¹⁰

Generations of tradition calcified Christian beliefs and habits, creating a comfortable pattern that “deceived [Churchianity's followers] into thinking their own way is right” (G.7). This inflexible obstinance meant that “organised Churchianity is becoming a dying species, soon to be extinct!” (54.47). By rejecting Christianity's preferred nomenclature and linguistically implying its worship of church structures instead of Jesus, Berg encapsulated his criticism in a single term while distancing his theological opponents from Christianity's cultural capital.

⁹ Whether Berg originated this term is unclear. The *Hollywood Free Paper* used *churchianity* in several – later – issues (see “Heavier Than Dope,” 1971, 3.13; David, “[Edward was Offended],” 1972, 4.4).

¹⁰ The parable in question warns against putting “new wine into old bottles; else the new wine will burst the bottles, and be spilled, and the bottles shall perish” (Luke 5:37; also in Matt. 9:17 and Mark 2:22).

Specific figures likewise received revealing names. Berg used *Nitler* to overlay pronouncements of fascism on President Richard Nixon's terms in office. As "the Hitler over here," Berg defined *Nitler* as "the term we prefer to use for Hitler's present American presidential heir" and "America's perfidious little would-be dictator . . . as we have preferred to call him – a nitwit Hitler" (108.14; 239.9; 310.6). Nitler was a fascist and a Nazi,¹¹ a carbon copy of Hitler displaced to a new time and setting (277.78-79, 85). Routinely, Nitler appeared as a poor leader (297.89; 263.70), a corrupt and decadent man (270.5-8), a self-centered person who cared only for his wealthy or powerful friends (108.47, 52; 149.9), and an insane individual (108.47; 198.6; 282A.17). References to Nitler presented a more specific critique than Berg's complaints about Churchianity.

Most broadly, Berg used *Systemite* to refer to anybody affiliated with established religious or social systems. Parents, politicians, and Churchianity's practitioners all received common identity in the *MO Letters* as opponents of the Children of God through *Systemite*.¹² Berg imbued *Systemite* with negative qualities including hypocrisy (F.11), self-centeredness (124.3), and a love of self-made, self-referential monuments (112.40). While the Children of God travelled to spread their "revolution for Jesus," the "damn stupid Systemites" toured Europe "laughing and drunk and making absolute idiots out of themselves" (S.3; 2.86). Berg described Systemites as reluctant to "drop out" of their comfortable, inherited religious and social frames (23.15). The Children of God, by contrast, remained "in the will of God. . . . By staying 'dropped out'! – By keeping 'tuned in' to God, and 'turned on' to his truth" (23.13).

¹¹ See 108.1, 5, 28; 162.5-6, 13; 270.38, and 272.55-56.

¹² Berg linked parents and the older generation to *Systemite* in 50.13, 54.35, 67.46, and 76.30. Berg linked politicians and officials to *Systemite* in 54.35 and 76.30. Berg linked *Churchianity* to *Systemite* in 69.25, 104.27, 109, and 112.40.

Systemites provided an inverse reflection of the Children of God. Negatively, Systemites lacked the selflessness needed to share God's love (124.3), expressed disgust at that which captivated "the hippies" (49.56), and categorically existed apart from "member[s] of the Revolution" (292.52). While these flaws highlighted the Children of God's hip, revolutionary, and selfless virtues,¹³ they did not preclude positive interaction between the two groups. In "Use It," Berg taught readers to "hate the damn system, but use the systemite to get God's work done. . . . All things, including the system, work together for good to those that love the Lord" (27.26).¹⁴

This relationship required tenuous intergroup communication. In several letters, Berg explained that Systemites responded to a different language than the Children of God. He suggested that colonies prepare "a tidy little Systemite brochure, with pictures, and so on, to explain [the Children of God] to the outside world in a language they understand" (49.51).¹⁵ Less optimistically, Berg argued that a lack of comprehension separated Systemites from his followers: "you can't explain anything to a systemite! If he understood, he wouldn't be a systemite" (100.23). To transform Systemites into revolutionaries for Jesus, the Children of God had to translate Berg's message using a language that the outside world would understand.

To signify and personalize this transformation Berg encouraged followers to change their names. By adopting movement-inspired names, participants effected a change in identity based on social affiliation. In her work on name selection, Emilia Aldrin argues that choosing a name

¹³ Kent also observes that Berg's retention of countercultural targets like Nixon or "the System" "made it easy for former protestors who converted to feel continuity with their previous attitudes and activities" (1993, 52). This technique is an example of frame alignment (see chapter 3).

¹⁴ Elsewhere, Berg encouraged his audience to "love the Systemite, but not the system!" (50.16).

¹⁵ While predicting America's immanent economic downfall in 1973, Berg similarly admitted that his "rather raw revelation will be a little rough for some delicate and sensitive Systemite souls" (216.22).

allows individuals to “engage actively in the creation of certain social meanings and structures,” particularly when navigating issues of identity construction (2017, 46). Aldrin identifies various social roles or settings that name selection can reflect, including a person’s religious values (2017, 56). Finally, Aldrin observes that names reflect or enact social positioning. In particular, name frequency situates individuals on a spectrum ranging from “common” to “unique” (Aldrin 2017, 55-56). For Aldrin, selecting a less commonly used name allows one to imbue that name with a sense of uniqueness. The Children of God’s (re-)naming practices, then, served as linguistic processes of identity construction and boundary establishment. Related to language adaptation, Berg’s teachings concerning name changes reveal the connection between titles, behavior, and identity.

Berg encouraged followers to change their names for two reasons. First, a name change symbolized new life, rebirth, and revolution. Second, Berg adopted a deterministic attitude towards language, arguing that names encapsulated a person’s qualities or aspirations. Selecting a suitable name, then, became a part of establishing identity, setting a trajectory of action, and demonstrating one’s knowledge of a term’s meanings. In the *MO Letters*, changing one’s name signalled a break with one’s past Systemite life. While “the Systemites depend totally on the system,” Berg asserted that “we’ve made a complete break religiously. We’re a totally new nation spiritually, in faith and practice and really in method and message” (M.5). This spiritual rebirth called for a titular rebirth: “the Bible says now that we’re Born Again and new creatures in Christ Jesus, old things are passed away and all things are become new, so we ask the Lord for a new name, too” (142.36). Relaying God’s words, Berg used similar language to explain his own renaming, writing that “I have made thee My Moses and My David! I have made thee a new vessel, and completely broken thee and destroyed the former vessel that was” (77.19). For

outsiders who failed to respond to this language of spiritual rebirth and new creation, Berg relied on American freedom. Turning the issue of freedom back on those who accused the group of controlling its members, Berg asked “shouldn’t I be able to choose my own name? Isn’t this a free country – freedom of speech and all that? . . . You’re not really free if you’re forced to take a name somebody else picked for you” (142.36).

More than signalling a new start or freedom from the System, however, changing one’s name shaped one’s behavior, qualities or aspirations. While etymological meaning often plays a minimal role when using names in dominant society,¹⁶ Berg insisted that a person’s name should coincide with their character. In fact, Berg suggested that titles that did not align with action lost their denotive value. In one letter, Berg exposed *church* and *Christian* as signifiers devoid of activity:

The name “church” no longer means anything but a building! . . . The name “Christian” no longer means anything either! It usually means just some kind of hypocritical self-righteous church person who goes to that building on Sunday! Even the name “Jesus People” doesn’t mean much anymore because of the way they’ve been acting lately, which certainly isn’t like Jesus! (143A.128).

Although *church*, *Christian*, and *Jesus People* still signified in the *MO Letters*, these meanings only highlighted the inert or errant status of Churchianity’s practitioners. For Berg, understanding a name or title enabled one to understand the referent’s activities and nature.

The Children of God derived new names from three interconnected sources: God’s leading, the Bible, and one’s actual or anticipated nature. Most simply, Berg believed that God sometimes bestowed names on individuals (77.19; see also 143A.119). Assuring skeptical outsiders of the re-naming process, he wrote that “He [God] leads us to pick a new one” (142.36). This could happen directly, as in the divine revelation of Berg’s own name, or

¹⁶ See Ainiala and Östman (2017, 5).

indirectly, as in the naming of the Children of God. Although *Children of God* emerged as an external media designation, Berg stated that “the Lord let the news media nickname us the Children of God” (143A.120). This indirect influence allowed members the freedom to retain their Systemite names if necessary, and placed any act of (re-)naming within God’s control.

More tangibly, the Children of God drew on the Bible and their own perceived characteristics, ambitions, or contexts when selecting new names. Remarking on sources of appropriate names, Berg wrote that new names

usually [come] from the Bible or some famous Christian hero of Church History! Sometimes they’re the names of virtues we’d like to be like, like Faith, Hope or Charity. Other times it has something to do with our own personal characteristics, such as where we’re from or what we look like, like Matthew Canada, [or] Hodiah Preacher-woman (142.36).

Berg’s (re-)naming strategy merged participants’ creativity, self-perception, and desires with the movement’s textual and historical background. Elsewhere, Berg identified this approach as biblical, since “people are always named in the Bible according to their character, circumstances of birth, place of origin, [or] nature of their work” (101.3). Justifying descriptive nomenclature using early Christianity, he explained that “Christian surnames originated” to differentiate members of the growing religion from one another: “[surnames] identified which Peter, James, or John, or Paul, or Mary they were talking about” (101.3). Adding descriptive surnames extended opportunities for personalisation and verified the movement’s growth.

A name’s presence in the Bible, however, did not assure its appropriateness. In 1975’s “Naming the Baby,” Berg cautioned parents against “closing your eyes and running your finger down the page and grabbing the first [name] it stops on!” (338.105). While hyperbolic, this caution harbored a basic point in Berg’s theory of naming: names indicated – even determined – proclivities and practices. He critiqued those who unwittingly selected names that belonged to

biblical figures who “were downright bad men, the bad guys, the villains,” reminding readers to select “a good Bible character you liked and wanted to be like and knew what kind of a character he or she was” (338.97, 100). Even ignorance of a name’s meaning wouldn’t absolve individuals from potentially manifesting negative etymological qualities: “you didn’t even look up in the Bible to see what the meaning of the name was! . . . It could have been ‘cut-throat’ or ‘damned liar’ or ‘Jacob the Deceiver’ or ‘crook’” (338.98).

Berg saw names and titles as indicators of past, present, or future behavior. Carefully selecting a new name that edified the Children of God demonstrated one’s willingness to break with Systemite identity, as well as one’s fluency in the virtues and heroes that the movement held dear. Likewise, retitling opponents became an act of denotive clarification and rebellion. Ultimately, Berg’s (re-)naming activities empowered the Children of God while disempowering their opponents. By encouraging members to select new names from Christian myth and history, Berg incorporated authenticity or legitimacy gained from traditional, mythical, and historical Christian associations into the Children of God. At the same time, by condemning American Christianity as inert or errant Churchianity, Berg separated these traditional, mythical, and historical sites of authenticity from mainline Christianity.

Relating Good and Evil

Berg’s insistence on selecting unique names associated with group-mandated virtues, and his warnings to avoid names with undesirable etymologies, suggests a sharp separation between good and evil in his theology, and deterministic moralizing (wherein “bad” meanings produce “bad” behavior) in his conception of words and meanings. In reality, Berg taught that the Children of God’s real and perceived opponents played a constitutive role in the group’s identity

construction and pragmatic behavior. He further clarified the relationship between activity and morality to justify using promiscuity for godly purposes. These relationships between good/moral and evil/immoral constitute a final rhetorical strand that supported his appropriation of *whore*, *harlot*, and *hooker*.

Berg re-purposed conflict between the Children of God and outsiders as a purifying process that shaped the group's identity, behavior, and organizational makeup. He began one of the earliest *MO Letters* with an explanation of constitutive opposition, explaining that "the kids are rebellious against society because the society is anti-God. Everything the kids are – the way they look, the way they act – in a large degree it's a rebellion against the pattern of society" (E.2). Since Berg believed that a successful message needed points of commonality to resonate with a target audience, anti-God society indirectly shaped the language and imagery that he used, as well as the problems to which he offered solutions. If the kids had rebelled against something else, then the Children of God would have developed different images, terms, and promises.

Rather than dismissing evil to focus on good, Berg insisted that "even the villains of history were necessary! Where would the good guys be without the bad guys? You wouldn't appreciate the white-hats! Even the Devil is necessary" (12.24). Mixing history, film, and theology, Berg claimed that heroes and holy figures gained their privileged status through contrast with their antagonistic opposites. Acknowledging a condemnatory article in a Jesus People newspaper, Berg quipped that "a man is not only known by his friends, but also by his enemies" (76.33). Commanding his audience "don't be afraid of that article," he used the critique to clarify the Children of God's identity in relation to the Jesus People (76.35).

Rather than defending himself against the "Sell-Christ-Down-The-River-Judas-Movement," Berg observed that "this [article] draws the line sharp and clear between them and

us, and shows plainly the Wolf's fangs under his long-haired sheep's coat," concluding that "the Lord's true sheep know their master's voice" (76.33-34). The Jesus People's condemnation thus highlighted the Children of God's faithfulness to God their master. Elsewhere, Berg similarly claimed that oppression served as a rubric for holiness. He warned that "when the Church got so big that it was recognised, accepted, adopted and patronised by the State, it lost the power and blessing of God" (23.11). Confidently, Berg taught that "as long as we're still small, still poor, and still persecuted, we're . . . most likely to be in the will of God" (23.13). Here, opposition and hardship guaranteed that the Children of God's behavior represented God's will. Berg even repurposed negative press as promotion. Commenting on a 1977 *Christianity Today* cover story that named the Children of God "Disciples of Deception," he wrote,

they don't seem to realise that if they would just shut up and stop advertising us that people would soon forget us! . . . But with that cover . . . if any PK (preacher's kid) gets ahold of that he's bound to make a beeline for one of our colonies! (576.3).

In this and other letters (see 118.29, 125.34), Berg claimed that attempts to slander the group through sensational depictions attracted young radicals to the movement.

Most directly, Berg's "Persecution" letter theorized that "persecution is not bad, but good, and good for you! It is persecution for a purpose" (125.12). The letter outlined multiple ways in which opposition strengthened or shaped the movement. Acting as a crucible, persecution "purges the ranks of those that don't mean business and who are not devoted, loyal, and true . . . but who, like Judas, will cop out under pressure and turn on you and betray you" (125.13). Persecution also introduced asymmetrical relations between devoted, loyal members and defectors who buckled under oppression, clarifying the group's worldview "it will really show you who your enemies are. . . . It also shows who you are . . . and that your Message is the truth, by the very fact that they persecute you" (125.14-15). Acts of opposition created and

demarcated real/imagined groups to organize the Children of God's members and interlocutors, validating their message while condemning their opponents to judgment (125.14-15, 17).

Pragmatically, persecution guided colonies' proselytization efforts: "by the time the enemy starts persecuting, it shows you have really gotten the Message out! . . . When they make it too hard to carry on, it's time to move" (125.16). Opposition signalled the end of a colony's proselytization efforts in a particular area, encouraging them to "giv[e] some other city or land their chance" (125.18). Without effacing the line between good and evil, Berg's notion of constitutive opposition formed a dualistic and pragmatic roadmap for interpreting conflict between the Children of God and critical outsiders.

Moreover, Berg linked the Children of God to their opponents through sexual promiscuity, emphasizing difference at the level of intent rather than activity. Since promiscuity found more support in what Berg saw as anti-Christ society than in traditional Christian behavior, Berg had to account for his divergence from Churchianity while defending the group's actions as sacred rather than profane. To do so, Berg discarded the notion that any activity was inherently profane/evil or sacred/good, instead arguing that one's motivations and purposes imbued activities with moral value. This attitude allowed the Children of God to act as holy hookers while condemning worldly whores.

From sackcloth vigils to sexual sharing, the Children of God's embodiment of God's message appeared unconventional. To insulate the group against charges of impropriety, Berg argued that the Bible provided precedent for ignoring social protocols. Just as he decried Churchianity's rituals and customs, Berg conceptualized social norms and legal codes as human-created restrictions that inherited the System's flaws. Contrasting human propriety and divine license, Berg wrote "to hell with the proper way! . . . The proper way is of man! The unexpected,

and the improper, the unconventional and untraditional, the unorthodox and unceremonious . . . this is the way God usually works!” (35.13). This sentiment uncoupled the Children of God’s moral compass from Systemite norms, encouraging deviance. The greater the gap between proper behavior and the group’s actions, the closer those activities approximated godly conduct.

Berg cited biblical stories to justify this assertion. Viewed from a Systemite perspective, he mused that God relied on “very poor tactics” to influence humankind (35.24). He reminded readers that God commanded prophets to marry prostitutes, walk around naked, or eat excrement (27.12; 35.25; 117A.16),¹⁷ encouraged women to behave like harlots (27.12),¹⁸ and recruited “a bunch of stinking long-haired fisherman” to serve as Jesus’ first followers (35.25). These stories dissociated Churchianity’s conservatism from biblical events.

To uncouple promiscuity from immorality, Berg made two arguments against designating any action as inherently immoral. First, Berg asserted that *good* and *evil* were qualities ascribed to actions by an actor’s intent. Second, Berg argued that every evil thing had a good counterpart. Both arguments allowed Berg to develop flirty fishing as a divinely sanctioned activity while simultaneously condemning opponents using Revelation’s apocalyptic imagery of *whore*.

In a 1971 letter, Berg claimed that “nothing is evil of itself . . . it’s all in how it’s used, or misused, which makes it good or bad” (104.2). As an example, he observed that “like your own body, or almost anything else in this world. . . . [Church buildings] could be used for great good” (104.2). By refusing to allow the Children of God to “live in them together, sleep in them, eat in them, have classes in them, be sheltered by them, and use them as a base of operations,” however, Churchianity condemned its buildings to damned status (104.2). Building or owning a

¹⁷ See Hosea 1:2, Isaiah 20:3, and Ez. 4:12.

¹⁸ See Ruth 3:7 and Gen. 38:14-15.

church did not constitute a moral crime in and of itself, but refusing to risk social stigma or structural damage when “a fulltime, soul-winning Army” requested that church’s use rendered the building’s caretakers morally liable (104.4). Elsewhere Berg went further, stating that if the tools and tactics used by the Devil were inherently evil, then God’s representatives would quickly run out of ways to proselytize. Again condemning Churchianity, Berg warned that

these damn, fool, so-called Christians, are so crazy they won’t even use a piano in some of their so-called churches, just because the Devil uses pianos in his nightclubs! . . . If you stopped using everything the Devil uses, there wouldn’t be anything left! (27.39).

Like church buildings, musical instruments occupied neutral moral space until deployed to advance either godly or demonic purposes.

In theory, anything could be used by faithful witnesses to reveal God’s truths. To awaken youth, for example, “God had to permit drugs to enter this country to open the eyes of the young people to the spirit world and the supernatural! – And away from the materialism of their parents!” (100.21).¹⁹ In relation to sex, Berg encouraged colonies to photograph women in swimsuits as promotional material, saying “let the kids know the devil’s not the only one who has sex to offer! In fact, you oughtta remind them that God originated it, and created it for us to enjoy” (104.29). So long as the photographers and their subjects promoted sexuality for divine purposes, participants did not need to worry about the Devil’s use of sex. Intent or inspiration decided an action’s morality.

Berg’s logic regarding swimsuit photos introduces his second argument against Churchianity’s refusal to utilize proselytizing techniques that anti-Christ forces used: every evil activity had a good counterpart or origin. Although the Children of God promoted questionable activities for divine purposes, Churchianity’s ignorance of this concept ensured that the terms

¹⁹ Berg similarly identified drug use as a symptom of American youth seeking spiritual truth in E.11. On the relationship between drug use and spiritual experience in American counterculture, see T. Miller (1999, 92).

describing such behaviors had predominantly negative connotations. Such negativity affected Berg's ability to fully embrace *whore/harlot/hooker* in his writing.

This argument appeared most fully in 1976's "God's Witches!" (573). The letter begins by framing flirty fishing as a type of hypnosis, or "getting a power over the other person's spirit" (573.5). To describe this process, Berg deployed the titular image, writing that "you absolutely bewitch them!" (573.7). Immediately, however, he admitted that "I don't like to use those terms about witches, it sounds like something bad," and launched into a far-ranging – if not confident – defense of his terminology (573.7).

Berg defended his language as necessary for establishing commonality with an audience, then sparking their interest through shock. He explained that "you have to use a word that people understand, and they understand witches" (573.14). Echoing Jones, Berg affirmed that "it's good to shock people, it wakes them up! If you just say the same old thing all the time . . . everybody goes to sleep" (573.18; see also 573.153).²⁰ Neither of these defenses, however, reformed *witch*'s negative connotations.

This logic, moreover, faltered when Berg observed that the Devil also "uses things that shock people in the newspaper and the magazines and the movies and television . . . [to] wake them up in a way" (573.19). Rather than deflecting this problem by reminding readers that intent imbued activity with good or evil status, though, Berg structured good and evil as mirror images of one another:

There has to be a counterpart to everything, like in the religion of Taoism: To everything, they say, there is an opposite, in all life. To good there's the opposite, evil; to fire there's the opposite, water; to the male there's the opposite, the female. . . . And to the good realities of God there are the evil opposites of the Devil (573.20-21).²¹

²⁰ Berg encouraged Children of God musicians to shock outsiders with their music (32.8) and claimed that he himself was "shocked with what the Lord is doing – absolutely awed by the radicalism of His Spirit" (109.13).

To avoid giving the Devil too much creative power, Berg clarified that “all the devil does is watch what God does and then he imitates it” (573.22, see also 573.17, 23). These counterparts populated Berg’s religious landscape. For instance, the two sets of God/Devil, Christ/Antichrist, and Holy Spirit/False Prophet formed two Trinities (573.22). Magic mirrored miracles, wizards paralleled prophets, and “demon possession” emerged as the inverse equivalent to “angel-possess[ion]” (573.24-26, 77).

Berg struggled, however, to denote *witch*’s godly opposite, complaining that the Devil had “capture[d] all these words [i.e. *witch*, *charm*, *wizard*, *magician*]” (573.8). Indeed, the Devil’s power had grown so strong that Berg had to reverse the mirroring process to describe the Children of God as *witches*:

There are no good words for the power of God in our language, there are no good words for our charm, our power, our enchanting power, our bewitching power. We have to use words borrowed from the Devil’s power to get the meaning (573.10).

Berg used this appropriative reversal – where God’s witnesses now mimicked the Devil – to disempower Churchianity. His condemnation justified his unique vocabulary choices:

How can the Church have words for things they no longer have and powers they no longer possess? How can they have words for people they don’t have in their churches? They no longer have powerful wizards of God, witches of God, spells of God, for most of the churches no longer have spiritual powers (573.144-145).

Churchianity’s inability to recognize that it had previously deployed actions that the Devil also used created an impotent religion that lacked spiritual efficacy.

To label these recovered abilities and positions, Berg had to create new terms or alter familiar vocabulary. He narrated his struggle to produce a positive term for *charming*/*enchanting*/*hypnotizing*, musing “I don’t like to say the word bewitch, but maybe we could coin a new one – to ‘bespirit’ or something” (573.9). *Witch* proved similarly problematic: “what is the

²¹ In 331B.26, Berg summarized Taoism’s core message as “everything comes in twos.”

opposite of a witch? A good angel? No, an angel is a spirit-being” (573.9). By the letter’s end, Berg found solace in the group’s distinctive vocabulary. Connecting fluency to identity and membership, he wrote that “these titles, these strange expressions, these names that God has given have even become a part of our language. Because the moment you use that name our kids understand what you’re talking about” (573.154). By calling members witches, Berg differentiated the Children of God from Churchianity, identified the group’s strengths and their opposition’s weakness, and showed his willingness to use terms with diminutive connotations.

These rhetorical strands – a hybrid linguistic identity, renaming and fluency, constitutive opposition, and reconceptualizing *good* and *evil* – allowed Berg to simultaneously support and subvert the pejorative connotations that he believed Systemite society associated with *whore*, *harlot*, and *hooker*. Although Berg drew these terms from the same source – the Bible – and although the three terms function interchangeably denotatively, *whore*, *harlot*, and *hooker* each played a unique role in the Children of God’s biblical revolution. The remainder of this chapter addresses the range of meanings Berg associated with each term, as well as how these meanings affected the Children of God’s ability to structure asymmetrical relations, identify real or imagined groups or classes, and contest social norms. With *whore*, Berg de-emphasized sexuality in favor of Christian allegory to discredit his Systemite and Churchianity opponents. He appropriated *whore*’s negative, non-literal connotations but retargeted its denotations to condemn those from whom he borrowed the word and situate the Children of God in an apocalyptic timeline. By contrast, Berg used *hooker* positively, playing on Jesus’ labelling of faithful followers as “fishers of men”²² to justify the Children of God’s sexual experimentation. Transposing the Bible’s words into contemporary jargon to justify flirty fishing, Berg subverted

²² See Matt. 4:19.

hooker's negative status without dropping its sexual meanings. *Harlot*, finally, served as a bridge between *whore*'s negative allegorical sense and *hooker*'s creative subversive sense. Berg used *harlot* to denote marginal social location, but drew on biblical examples to categorize harlots as God's chosen people. This simultaneous linguistic retention and revision of *whore*, *hooker*, and *harlot*'s meanings affected the movement's practices, demographics, and beliefs.

It is important to note the differences between *whore/harlot/hooker* and *nigger* as pejorative terms. Unlike *nigger*, *whore/harlot/hooker* targeted and characterized particular individuals based on their occupation or behavior, rather than referring broadly to an entire group based on a single characteristic.²³ Only women who participated in flirty fishing, moreover, became whores or hookers. Without denying that men could convert others through sexual intimacy, Berg identified flirty fishing as a ministry best practiced by females (548.60; 573.122).²⁴ Since Berg did not ascribe *whore*, *harlot*, or *hooker* to unusual referents, he did not need to radically alter the definitions of these terms. He did, however, recognize that being (called) a whore, harlot, or hooker had negative social consequences in Churchianity-influenced cultures.

As occupational titles or behavioral descriptors rather than racial slurs, *whore/harlot/hooker* lacked *nigger*'s pejorative strength. In the *MO Letters*, however, each term remained what Lynne Tirrell calls a "reductive classification," that is, "[a classification] that purports to reduce the [target's] rich and complex identity to the category that is applied" (1999, 67n3). While Berg's early uses of *whore* and *harlot* referenced specific biblical figures, most of his

²³ See Lycan's differentiation of *slut* from *nigger* (2015, 5).

²⁴ Berg conceived of flirty fishing as a woman's task due to expedience. While "sex is a basic essential need of the male personality," "a woman needs love expressed in a much greater variety of ways" (529.9, 26). Since "it is much easier for a woman to satisfy a man's greatest needs," the *MO Letters* defended female flirty fishing as the norm (529.36, see also 44).

whores, harlots, and hookers have little identity beyond their promiscuous nature. Berg made broad statements that further illustrate his reductive use of these labels. Phrases like “very few whores ever win any rape cases” or “whores . . . do it [*sic*: have sex] for money,” for instance, ascribe the same motivations and challenges to all whores (528.23; 549.26-27). Berg used *whore* as a catch-all term that effaced difference and failed to take the unique situations, motivations, and attitudes that his promiscuous referents experienced into account.

Being a whore/hooker in the Children of God – like being a “nigger” in Peoples Temple – meant taking on a set of identifying traits that all members of the addressed group shared, despite each individual’s unique perspectives or qualities. While each movement’s appropriation and rehabilitation of negative terminology countered the pejorative nature of *nigger* or *whore* by inscribing positive meaning, the broad application of these rehabilitated words rendered them reductive. *Whore*, *harlot*, and *hooker*, therefore, are pejorative words due to their reductive classificatory qualities (Tirrell 1999, 3).

Whore: “The Worst Thing You Could Possibly Say” or “Why Should You Be Ashamed?”

In the *MO Letters*, Berg repeatedly used *whore* pejoratively. His retention of Christianity’s negative interpretation of a whore in the book of Revelation seems, at first glance, out of place amidst his rejection of Churchianity. Moreover, Berg’s often-allegorical use of *whore* clashes with his assertion that names and titles should reflect the actual lived behavior of their referents. Without denying these peculiarities, I reveal *whore* as a site of Berg’s struggle to disempower critics while situating the Children of God in an apocalyptic timeline that asserted the group’s sacred status and licensed his advice to be a *hooker*. Moreover, I trace *whore*’s evolution in relation to the Children of God’s changing practices. As the movement’s doctrinal

needs and the proselytizing behavior changed, Berg's appropriation of *whore*'s symbolic and speculative denotations allowed him to morph the term from a derisive condemnation into a positive paradigm.

Most instances of *whore* in Berg's teachings referred to a biblical antagonist found in Revelation 17-18. This "great whore," or "Babylon the Great, the Mother of Harlots and Abominations of the Earth,"²⁵ joined Revelation's cast of symbolic characters to depict the final battle between God and the Devil and good's triumph over evil. Like many twentieth-century Christian interpreters, Berg saw Revelation as a cryptic roadmap outlining past, present, and future events that comprised this cosmic contest. If one could translate Revelation's symbolic code, then one could place current events into an eschatological timeline and ascribe good or evil status to particular figures and nations. Hal Lindsey and C. C. Carlson's 1970 book *The Late, Great Planet Earth* stands as the exemplar of this interpretive method during Berg's lifetime and provides a backdrop for his understanding of Revelation's *whore*.²⁶

Like Berg, Lindsey and Carlson recognized that Revelation's imagery may be "shocking or offensive" to readers (1970, 114). They interpreted the whore as a "religious system" tied to dictatorial political figures and imperial control (1970, 104, 123). Lindsey and Carlson went on to clarify that this religious system "bring[s] all false religions together," further claiming that the rise of youth interest in "astrology," "spiritism," "the return of the supernatural," and "drug addiction" heralded its rise (1970, 124-125). Remarking specifically on *whore*, Lindsey and Carlson emphasized unfaithfulness and deception, explaining that this religious system claimed

²⁵ See Rev. 17:1, 5.

²⁶ Like Berg, Lindsey emerged as an older-generation leader in the Jesus People (Nichols 2008, 158-160). For *The Late, Great Planet Earth*'s status as an exemplar of contemporary American interpretations of Revelation, see Boyer (1992, 126-128).

allegiance to God but had sold out to politicians, “prostituting its purpose” by exchanging its semblance of holiness for worldly power (1970, 129, 133). Since the whore’s false religion claimed to worship the Christian God, Lindsey and Carlson insulated their own faith tradition by arguing that “Christianity is not a religion. Religion is the process of man trying to achieve goodness, perfection, and acceptance with God by his own efforts. Christianity . . . is God taking the initiative and reaching for man” (1970, 115). Lindsey and Carlson thus exonerated Christianity by emphasizing divine action and rejecting the efficacy of human rituals and constructions.

The specific identity of Revelation’s whore, however, remained nebulous. In many ways, Berg’s initial use of *whore* in the *MO Letters* mirrors the whore’s nebulous identity in *The Late, Great Planet Earth*. As time went on, however, Berg’s increasing rejection of both the United States and Churchianity led to much more explicit decoding of the whore’s identity.

Berg’s earliest uses of *whore* all appear in an apocalyptic context, and most stress the relationship between false religion, economy, and empires. As a vague villain, *whore* stood in for amorphous politicians and policies that Berg condemned. In a 1970 prediction of coming economic ruin, for instance, he explained that the “Big Merchants” would manipulate “the poor” and promote the Vietnam War in their quest to “support the Whore” (H.7, 9). In August 1970’s “The Rise of the Reactionary Right,” Berg associated *whore* with “the insidious far right,” which sought approval from Systemites through its crusade of “violence against hippies and young protestors” (L.8-9). Even more vaguely, several 1970 letters spoke only of the affiliation of the whore of Revelation with the System (see 5.12, 24.4).

While Berg provided several specific examples of whorish false religion’s connection to secular power, these examples drew on myth and history instead of contemporary actors or

events. In “The Rise of the Reactionary Right,” Berg claimed that “Mussolini and the Nazis had the blessing of the Pope,” further remarking that “the Catholic Church depends on the Whore for its existence” (L.10). Later, Berg drew on biblical narratives of Jesus’ birth to identify “Herod the Horrible and leaders of the religious whore [i.e. institutional Judaism]” as co-conspirators in Jesus’ first encounter with persecution (27.23). None of these early uses provide a clear definition of what Berg meant by *whore*. The term’s presence signalled a nefarious connection between false religion and secular authorities, but specific denotations remained elusive. It’s also notable that, in these earliest uses of *whore*, Berg distanced the title from sexual behavior (see 20.22 for a lone 1970 exception).

As Berg separated the Children of God from Churchianity and other branches of the Jesus People over time, however, *whore* became a linguistic signal highlighting the flaws of established Christianity and its ties to empire. Thus conceived, *whore* used binary comparisons of good/evil, faithful/sell-out, and Systemite/radical to create asymmetrical relations between the Children of God and their Christian interlocutors. Ironically, Berg used the same argument to separate the Children of God from Churchianity that Lindsey and Carlson used to separate Christianity from religion: self-interested and human-constructed practices did not reflect true communion with God.

Berg rooted *whore*’s condemnation of Christianity’s institutionalization in the fourth century Roman Emperor Constantine’s toleration of the fledgling faith. Thanks to Constantine

Christianity became accepted, recognised, popular, powerful, wealthy, and dictatorial, and became Rome itself – the very System it had dropped out of. . . . The church had become the Empire. . . . The true Church had to go underground, while the whorish System of Babylon reigned supreme (61.52; see also 318.25).

While the protest and creativity Berg identified in the Protestant Reformations freed the true Church, this freedom lasted only until Protestantism’s own “whorish collaboration with the

Beast,” complete with national affiliations and traditions (61.53; see also 318.27). This collaborative traditionalism persisted into contemporary America, where “the God-damned Orthodoxists, Catholicists, Inquisitors, and hierarchical worshippers of the System” attacked the Children of God “in the name of their own God-damned dogmatic doctrines of the Whore” (76.51). In short, Revelation’s whore became Churchianity. Repeatedly, Berg used *whore* to label Churchianity as false or evil, situating the Children of God – Churchianty’s opposite – as true or holy.

In several *MO Letters*, Berg included *whore* in lists of opposing terms that crafted this asymmetry. 1971’s “Flesh or Spirit” referred to “the battle royal between pride and humility, between the damned religionists and the saved sinners, the perpetual warfare that has been waged ever since between the False Church and the True Church, the Whore and the Bride” (45.5). In “Persecution,” Berg again contrasted “the true followers” with “the False Church, the wicked Whore” (125.39). Finally, in a lengthy 1976 explanation of Revelation, he differentiated “the Kingdom of Christ, the Church” from “the Whore, the System, the kingdom of the Devil” (541.45). The letter’s cover page explained the outcome of allegiance to each side, promising “Heavenly Delights for God’s Gal” and warning of “Hellish Horrors for System Slut” (541).

Elsewhere, Berg specifically identified Churchianity and the Jesus People as the whore’s allies. In 1972, Berg challenged the Devil, explaining that “we’ve declared war on his works and his Churchianity, his Whore” (168.13; also 303.37). Calling out his Jesus People contemporaries, Berg scoffed that their ministries generated “Jesus People, that you can find in church on Sunday, and on the streets on Saturday, but workin’ for the Whore the rest of the week, same as any other damn systemite!” (54.47). In a harsher indictment, Berg called the Jesus People a “sly, Satanic imitation and System substitute for true Discipleship, a cheap Bargain Counter Religion

being foisted on youth by the Church System to promote the Whore herself” (76.25). Later in the same letter, Berg identified the Jesus People’s churches as “Whorehouse[s]” (76.33). Taking a more procedural tone, Berg complained that “the Jesus People haven’t dropped out! They’re still a part of . . . the fiendish, hellish, whorish, commercial, churchianity system” (148.14, see also 10).²⁷ Mocking the Jesus People, he wrote that “they’re at their damn System jobs and still going to those damned, abominable church buildings! . . . You don’t have a revolution just by letting your hair grow long!” (148.23, 26). These excerpts explicitly connected *whore* to the Children of God’s religious opponents.

In addition to appropriating *whore* from the Bible, Berg also retained portions of Christianity’s interpretation of the term. For Berg – as for Lindsey and Carlson – *whore* denoted false, human-centered religious behavior that sold out to secular powers while retaining its guise of true religion. Berg, however, turned this critique back onto Christianity, identifying Churchianity and the Jesus People as present-day whores. Rather than changing *whore*’s meaning or connotation, Berg adapted *whore*’s referent based on his condemnation of Jesus People who failed to drop out and churches that allied too closely with the System. Contemporary Christian interpretations of Revelation emphasized *whore*’s allusive, opaque, and symbolic qualities, and Berg’s acts of appropriation carried over this plasticity. By doing so, Berg gained a pejorative term that he could deploy against various groups. Since mainline Christianity and the Jesus People failed to provide a single, definitive explanation of what/who the whore symbolized, Berg rhetorically forced a speculative impasse that assigned asymmetrical values to the Children of God, Churchianity, and the Jesus People.

²⁷ A similar sequence of condemnations appears in 351.75.

Whore's condemnation of Christianity, however, covered only half of its critical denotive possibilities in the *MO Letters*. Beginning with March 1973's "America the Whore!", Berg equated *whore* unequivocally with the United States (216). In this letter, he addressed international exchange rates in the wake of President Nixon's New Economic Policy (see Zeiler 2013). Dismayed at both the "news that the European money changers . . . foolishly agreed to support the dollar" and the knowledge that his readers "can't understand all this high finance," Berg claimed that "God has to give you a simple little illustration" to explain the danger of backing the American dollar (216.1, 8). Revelation's whore provided this illustration.

Interpreting Revelation's "astonishingly accurate, deadly descriptive and powerful potent passages," Berg identified America as "the final manifestation of the Whore of world capitalistic Commercialism" (216.32). Tying *whore* to anti-Christ apocalypticism, he encouraged readers still in the United States to "abandon their whore" and to "get out of that old Whore! . . . God is about to judge her!" (216.43, 34). In subsequent letters, Berg identified America as "the very epitome of the Babylonish Whore" (318B.5; see also 541.104). He reminded readers that "God has always commanded his people to 'drop out,' to come out of the whore, and this is still his message to his children caught in the greatest Whore of all time, America" (541.88). He further warned that God would "put an end to the most death-dealing, destructive, war-mongering, wasteful and extravagant nation the world has ever known [*sic*: the U.S.] – Babylon the Great Whore" (350.155).

In these passages, the Children of God encountered Revelation's whore not as a vague allegory associated with historical powers like the Roman Empire or Nazi Germany, but as a specific, contemporary nation. Berg's use of *whore* thus justified the group's message and the practices. Identifying America as Revelation's whore – with all of Churchianity's negative

connotations preserved – explained Berg’s exodus from the country and subsequent seclusion abroad. As a condemnatory voice calling out an anti-Christ figure, Berg’s absence from the Children of God’s American colonies verified the whore’s danger. Moreover, identifying America as Revelation’s whore – as well as linking specific events and figures in American government and foreign policy to biblical passages – underscored his message’s urgency.

“America the Whore” introduced a second recurrent theme into Berg’s use of *whore* after 1973: explicit sexual or relational connotations.²⁸ Berg identified whoredom as an ungodly occupation (216.7), a trade devoid of love (216.4), and a relationship with no lasting affection or benefit (216.16, 19). The letter characterized America the whore as old (216.4, 11), decrepit (216.9, 11), and useful only for sex (216.8, 18).²⁹ Moreover, the title *whore* negated the need for respect. Berg wrote that “it’s time for the rape of Ameri[c]a. . . . She doesn’t deserve respect: She’s an old Whore!” (216.4). America the whore appeared as an aging, worn-out prostitute that “has seduced and infected the whole world” and “did corrupt the earth with her fornication” (216.17, 41). Since Berg identified sex as a whore’s only purpose, and since America’s crumbling – metaphorical – body could no longer fulfill this function, the letter encouraged the whore’s pimps to “cut her off and let her die” (216.9).

Here and in other *MO Letters*, Berg used language of barrenness and infertility to degrade and dismiss whores. During a letter on spiritual warfare, he characterized the Children of God’s battle against the System as

uncovering their rotten nakedness, their stinking, rotting flesh – fleshliness, devoid of the power of God, and now denuded of the cloak of hypocrisy. . . . They are becoming extinct – a species without reproductive organs – impotent – barren – and alone – even

²⁸ See 20 and 123 for the only two pre-1973 letters that explicitly connect *whore* to sexual behavior.

²⁹ In a rare moment of self-censorship, Berg characterized America the whore as nothing more than a “p—y hole,” reducing *whore*’s denotation to a sexual object (216.18).

without God – the False Church – the Great Whore (171.43).

Berg's *whore* separated sex from procreation. This take on sexual terminology separated *whores* from the Children of God's *hookers*, who produced a new generation of movement members. In 1975,³⁰ similarly, Berg reprinted an end-time vision that characterized Revelation's whore as "desolate and naked" (334.137).

Ironically, Jesus People leaders responded to Berg's use of *whore* – a barren, childless figure – by playing with the term's procreative implications. Jack Norman Sparks – Berg's contemporary whose Christian World Liberation Front targeted the same young, countercultural audience as the *MO Letters* – reflected *whore's* negative connotations back at the Children of God by speculating on the group's status as a prostitute's progeny.³¹ Deflecting Berg's doctrines, he countered that "the Children of God is a bastard orphan heresy. It is a bastard because it admits its mother to be a whore; [and] an orphan because it pronounces its whore-mother dead" ([1977] 1979, 177). While the Children of God emphasized its separation from impotent, whorish Churchianity, Sparks used Berg's linguistic choices to challenge what he saw as the Children of God's flawed logic.

Religiously, politically, and sexually, *whore* signified false faith, immanent destruction, and negative growth. As Berg began to promote flirty fishing, however, *whore* appeared in a more lenient context. Emphasizing the importance of affection and attention as embodied religious values, he wrote that "that's one thing even a whore can make you feel. . . . Most of the whores and prostitutes I ever knew . . . enjoyed their work and they loved the men and felt like

³⁰ Berg dated the revelation 1960 but explained that it contained "a prophetic vision given 15 years ago," moving the publication date to 1975 (334).

³¹ For a description of the Christian World Liberation Front, and another example of Sparks' aversion to the Children of God, see Streiker (1971, 90-97).

they were trying to help them” (561.42). Explaining his choice of terminology, Berg connected *whore* to truth, shock, and honesty:

I just use the term because it shocks you. I mean it’s the worst thing you could possibly say about most women. . . . But the Lord loved the whores. . . . And they loved Him because they knew He understood their love for men and their desire to try and help men and to comfort men and really to have a ministry to men (560.31-32).

In this passage, Berg acknowledged *whore*’s negative connotations in both biblical and contemporary period. Drawing on his belief that sex enacted for godly purposes sanctified promiscuity, however, Berg inverted *whore*’s negative connotations to claim that whores practiced a holy ministry of love. If God loved and saved whores while the System reserved the term as a demeaning pejorative label, then that disparity showed the System’s inherent anti-Christ tendencies.

Whore’s positive connotative capacity led Berg to encourage female members to embrace the title. Rather than denying a 1977 *Time* magazine’s accusation that the group “had added to the Playboy philosophy ‘the ancient practice of religious prostitution’,” he embraced promiscuity, writing “for God’s sake, let’s be honest [about our behavior]!” (597.35).³² He reminded readers that intention sanctified action, emphasizing the break between Systemite sexual mores and the Children of God’s revolutionary sex: “you used to do it just for fun, for kicks. . . . So for God’s sake, why should you be ashamed to be called ‘God’s whores’ or ‘religious prostitutes’ if you’re doing it now for the Lord!” (597.36). In fact, Berg questioned the term’s pejorative status, berating followers who “don’t like being called a ‘beggar’ and a ‘whore’ and you get all uptight just because people call you bad names – or what you think are bad names, or what they think are bad names” as too reliant on the System’s opinions (597.39). This quotation emphasizes *whore*’s polyvalent connotations. In apocalyptic or political contexts Berg

³² See “Tracking the Children of God” (vol. 110, no. 8).

deployed *whore* in connection with evil empires and demonic forces to disempower his opponents. As a defense against criticism, however, he inverted *whore*'s associations, inviting followers to reject the System's definitions and claim the term as a model for godly love.

"A Potent Typology":³³ Harlot and Godly Sex

Berg's appropriation and retention of *whore* as an ambiguous allegorical signifier, alongside his inversion of the term to promote and condone the group's evolving practices, involved a greater range of connotations and denotations than other sexual vocabulary in the *MO Letters*. *Harlot* straddled positive and negative connotations, serving as a sign of social marginality, a sinful practice, and a common characteristic of Jesus' companions. *Hooker*, in turn, negotiated the interaction between the Children of God's biblical grounding and its appeal to contemporary youth culture. As an inventive re-interpretation of Jesus' teachings, *hooker* tied sexual promiscuity to godly behavior in an informal, contemporary manner, providing a linguistic buffer that freed Berg from pinpointing flirty fishing's origins in the Bible.

Harlot usually appeared in the *MO Letters* to label a biblical cast of characters who practiced a socially marginalizing occupation. Crucially, however, Berg found a holy silver lining to harlotry, repeatedly linking these characters to forgiveness, love, and proximity to Jesus. Consider Berg's evaluation of Jesus' shocking behavior as expressed in the Gospels:

Wouldn't it have been better for him to have lived a little more decently and acceptably. . . . [Instead of being] executed with the common criminals, and leav[ing] behind the evil reputation of having been a companion of publicans and sinners, a glutton and a winebibber, found too often in the company of drunks and harlots (35.24).

In this passage, harlots shared a social position with criminals and drunks, and served as an example of Jesus' very poor tactics for establishing God's Kingdom on earth. Berg explained

³³ See 537.9.

that harlots “offend[ed] the System,” contributed to classifying Jesus’ followers as “a motley crew of ne’er-do-wells,” and populated the Bible with a cast of “questionable and undesirable characters” (35.25-27). Commenting on the presence of “ex-harlots” in colony leadership, Berg noted that “this isn’t exactly the kind of society most people are looking for. . . . Most of us want to be of some reputation and to be well-thought of and respected” (35.36). These uses of *harlot* retained the term’s common denotation of referring to somebody who practiced “free love and adultery and licentiousness,” and evaluated such practices as socially unacceptable (35.34).

Elsewhere, *harlot* followed a similar pattern. Berg related harlotry to self-destruction and drug addiction (47.49; 251.24; 259.47; see also 250.17), and claimed that harlots suffered from humiliation and poor reputations (117A.16; 537.14). Cementing these qualities as negative, Berg explained that a harlot was “a bad woman,” later teaching that harlots practiced “God-prohibited, over-indulgent and excessive sexual activities” (251.24; 258.16). He thus retained and amplified biblical and contemporary pejorative conceptions of harlots. His rare non-literal deployments of the term followed a similar trajectory. In a scathing indictment of the Jesus People, Berg linked *harlot* to both Revelation’s panoply of anti-Christ antagonists and the Jesus People’s status as enemies of the Children of God (76). By labelling the Jesus People an “anti-Christ religious System” full of “Judas Doctrines and Practices,” Berg “exposed the Harlot” (76.33). In a later attack on organized religion, Berg labelled “hypocritical false Churchianity” a harlot (602.13). Literally and symbolically, *harlot* signified anti-Christ behavior and social stigma.

Berg, however, balanced *harlot*’s negative connotations against Jesus’ close contact with outcasts and God’s willingness to redeem harlotry. In the *MO Letters*, harlots became radical revolutionaries whose activities underscored the unique, System-challenging nature of God’s

love. This adaptation licensed unorthodox practices as a hallmark of close contact with Jesus and a means of demonstrating one's willingness to drop out of the System.

In a letter that redressed colonies for turning away converts based on their past activities, Berg cited encounters between Jesus and harlots to suggest colony leaders "not be so self-righteous!" (50.21). In this instance, *harlot* appeared as a shorthand for a problematic-yet-forgivable past. In fact, acting like a harlot increased, rather than hindered, one's ability to join God's family. In "Use It!", Berg reminded readers of Genesis that "Tamar even had to pretend to be a harlot to get Judah to marry her, so that, she, too, might become one of Jesus' ancestors" (27.14). Skipping forward generations, Berg wrote that Jesus enjoyed the company of harlots (537.14; 559.11). Rather than casting this enjoyment as atypical, Berg wrote that "most of God's greats had oodles of wives, women, mistresses, [and] harlots" (258.67). In Berg's doctrines, then, *harlot* appeared in conjunction with sacred stories that guided the movement's attitude, linked harlotry to interacting with Jesus, and connected the term to biblical heroes.

Berg, however, did not refer to the Children of God as *harlots*. While whores spanned the mythic past, contemporary present, and apocalyptic future, harlots remained a fixture of biblical times. The presence of harlots in stories about Jesus, however, supported Berg's notion that Christianity's rule-governed, conservative attitude towards sex developed apart from God's intent. This doctrine is crucial for analyzing the final promiscuous term in Berg's linguistic arsenal: *hooker*.

Berg appropriated sexual behavior, language, and imagery for the Children of God's benefit by negating the validity of Christianity's sexual restrictions. Claiming that "it all starts off with the false doctrine that sex is sin," Berg revealed sex as natural and godly while exposing sexual prohibitions as human-made and dangerous (259.4). Specifically, he alleged that

Churchianity's condemnation of sex constituted the real sin: "sin is not just doing something dreadfully bad. Even worse, it is getting out of line with God's Will, leading people astray" (G.8). Berg thus denied sex's sinful status, asserting that "what we're doing is good, not evil. . . . Just the opposite from what the Church has been teaching" (560.4; see also 549.47; 559.234). This inversion undercut Churchianity's authority, freed the Children of God from malpractice, and opened a new binary opposition between Berg's movement and his opponents: freedom versus control.

In Berg's teaching, Christianity's sexual regulations – and, to a lesser extent, the System's censorship of sex – found no support in God's laws. Conducting a cover-up, churches don't want to let you in on the secrets of sex, and that sex is of God, created by God, and commanded by God for your enjoyment . . . and a type of His own relationship with us in the Spirit, instead of a sinful result of the Fall (73A.8).

These realizations modelled God's relationship with humans in sexual terms, encouraged intercourse as a means of pleasure, and rendered physical intimacy as a divinely created act rather than a corrupt practice. If sex's sinful status were removed, however, then "you wouldn't need them or their damned church buildings" (73A.8). Christian leaders deliberately misrepresented sex "because they're afraid their flock might get interested in a little spiritual reality" instead of relying on church-centered rituals, memberships, and offerings for salvation (73A.8). This explanation exposed Christian leaders as self-interested frauds and situated spiritual reality beyond Churchianity's walls and rituals.

In a passage that advocated using "go-go girls" and "strippers" to "interest some audiences," Berg again emphasized religion's restrictions on sex as a mechanism of control (107.39). Recognizing that go-go girls and strippers rarely appeared in Christian services, he advocated for their presence in Children of God concerts "to demonstrate our total freedom from

the God-damned System Religion, and our being unashamed of the beauties of God's Creation! That would really divorce us from churchianity" (107.39). Again, sexual behavior separated the group from Christian traditionalism, revealing the godless basis of Churchianity's prohibitions.

The secular System perverted sex as well, constructing social mores that stigmatized godly interaction between humans (see Vance 2015, 84). Berg identified "the custom of society or the culture in which we live . . . and its mores and taboos" as responsible for condemning practices that "are perfectly normal, lawful activities as far as God is concerned" (258.3). He further complained that "it's legal, and not a sin, as long as you do it the System way" (258.7). This legalization again turned sex into a commodity of control: "they have licensed it and made it legal in certain forms, like a sort of necessary evil . . . so the System can make money on it and control it" (258.8). The world's powers thus controlled and misrepresented sex using religious morality or social norms, asserting their control over people by doing so. This controlling misrepresentation bred pathological attitudes towards sex. Complaining that "the God-damned System's self-righteous and hypocritical pornography laws" inspired "inhibitions, phobias, and frustrations," Berg assured readers that the Children of God's permissiveness meant that "we're perfectly normal sexually" (104.29).³⁴ Encouraging colonies to add "Praymate of the Month" centerfolds to their litnessing, Berg promised that the photos would "illustrate our openness of mind, and a normal, healthy attitude towards God's Creation" (104.29).³⁵

Using his arguments that intention determined an action's morality and that God created all actions, Berg freed sex from its social and religious confines. He insisted that "the church and

³⁴ This is not to suggest that Berg promoted all forms of sexual activity. He warned members against "sexual perversions; they are unhealthy and unscriptural," as well as birth control and abortions (123.28; 141.4).

³⁵ See 318B.27 for this request's fulfillment. *Playboy* appeared in Berg's publications in a variety of ways (see 224's cover art, for instance).

the devil made sex a sin – but God through us is restoring the virtue of his own creation!” (594.112-113). By liberating sexual interactions, Berg demonstrated God’s “present-day rejection of the cold modern fruitless churches of today and His choice in their place of a wild fanatical radical, sexual, revolutionary, latter-day” group (537.9). In the Children of God’s worldview, sexual pleasure became a basic human need and a form of God’s love. Berg wrote that “with our new-found sexual freedom, you would think we had just recently discovered it. . . . [Instead,] it is one of youth’s most basic needs” (307A.13). Lust, in fact, constituted “an irresistible desire . . . that apparently God has given them to perpetuate the human race” (529.3). In an August 1977 letter, Berg assured readers of sex’s ubiquity, exclaiming that “sex is worldwide, beloved, and the age-old profession of prostituting is worldwide, and girls go to bed with men every night by the billions!” (597.34). Moving beyond the Children of God’s American origins, he identified love as a universal language that could “wor[k] the same miracles for all young people anywhere” (385.22). These claims normalized sex as a global human practice.

Picking up on sex as a universal language, “God’s Love Slave” characterized sex as “one of the most eloquent ways in which we can witness the total love of God to those whom we can speak very little of their own tongue!” (537.18). Urging group members to embody God’s love, Berg asked “how are they going to know the Spirit and hear the Truth until you bring it to them[?] . . . Your body is the vehicle that the Spirit is travelling in” (560.12-13). In another letter, he connected physical appetite to spiritual desire: “what better way to show them the love of God than to do your best to supply their desperately hungry needs for love, fellowship, companionship . . . and yes, even sex” (501.50). Finally, Berg addressed colonists whose partners participated in flirty fishing. Warning against selfishness and jealousy, he argued that “when she’s down there fucking some other guy, son, she’s doing it as unto the Lord. . . . She’s

down there fucking Jesus!” (575.96-97). Sex thus became a holy conduit for conducting or experiencing God’s love, transforming sexual partners into Spirit-vessels and divine figures.

To remedy the System’s misinformation, Berg authored instructional letters on seduction (250), biblical encouragements and prohibitions regarding sex (258), anatomy and intercourse (259; 353), and sex’s role in marriage (260). Using scientific terms and diagrams alongside biblical citations, Berg presented and legitimated this material as factual information. In addition to overlapping prophetic and anatomical content, these letters affected members’ behavior: the Children of God’s official canon guided how people should dress, how they understood their bodies, and who they interacted with. Ultimately, Berg simultaneously rendered sex both sacred and mundane, sanctifying it as godly conduct while also writing that “fucking is nothing! What’s a little fuck between friends” (532.54; see also 559.256).

In his rehabilitation of sex, Berg dismantled religious and secular prohibitions as selfish, human-created endeavors to make individuals dependent on Churchianity and the System. Framing sex and sexuality as simultaneously sacred and mundane, he balanced the Children of God’s appeal to both Christians searching for a rejuvenated, permissive faith and youth interested in abrogating inherited norms.

“A Sample, Not a Sermon”: *Hooker*

Unlike *whore* and *harlot*, *hooker* does not appear in the King James Bible. The term does appear, however, in Jack Sparks and Paul Raudenbush’s *Letters to Street Christians*, a collection of biblical books reimagined using contemporary lingo ([1971] 2004). Sparks and Raudenbush twice identify the character Rahab as “the hooker,” updating the occupational title for what Berg termed *harlot* ([1971] 2004, 95, 101). Berg performed a similar linguistic update, using *hooker*,

hook, and *hooking* to refer to colonists who participated in flirty fishing and rooting his vocabulary choice in Jesus' invitation to "follow me, and I will make you fishers of men" (see 328B.55).³⁶ By updating Jesus' fishing metaphor, Berg inverted *hooker*'s negative connotations to encourage female followers to actively exemplify God's love for humankind.

Despite publishing more than 500 *MO Letters* before announcing flirty fishing, Berg advocated demonstration and action as more effective means of proselytization than circulating theological pamphlets. Repeatedly, he called for colonies to embody the group's beliefs using the adage "better a sample, than a sermon."³⁷ Berg drew this aphorism from his grandmother's poem "A Sample, Not A Sermon," which praised demonstrations while condemning lectures (104). While sermonizing ran the risk of being "confusing" if "your tongue too fast may run," "right living speaks a language which to everyone is clear" (104). Basing his advice on his grandmother's belief that "the best of all the preachers are the men who live their creeds/For to see good put in action is what everybody needs!", Berg told the Children of God to express their doctrines through action's clear language rather than stuffy theological speech (104).

This sample-not-a-sermon mentality emerged in several texts to clarify flirty fishing's purpose, anchoring women's behavior to the movement's doctrines. In "FF Tips," Berg complained about women who treated flirty fishing as an amusing pastime with no spiritual dimension (548.50, 114). Arguing that "the sample without the sermon means almost nothing," he exhorted colonists to see their actions as an indication of their affiliation with the Children of God (548.56; see also 548.112). 1976's "The Priestesses of Love!" reminded women that "the one cannot do without the other. . . . A sample of your love and the explanation for it" (561.84).

³⁶ See Matt. 4:19 and Mark 1:17.

³⁷ Versions of this phrase appear throughout the *MO Letters*. See, for instance, 50A.2; J.63; 594.77.

Likewise, the “FF’ers Handbook” advised women to couple physical intimacy with spiritual teaching: “they have to see a sample first, they have to feel something, yes. But then you have to tell them why” (559.336). In mating flirtatious or sexual activity to proselytization, Berg demonstrated the practical outcome of two of his earlier-mentioned rhetorical strands: namely, that an action’s purpose determined its moral value and that a person’s behavior ought to match their name/title.

By interacting with potential converts through dancing, talking, flirting, and sexual intercourse, women in the Children of God provided samples of the movement’s emphasis on love and connection. Since *whore* and *harlot* occupied ambivalent connotative space in Berg’s rhetoric as terms that gestured both towards damnation and redemption, *hooker* became the term of choice for referring to the group’s sacred sexual sample. It’s important to note, however, that *hook/hooking* language in the *MO Letters* predates Berg’s announcement of flirty fishing as an official policy in 1976’s “King Arthur’s Nights!” (501). Berg himself acknowledged the processual development of this doctrine and practice, providing a list of previous texts whose revelations culminated in flirty fishing (501.32).

In 1971, Berg used fishing language to warn colonies about the dangers of preaching overtly apocalyptic, anti-Churchianity, and anti-System content (55). Noting that radical teachings may scare potential recruits or induce attacks, Berg advised colonists to “take a tip from Jesus, and from the apostle Paul: they often disguised the deeper and more dangerous truths of their message in stories and parables, and double-talk which only the initiated would understand” (55.31). Putting this teaching into immediate action, Berg told his followers to “avoid the sharks: look for the fish! – And carry plenty of bait with you. . . . The interested fish will usually come up to you afterward, and nibble timidly at the bait! Hook ’em . . . wisely,

gently, and lovingly” (55.31). In his metaphor, “good lookers, good literature, and a happy face” constituted good bait (55.31). Two weeks later, Berg again deployed fishing language to discuss integrating new converts into the group. Chastising colonies that tested initiates by expelling them to see whether or not they would try and return, he asked “how many fish have you caught again, that once you had ’em hooked you threw ’em back in to see if they’d survive?” (60.56). In both instances, Berg used the symbolic language of *fish*, *bait*, and *hook* to connect the group’s outreach efforts to Jesus’ parables. *Fish*, *hook*, and *bait*, however, hardly constituted pejorative terms in their own right.

In “The Flirty Little Fishy!”, the *MO Letters* set a precedent for linking flirty fishing to behaving like a hooker. This link added a contemporary flare to biblical injunctions, re-christened movement practices using vocabulary whose multi-layered meanings were most apparent to insiders, and lent connotations of social marginality to the group’s behavior. “The Flirty Little Fishy” admitted that Berg’s instructions to flirt as a sample of God’s love showed little “regard for convention” and could hurt one’s reputation (293.8). To lessen the potential stigma of such commands, Berg abstracted his discussion of intimate interactions using King James Bible linguistic cues and figurative deployments of *hook* and *hooking*. The flirty subject of Berg’s letter became “God’s bait to hook [men]. . . . You have to love them with all your heart and with all your soul and thy neighbour as thyself” (293.10).³⁸ Requesting divine support to aid the bait, Berg prayed “help her to catch men, be bold, unashamed and brazen, to use anything she has. . . . Even if it be through the flesh, the attractive lure, delicious flesh on a steel hook of Thy reality” (293.17). Injecting language reminiscent of Jesus’ death, he called on God to “crucify her flesh, Lord, on the barb of Thy Spirit. . . . Help her, O Jesus, to be willing to be the bait,

³⁸ In this excerpt, Berg condensed Matt. 22:37-39 (also found in Mark 12:30-31 and Luke 10:27).

impaled on Thy hook” (293.18-19).³⁹ Connecting the sermon, the sample, and the potential recruit, Berg wrote that “the hook and the bait and the fish, lo, these three become one and inseparable, one body pierced with My love” (293.24). “The Flirty Little Fishy!” set up *bait*, *hook*, and *fish* as in-group synonyms for the group’s message, insiders, and outsiders, and buffered a radical divergence in practice from other Jesus People groups through the innocuous and biblical language of fishing.

Seduction, flirtation, and sex served as Berg’s ideal bait. While God began as the only hooker in the Children of God, Berg soon began referring to group members as hookers. *MO Letters* covering flirty fishing closed with valedictions such as “I love you, Little Hooker!”, “Be a Happy Hooker for Jesus,” and – most frequently – “Happy hookin’” (505.62; 532.66; see 528.60, 529.51, 561.98, 559.383). These remarks situated the reader as a hooker, and associated *hooker* with positive and divine aspects of life. A cheerful disposition and a Jesus-centered motivation ensured that being a hooker was a sacred and positive identity.

By 1974, Berg wrote that “sex and our manifest loving affection has become one of our biggest attractions to bait the hook for even the wariest of fish!” (307A.12). Praising colony initiatives later that year, he thanked “Caleb, Lydia, and their mob” for publishing “‘Jesus Hookers In Action!’, one of the best little skit books we’ve seen yet, packed with. . . lots of nudie-cutie flirty fishies” (318B.29). As flirty fishing became a frequent topic in letters, Berg insisted that the practice’s purpose – providing a sample of God’s love – guaranteed its morality. Recounting his flirty fishing adventures, Berg warned readers “if you’re a hooker for Jesus, don’t

³⁹ Berg identified pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections, and rape as forms of martyrdom or analogues to Jesus’ pain during crucifixion (see 501.52; 569.119). In “Afflictions,” he remarked that “this is as close to martyrdom as you can come without dying or being tortured” (569.152). Berg also implied that avoiding these potential consequences of flirty fishing required faith: “can you trust God you won’t catch anything including a germ or a sperm[?]” (501.61; see also 589.85).

forget who you're hooking for, and don't forget to constantly point your hook in his direction" (532.33). *Hook/hooking/hooker* signalled Berg's willingness to radically embody – or, more accurately, ask his followers to radically embody – the organization's beliefs.

As Berg deployed *hooker* to refer to the Children of God's female members, God received the title of *pimp*, harmonizing Berg's elaborate fishing metaphor with *hooker*'s sexual connotation. Returning to a biblical allegory of Christ-followers as God's Bride, Berg wrote that "[God] literally shares his wife, the Church, with the world to prove his love. . . . God is a pimp! . . . He's the biggest one there is" (560.26-27). Similarly, Berg – and other members who had female partners – became pimps as well (576.138). Remarking on the Children of God's secular counterparts, he reminded readers that "not even the whores operate without a pimp to advise and counsel them" (549.26). Turning the Bible back on literalists who doubted that holy hookers and deified pimps gelled with prohibitions against adultery, Berg asked "do you really believe that 'to the pure all things are pure' (Tit. 1:15), and that 'all things are lawful unto you' (1 Cor. 6:12) and you 'can do all things through Christ who strengtheneth you' (Phil. 4:13) [?]" (501.53).⁴⁰ He thus forced detractors within the group to acknowledge the Bible's own inner-textual alterations which achieved freedom from "the old dead Mosaic laws" (592.34). Again invoking his teaching that intent determined morality, he asked "how can sex be adultery when given for the love of God[?]" (594.112).

For those who still found his arguments unconvincing, Berg invoked an eschatological timeline, observing that

God can break his own rules if he wants to! If in this last generation He wants to throw out the whole rulebook and give them [i.e., God's faithful followers] a whole new set of love rules to go by, God is the One Who makes the rules (576.104-105).

⁴⁰ Berg made a similar argument in 592.25.

These excerpts situated Berg's call to act like a happy hooker for Jesus' sake in a trajectory of new revelations specifically suited to the group's moment in history. Despite biblical justification and symbolic cushioning, however, Berg differentiated the Children of God's *hookers* and *whores* from secular sex workers. This differentiation definitionally relied on the claim that an action's purpose or inspiration classified that action as holy or reprehensible.

Simply put, worldly hookers and whores engaged in sexual intercourse in exchange for money, while the Children of God's hookers and whores engaged in sexual intercourse as a sample/sermon of God's love. In the former case, Berg depicted sex as a self-centered or self-serving activity, while in the latter case Berg emphasized selflessness. Responding to external accusations about the movement's sexual practices, Berg offered a definition of *prostitute* that demonstrated this separation: "we are not prostitutes, because the usual worldly conception and definition of the word is a woman (and nowadays even men!) who do it for money" (597.61). He inverted condemnatory charges of prostitution, telling women to say "I'd sure as hell rather be a prostitute for God than self-righteous hypocritical religious spiritual adulterers and prostitutes like you, or real prostitutes who are just doing it for the money" (597.53). This differentiation of godly sexual practices from worldly sexual practices echoed throughout the *MO Letters*.

In 1973, for instance, Berg addressed lesbian relationships, especially in cases where women had separated from their husbands (292). Postulating that an excess of shy men accounted for women turning to each other to form relationships, he exhorted women to take the lead in "find[ing] a new man" (292.52). After volunteering his own sexual services to please "widows," he clarified that "I'm not suggesting that our Widow's Colonies ought to become whore houses, and they certainly never will because we don't do anything for money" (292.53).

In this letter, Berg differentiated promiscuity amongst colonists from practices in whore houses by emphasizing the absence of financial exchange.

The same differentiating apparatus appeared in other *MO Letters*. Contrasting show girls and strippers with holy hookers, Berg wrote that “I’m comparing our ministry with theirs, where the devil does it strictly for selfish gain and money” (309.22). While “selfish old whores” bedded men for pleasure and wealth, the Children of God’s hookers provided “real affection and love” out of kindness and sympathy (309.29). During a written retaliation against charges of prostitution, Berg explained that flirty fish did not take men to bed for “money,” but rather for “religion” (597.32). In a 1977 lament that American singer/actress Jeane Manson (b. 1950) refused his advances and did not join the group, Berg wrote that “she was the Lord’s, but she let the world rape her! She let it rape her for money. . . . Like a whore, she did it for pay” (811.22). Even Berg’s language in “America the Whore” underscored the transactional nature of being a worldly whore, calling on European pimps to abandon the American whore because of her economic insolvency (see 216.4, 16, 43). Consistently, Berg redefined *hooker* in the context of flirty fishing based on its aim – a selfless sample/sermon, rather than a financial transaction.⁴¹

Berg’s appropriation of *hooker* situated the Children of God as a contemporary re-imagining of Jesus’ earliest followers. While whores and harlots populated the biblical text, *hooker* functioned as a linguistic bridge between past and present, as well as between canonical

⁴¹ Facing increasing numbers of men benefiting from flirty fishing but not contributing to the movement in 1977, however, Berg wrote that “it’s about time the men start footing the bill” (652.24). Still insisting that “our girls never accept money,” Berg used the language of donation rather than transaction to separate worldly hookers and God’s hookers (see 652.31, 36, 43). This separation faltered further in the Family of Love. Emphasizing giving over requesting, Berg wrote that “we’ll sure accept the money if they want to give it to us” (684.7). In “The Shepherd’s Rod,” Berg offered advice to colonies who could not bring in enough income to cover expenses, suggesting that readers “get the FF-ers on the ball!”: “[tell your sexual partners] ‘I have given you everything, now it’s time you shell out and help the Family, or we’re going to close down and all of us leave, including me!’” (682.47). By the end of 1978, Berg suggested modelling flirty fishing as an escort service (750). Admiringly, he wrote that “these ‘escort’ services are flourishing. . . . Most of them are nothing more than a front for prostitution. . . . So why not an ‘FF Escort Service’?!” (750.3).

content and radical revisionism. Behaving like a hooker enabled group members to physically embody God's love, exemplifying Berg's teaching that faithful followers could best spread their sermon through a sample. The term's common contemporary sexual connotations, moreover, provided a roadmap for how to proselytize in the movement's current, international environment.

Despite its solely sexual deployment, moreover, *hooker* softened Berg's teachings about sexual promiscuity. While addressing women and men in the group as hookers and pimps created a sexualized identity, Berg's widespread fishing metaphor served as a buffer between members and their activities. Women became attractive bait concealing a sacred message, men who arranged liaisons or directed members' proselytizing became fishermen, and the process of seducing – and perhaps sleeping with – a stranger became flirty fishing. This extended biblical metaphor allowed Berg to be more or less graphic in his discussions of promiscuous sexual encounters, depending on his audience and purpose.

Combined with his teachings linking names to disposition and determining an activity's morality based on its inspiration, the practical effects of Berg's use of *hooker* in the Children of God are clear. Female participants received an identity that served as a blueprint for spreading the movement's doctrines and attracting new converts. Although Berg cast flirty fishing as an optional practice,⁴² he viewed hookers as the movement's vanguard,⁴³ praised their embodied dedication to the Children of God's beliefs, and denigrated those who would not participate as prideful or uncommitted.⁴⁴ In a group that privileged social deviance as a sign of godliness, being referred to as a whore, harlot, or hooker signalled approval of one's conduct.

⁴² See 575.25

⁴³ See 575.153.

⁴⁴ See 505.13-14; 528.12-13; 559.11; 117A.17-18.

To receive these labels, however, women had to navigate flirty fishing using primarily Berg's experimental instructions based on his European experiences with Maria. While the *MO Letters* praised women as society's true powerholders, Berg's dedication of an entire letter to "Rape!" in April 1974 – less than three months after "The Flirty Little Fishy" reached group members – indicated the danger incumbent in flirty fishing (528; 293). Certainly, Berg emphasized women's alluring and procreative capabilities to situate the female body as a conduit for God's message, asking his female readers "do you realize how much power you have when your body virtually envelopes them [?]" (561.35). In "God's Witches!" he wrote that women "have a great great power," predicting that "women are going to rule the earth! They're almost ruling it already. . . . The women govern everything in the U.S.A!" (573.109, 123-125).⁴⁵ This power and authority, however, evaporated in Berg's writings on rape, wherein God's whores remained largely responsible for their own safety. In fact, Berg normalized rape as a likely outcome of promiscuity, offering victim-blaming explanations such as "if you've already got a reputation of being quite free with your sex, you might as well expect to get raped once in a while" (559.266).

Alternately, Berg identified rape as an opportunity to gain spiritual merit. He advised that "you might as well get credit for giving your love freely and willingly. . . . If you go ahead and do it only because you were forced to, the Lord's not going to give you much credit for that!" (528.41-42). He further rationalized rape as a sign of humanity's hunger for God, implicitly prioritizing the need to spread the movement's sermon over the safety of its samples (528.1-3).

⁴⁵ For more on the role of women's bodies in Berg's conception of flirty fishing, see Raine (2007, 5-10). For a description of the Children of God as a sexist, rather than sexually-liberating, group, see Kent (1993, 52-53) and Vance (2015, 86-87).

Berg's appropriation and adaptation of *whore/harlot/hooker* as positive rather than pejorative designations disempowered those who looked down on the Children of God's promiscuity. The practical ramifications of these appropriations, however, also disempowered insiders by placing God's whores in potentially dangerous real situations (from seducing strangers to contracting diseases) while providing only imagined protections (that is, spiritual power) (see 569). Although Berg's assurances that behaving like a hooker brought one closer to Jesus and embodied God's loving power cast promiscuity in a positive light, it failed to protect flirty fish in situations such as rape.

Berg's appropriative rehabilitation of *whore/harlot/hooker* had other organizational effects as well. In particular, the group's name change to the Family of Love reflected the practical results of behaving like a happy hooker, especially if one obeyed Berg's early prohibitions of birth control (see 49.41; 141.4). *MO Letters* printed at the time of the group's name change allude to the increasing presence of parents and children in the movement. Letters like "Bible Reading for Children," "The Advantages of Having Children," "Childcare Jewels," and "Jesus' Babies" situated child-rearing firmly within the Family of Love's spiritual duties (687-688; 715; 739). When Berg wrote a 1979 three-part letter series answering members' questions about sex, he dedicated the first letter almost exclusively to matters of either pregnancy or parenting (815). Berg even incorporated birthing and childcare advice into his revelations, including an eleven-part series on home delivery.⁴⁶

The births that resulted from flirty fishing forced the Family of Love to find a productive role for those born into the movement. In early 1971, Berg spoke disparagingly of the lifecycle of movements led by a single charismatic leader: "the repercussions of his ministry seem only to

⁴⁶ Berg's saga of home delivery began with "Techi's Story! – Chapter 1" in March 1979 and concluded with "Techi's Story! – Chapter 11: Convalescence" five months later (785; 864).

carry about two or three generations of its own momentum, and then the movement usually cools off and rejoins the System” (42.2). Waving aside any concerns, Berg’s apocalyptic timeline meant that “I don’t think there’s enough time left for it to happen to us!” (42.28). With the advent of flirty fishing, however, the Children of God had to implement institutional changes to cope with new generations of members. In 1975’s “Real Mothers!”, Berg and Maria cast motherhood as biblical and heroic,⁴⁷ noting that “we need them so much, too, because of all the children we’re having!” (389.5).

Putting these children to work, Berg wrote that “every child should be an asset and taught how to litness and provision. . . . What man could resist a poor mother with a babe in arms and a few little tikes tagging along on her coattails?” (684.17, 20; see also 671.24-31). Calling children “your future labour force,” Berg told parents to provide both samples and sermons as education: reading “the New Testament and the MO Letters” to children comprised the sermon, while taking the children litnessing constituted the sample (688.10, 28; see also 687).⁴⁸ In a less laborious view of the group’s offspring, Berg encouraged new mothers not to neglect their parental duties in favor of proselytizing activities, telling them that “those children God has given you are your ministry for the time being!” (835.37). Children became participants in – and demonstrations of – living God’s message of love.

⁴⁷ In fact, Berg situated motherhood as even more meritorious than being a whore/hooker: “any girl can strip and make love and get pregnant and have a baby! . . . [But] how many of you really love and care for them and ‘train them up in the way they should go, so that when they are old they’ll not depart therefrom’!” (389.90). See Kent (2001a, 185), however, for a summary of sexual abuse allegations by Children of God children.

⁴⁸ “Bible Reading for Children” instructed caregivers to avoid stories from the Old Testament due to violent plots (687.25-26, 30). Whatever stories one read, Berg stood by the King James Version as the translation of choice, allowing that one may have to “translate it into the daddy version” to clarify some language (687.11, 8).

Real and Imagined

James Chancellor's summary of the Family International's history and theology in James Lewis and Jesper Petersen's 2014 edition of *Controversial New Religions* begins with the movement's earliest instantiation as the Children of God. Chancellor says little about the development of flirty fishing, noting only that the organization's early experimentation with promiscuity was "unknown to the vast majority of disciples, whose sexual mores continued to reflect their evangelical Christian roots" ([2004] 2014, 16). He further observes that Berg's introduction of flirty fishing as an official policy in 1976 offended many colonists, "and a significant number left the movement" ([2004] 2014, 16). By 1977, he notes, some colony leaders believed that Berg's sexual permissiveness cast doubts on his status as God's prophet (Chancellor [2004] 2014, 16).

Flirty fishing thus appears in Chancellor's history as an unexpected new idea that caught followers off guard, destabilized the group's membership and leadership, and ultimately contributed to the organization's restructuring. To his credit, Chancellor draws out several important functions of Berg's sexual ethos. He suggests that flirty fishing situated sex as a God-endorsed human need rather than a reprehensible crime, reflected the movement's belief that living in the end-times licensed radical new behavior, and effected a way to "break down old, System loyalties and allegiances" ([2004] 2014, 31). Chancellor's work, however, provides little insight into the rhetorical and linguistic tools that Berg used to mitigate flirty fishing's shock. As this chapter demonstrates, Berg's rhetorical framework crafted a theology that supported sexual promiscuity. Moreover, his appropriation, adaptation, and redeployment of *whore*, *harlot*, and *hooker* – and the consequences of such deployments – offers insight into the movement's identity, conflicts, and boundaries.

In this chapter, I tracked Berg's appropriation and deployment of *whore*, *harlot*, and *hooker*, emphasizing the tensions between literal and figurative language usage and exploring the ways in which the same term can possess both negative/damning and positive/edifying qualities. Unlike *nigger*'s adaptation in Peoples Temple, Berg did not substantially alter the denotive meaning of *whore/harlot/hooker*. Berg's whores resembled those found in contemporary Christian eschatological interpretations, and Berg's harlots and hookers were defined by their promiscuous sexual encounters.

Without major changes in definition to draw on, I instead highlighted three doctrinal concepts that supported Berg's linguistic adaptations. First, Berg generated a hybrid linguistic identity. By adopting a textual apparatus that mimicked the Bible and expressing his own ideas using vocabulary reminiscent of the King James version, Berg presented his writings as inspired and authoritative. By using "simple little four-letter words," on the other hand, Berg deployed a vernacular familiar to contemporary youth culture. Simultaneously eloquent and irreverent, Berg cultivated an image of being divinely inspired yet revolutionary. This balance appears in his use of *whore*, *harlot*, and *hooker* to characterize both biblical figures and radical youth followers.

Second, Berg embarked on a re-naming campaign. Terms like *Churchianity* or *Systemite* disempowered challenger groups including mainline Christianity, the Jesus People, members' parents, and critical outsiders. By refusing to utilize conventional names or titles and instead inventing new names for real/imagined groups and classes, Berg underscored the importance of titles reflecting their referent's nature. By creating new titles, and by saturating those titles with denotations and connotations that matched the Children of God's beliefs, Berg reinforced the movement's worldviews while removing legitimacy or positive affiliations from critics. Moreover, Berg's call for members to choose new names served a dual purpose. On one hand, it

inscribed the group's ideals on the individual's foremost identifier, orienting members' natures and activities within the organization's worldview. On the other hand, renaming accomplished a pragmatic rejection and critique of the System. Berg accomplished a similar process of rejection, re-naming, and re-orientation by clarifying the identity of Revelation's whore, as well as by titling female group members *harlots* and *hookers*.

Third, Berg repurposed the relationship between the Children of God and its actual or perceived opponents using constitutive opposition. The nature of one's enemies – and the nature of their complaints, as well as the terms used to level those complaints – helped shape the group's own beliefs and behaviors. Rather than drawing a sharp demarcating line between God's faithful and the anti-Christ world, Berg connected these two polarities via a creative, constitutive process. Parents, religious leaders, or political powers that opposed the Children of God thus strengthened and clarified the movement's doctrines: Revelation's *whore*, for instance, took definite form thanks to American policy decisions. Opposition also affected demographic and pragmatic dimensions of the Children of God. Lurid external depictions of the group, for instance, promoted the movement to countercultural or radical youth, affecting the demographics – and expected behaviors – of Berg's followers.

Lastly, the *MO Letters* reflected on the connection between intent, activity, and morality. In some letters, Berg asserted that an action's status as good or evil depended on the intent or inspiration of its actors. In this way, Berg circumvented conservative Christian opponents who worried that the Devil used sexual promiscuity as a tool for shaping people's thoughts or gaining their allegiance. Since both God and the Devil drew on the same set of tools to wage their cosmic battle, Berg saw little reason to avoid proselytizing techniques that proved effective for their theological enemies. In other letters, Berg claimed that the Devil simply mimicked or borrowed

activities created by God. Due to its divine origin, sex – the key characteristic of being a whore, harlot, or hooker – was not inherently evil. In these reconsiderations of the relationship between the Children of God and its real and perceived enemies (with analogous relationships between good/evil and moral/immoral), *whore*, *harlot*, and *hooker* lost their negative connotations.

Each term, however, operated differently in the *MO Letters*. With *whore*, Berg abandoned denotive descriptiveness, transposing Christianity's negative interpretive connotations of Revelation's whore into his own apocalyptic, allegorical outlook. He redeployed *whore* as a label for both America and Churchianity, turning the term's anti-Christ, condemnatory, and dooming associations back onto those opponents from whom he'd initially borrowed the word. As sexual promiscuity became more common in the Children of God, Berg altered *whore*'s purpose to signify rejection of the System's values. Playing on the shock of accepting such a designation, he reminded readers that God eschewed human social conventions.

Unlike *whore*, Berg used *harlot* in a literal sense, deploying the term to denote women in the Bible who practiced sexual promiscuity as an occupation. More than *hooker* and *whore*, Berg's harlots balanced negative connotations against positive attributes. According to the *MO Letters*, harlots were women whose sinful behavior relegated them to society's fringes and destroyed their bodies. Inverting these pejorative descriptors, Berg reminded readers that Jesus interacted with harlots to spread God's message of love. *Harlot*, therefore, signalled closeness to God and radical distance from System sentiments. While he rarely described his own followers as harlots, the term's consonance with *whore* and *hooker* lent its appropriated and inverted connotations to the Children of God's conception of promiscuous sexuality.

With *hooker*, Berg provided a contemporary inflection to Jesus' teachings. Updating the biblical invitation to become "fishers of men," Berg crafted a symbolic view of the group's

outreach practices that cast potential converts as fish, God as a fisherman, and women as bait or – eventually – hookers. On its own, *hooker* became an empowering designation and an accurate descriptor of its referent’s activities. Hookers in the Children of God provided a sample of God’s love, shaping both their personal identity and their role in the group. This sample rhetorically empowered women insofar as their bodies became loci of divine strength and vehicles for promoting their faith, just as being labelled a “hooker for Jesus” absolved their promiscuity by clarifying its holy intent. As part of a larger system of fishing symbols, however, *hooker* served as a buffer to lessen the stigma of flirty fishing. By referring to seduction and sex through an angling metaphor, Berg reduced the raciness of inviting young women to have liaisons with strangers as a divinely inspired missionary endeavor.

The Children of God’s use of language appropriation to create identity, disempower opponents, and demarcate radical insiders from Systemite outsiders based on fluency does not directly contradict Chancellor’s history and theology of the movement. Certainly, Berg’s introduction of “shocking” connotations for *whore/harlot/hooker* in the *MO Letters* affected the group’s organization and demographics, separating faithful Christ-followers from those mired in Churchianity’s traditions. Chancellor’s account, however, ignores the considerable mitigating groundwork that Berg laid by appropriating pejorative language. By clarifying and destigmatizing *whore*, *harlot*, and *hooker*, Berg disempowered critics who saw “God’s whores” as an oxymoron while shaping his follower’s self-identity and situating their behavior in an end-times vision of radical change. While the Children of God’s flirty fishing contributed to substantial dissent and defection, the linguistic and rhetorical maneuvers that introduced, underpinned, and justified promiscuous sexual encounters also played a mitigating role to resituate members’ beliefs and behaviors within Berg’s theological vision.

Chapter 7

“Changed on the Inside”: Appropriation, Conflict, and *Freaks* in the Jesus People

Hollywood Free Paper Sources: An underground newspaper circulated within the Jesus People movement and edited by Duane Pederson, the *Hollywood Free Paper* received volume and issue – but not page – numbers. Some articles lack a title, and many articles lack complete author information. I obtained these newspapers from the David Allan Hubbard Library (Fuller Theological Seminary). I cite *Hollywood Free Paper* articles parenthetically in the following format: (Author If Indicated, “Article Title or First Words,” Year of Publication, Volume Number. Issue Number). For example: (David, “Only 1 Way?”, 1972, 4.9).

Both Peoples Temple and the Children of God are prime examples of the analytical strength of understanding NRMs as groups who craft anti-languages to structure asymmetry between real/imagined groups or classes. Social contest and condemnation drove Jones and Berg’s acts of language appropriation (as well as L. Ron Hubbard’s life-long creation of new Scientology terms), and this combative doctrinal disposition lends itself well to analysis through Murphy’s theory of religion and sociolinguistic ideas about identities, conflicts, and boundaries.

The words that Hubbard, Jones, and Berg adapted or crafted exemplify each group’s participation in broader social conflicts. Psychiatry, race, and sexuality were all socially contested concepts at the time that Scientology, Peoples Temple, and the Children of God were (respectively) founded. As such, terms like *psychiatry*, *nigger*, and *whore* existed as contested sites of power, potential, legitimacy, and control. As contested terms, these words proved especially malleable and adaptable – in both wider society and in NRMs, the denotations and connotations of *psychiatry*, *nigger*, and *whore* fluctuated, open to reinterpretation and experimentation. The *freak* language that the Jesus People deployed expressed a different sort of social contest. Rather than attempting to traverse the gap between social deviance and social legitimacy, *freak* emphasized the division between a disgruntled, disempowered social strata and

their power-holding opponents. Scientology, Peoples Temple, and the Children of God, alternately, rhetorically and linguistically coupled condemnation with positive contributions to facilitate empowerment: scientific rigidity in place of manipulative medicine, integration and equality instead of racism and classism, or sexual liberation rather than repression.

In this brief chapter, I examine Duane Pederson's use of *freak* in the *Hollywood Free Paper* (hereafter *HFP*) as an act of language appropriation in the Jesus People movement to highlight some limitations of analyzing linguistic processes in NRMs using Murphy's conception of religion. This examination's brevity is a function of the Jesus People's comparatively low degree of conflict with surrounding society, brief duration as a large-scale social movement, and – at least within the *HFP* – infrequent inversion of pejorative language. By exploring *freak*'s role in the *HFP*, I show that Murphy and Halliday's mutual focus on asymmetry or antagonism in language adaptation maps best onto NRMs that try to actively supplant extant powerholders through their doctrines and practices. The Jesus People's relatively accepted/privileged social standing and specific movement goals (re-orienting Christianity towards a personal connection with Jesus to indirectly catalyze social change) left them with little to condemn/contest in their acts of language appropriation.

A Different Revolution?

The major difference between the Jesus People and the NRMs covered in previous chapters lies in the separation of social *movements* from social movement *organizations*. As far back as 1966, Mayer M. Zald and Roberta Ash articulated this difference by stating that “social movements manifest themselves, in part, through a wide range of organizations” (1966, 327). In their argument, “a social movement is a purposive and collective attempt of a number of people

to change individuals or societal institutions and structures” (1966, 329). Any of these purposive and collective attempts can spawn multiple social movement organizations – these organizations are bound together by the movement’s major goals, but may differ in their means of formulating or achieving these goals (see Marx and McAdam 1994, 102). Carly Psenicka makes a similar argument for the label *counterculture*: while “all of the organizations that fall under the countercultural ‘umbrella’ . . . shared the goal of subverting the mainstream culture. . . . The methods and particular aims of the distinct groups varied” (2014, 23-24).

In this thesis, the Jesus People appear as a social movement, since the broad designation “Jesus People” refers to multiple organizations that emerged and spread in the United States in the late 1960s.¹ These organizations re-branded Christianity’s Jesus as a young radical who opposed old-fashioned traditions, and shared the goal of encouraging American youth to form a personal, spiritual bond with Jesus. Unlike the NRMs covered in chapters 4-6, the Jesus People did not follow a single movement leader – instead, various individuals rose to prominence, influencing particular geographical areas. These leaders included ordained ministers (such as Chuck Smith [1927-2013]), movement converts (such as Lonnie Frisbee [1949-1993]), and celebrities (such as Larry Norman [1947-2008]), as well as marginalized figures who emphasized apocalypticism (such as Tony Alamo [1934-2017]). Although some of these leaders collaborated in movement activities, the Jesus People lacked a single voice of organizational

¹ The Jesus People, in turn, appeared as a collection of organizational articulations of American counterculture (where “counterculture” becomes the social movement and “Jesus People” becomes an instantiation of that movement). One might also suggest that early Dianetics off-shoots render Scientology a social movement. Still, Scientology, Peoples Temple, and the Children of God existed as discrete entities, while *Jesus People* labels multiple unique organizations.

authority. Similarly, although the movement produced many texts, no single monograph or serial became the sole canonical source of doctrine.²

With multiple organizations deploying countercultural lingo to support various biblical interpretations in a variety of contexts, the Jesus People's acts of language appropriation are harder to track than those of the Children of God, Peoples Temple, and Scientology. To mitigate this methodological difficulty, I focus on a widely distributed Jesus People text: the *Hollywood Free Paper*, edited by Duane Pederson (b. 1938). In 1971, Pederson claimed that "we now have a circulation of about 500,000," noting by 1973 that the newspaper had printed more than 14 million copies ("Earth Tremors," 1971, 3.22; "Here We Are!", 1973, 5.5). The paper's wide circulation, combined with the fact that other movement leaders contributed articles, situates the *HFP* as a widely consumed and representative Jesus People text. As such, the linguistic choices of its creators likely influenced the beliefs and practices of a wide swathe of movement participants.

Socializing In/Through the *Hollywood Free Paper*

The *HFP* published 100 issues over twelve volumes between 1969 and 1988. Pederson printed volumes 1 through 10 without interruption between 1969 and 1978. After volume 10's last issue appeared, however, the *HFP* went on hiatus until publication resumed in 1987 and 1988. If measured by intended audience and content, a different separation emerges. Volumes 1-6 contain content aimed primarily at countercultural youth, while volumes 7-12 include material

² While the Jesus People agreed on the Bible's primacy as a sacred text, individual leaders differed in their attitude towards translations. As mentioned in chapter 6, Sparks and Raudenbush authored a contemporary paraphrase of the Bible while Berg insisted on the King James version. This debate between a contemporary translation and a long-established version played out in other Jesus People organizations, as well. The *Hollywood Free Paper* offered Bibles translated into "modern English" (see "Religious Book Discount House," 1971, 3.3), while Tony and Susan Alamo's organization insisted on the King James version as the sole repository of God's message (Tony Alamo Christian Ministries 2013, art. 5).

primarily intended for prison inmates. Due to this shift in audience, as well as the fact that the majority of the *HFP*'s issues were printed in its first years of publication,³ I engage primarily with volumes 1-10, emphasizing volumes 1-6. This focus ensures a consistent scrutiny of the 1969-1978 time period covered in chapters 5 and 6.

Like other underground newspapers in countercultural America, the *HFP* contained “opinionated accounts of events that mattered deeply to [its authors] . . . and they used a language and sensibility of their own fashioning; their hip vernacular was something they shared with most of their readership” (McMillan 2011, 4). Rather than printing apparently objective observations of events, papers like the *HFP* used events to promote a particular ideology. Underground newspapers filtered the world through a shared oppositional lens, contained “an ethos that socialized people into the [m]ovement,” and thereby “fostered a spirit of mutuality” amongst readers (McMillan 2011, 4). Underground press products made their allegiances explicit, chronicling countercultural sentiments.

Regarding language, Rodger Streitmatter highlights the unprofessional nature of such publications, noting that “counterculture papers were often amateurish or rag-tag in appearance, with many words misspelled and misused, as well as headlines and graphics . . . that lacked artistic talent” (2001, 201). Streitmatter, however, provides an explanation for these apparent errors, claiming that they were “deliberate expressions of an anti-establishment approach to journalism” (2001, 201). Moreover, he identifies “slang and coarse language” as characteristic features of the underground press (2001, 201). Without ascribing undue importance to typos or oversights, I argue that seemingly catachrestic deployments of vocabulary in the *HFP* served social functions, communicating the Jesus People's sentiments and identity.

³ In 1970 and 1971, Pederson printed forty-nine of the paper's 100 issues.

The *HFP* emerged in 1969 as a Christian underground newspaper in California. In the first issue, Pederson explained that the *HFP* “seeks to propagate the teachings of Jesus Christ” (“Just for the Record,” 1969, 1.1). This first issue included elements that became standard in future printings: cartoons, a section for mail from readers, a page highlighting upcoming events and community requests, and a full-page poster. The *HFP*’s first issue also contained elements drawn from traditional newspapers that did not persist in future editions.

First, the *HFP*’s first issue included advertisements from unaffiliated third parties, including a vehicle insurance/leasing agency, a talent agency, and Johnston’s Yogurt Fruit Sundaes. Although the Johnston’s Sundaes ad appeared again in the next issue, later *HFP* publications promoted only products that Pederson or Jesus People produced, or that directly supported the Jesus People’s beliefs and activities. Second, the inaugural issue included content that did not directly discuss Christianity (see “Freedom of Expression” 1969, 1.1). Future issues of the *HFP* referenced Jesus, the Bible, and Christianity incessantly, rarely leaving it up to the reader to connect the paper’s contents to spiritual matters. Third, the first issue lacked a directory of recurrent events and meeting spaces. In the second issue, Pederson renamed his “Coming Events” section “The Wall,”⁴ providing a mailing address for readers to submit upcoming gatherings or concerts (1970, 1.2). Over time, The Wall promoted more and more recurring events, grouping entries first by day of the week (beginning with “The Wall” 1970, 2.1) and later by city or state (beginning with “Jesus Teach Ins and Raps” 1970, 2.19), serving as an index of the movement’s growth.

The *HFP* socialized readers into the Jesus People in a variety of ways. The Wall allowed for networking, and geographically/temporally chronicled the Jesus People’s spread across

⁴ This section went through several name changes, but its function as a repository for the names, addresses, and gathering times of various Jesus People organizations remained constant.

America. By the end of 1971, readers could find like-minded Jesus People from more than forty states advertising on The Wall (3.23).⁵ Moreover, the *HFP*'s inclusion of letters to the editor, as well as articles written by movement leaders and *HFP* readers, situated the paper as a community forum to discuss ideas. People wrote in to relate their own experiences of Jesus (see Jerry, "Dear Brothers and Sisters" 1971, 3.14), express gratitude for Pederson's work (see "Open Letter" 1974, 6.2), critique the movement (Andersen, "Even Jesus Has Gone Commercial" 1972, 4.4), and even search for missing persons (Jamison, "Dear Friends" 1971, 3.23).

Itself a cultural marker, the *HFP* also acted as a purveyor of items that established one's identity as a Jesus Person, selling arm-bands, bumper stickers, posters, buttons, and t-shirts with movement-specific slogans on them.⁶ The paper also promoted books by Duane Pederson, as well as third-party merchandise that supported Pederson's theology.⁷ These products telegraphed the *HFP*'s balance between upholding and revising mainline Christianity. 1970's "Books for Jesus People" emphasized countercultural content in its offerings, using phrases like "the revolution starts with you" or "all about The Spirit in The Sky" to promote Joseph Bayly's *View From a Hearse* and Bill Eakin and Jack Hamilton's *You Know I Can't Hear You When You Act That Way* (1970, 2.5). Written by post-war Christian youth outreach leaders, these texts fit the *HFP*'s target audience in the early 1970s.⁸

⁵ Most of the unlisted states (including New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Vermont, Georgia, and Mississippi) lay geographically farthest away from the Jesus People movement's California origins (1971, 3.23).

⁶ Arm bands, bumper stickers, t-shirts, and buttons all appeared for sale starting in 1970's *HFP* Vol. 2.

⁷ For an example of Pederson advertising his own books, see "A New Book By Duane Pederson" in 6.1 (1974). The *HFP* began advertising third-party books in a 1970 "Books For Jesus People" ad, later promoting Bibles (2.23) and a Religious Book Discount House in 2.24 (2.5, 1970). Larry Norman's 1969 and 1970 albums *Upon This Rock* and *Street Level* appeared as early third-party products ("Hollywood Free Paper Emporium" 1970, 2.23).

⁸ Eakin and Hamilton both worked as part of Youth For Christ, while Bayly partnered with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship.

Late 1970 issues of the *HFP*, however, also advertised a Religious Book Discount House in Whittier, California. Priced much higher than the “Send Bread One Dollah” for Bayly’s *View From a Hearse*, Whittier’s Discount House offered weighty systematic works such as *Young’s Analytical Concordance* – first published in 1879 – and *Halley’s Bible Handbook* – first printed in 1927 (“Books for Jesus People” 1970, 2.5; “A New Christian Bookstore” 1970, 2.24). This discrepancy between youthful and orthodox content connected the Jesus People to the counterculture while retaining continuity with a longer tradition of Christian doctrine and practice.

Finally, the *HFP* socialized potential Jesus People converts by repeatedly inviting readers to find evidence of Jesus’ role as a savior in current events and culture. *HFP* articles covered such disparate matters as New Year’s Eve (1.6), free speech on campus (3.14), amnesty for Vietnam War draft dodgers (4.2), and Dr. Pepper sales pitches (5.3).⁹ These varied topics, however, all served as a springboard to introduce readers to Jesus. Consider, for instance, two articles that addressed environmental concerns: “Ecology of Man” in the *HFP*’s April 1970 “Earth Day” issue, and the following month’s “Pollution” (2.8; 2.10).

“Pollution” set the stage for environmental activism, explaining that “students observed a special week designed to do something constructive about man’s ecological problems. Trash-ins, walk-ins and birth control leaflets confronted students, parents, and the total community” (1970, 2.8). Rather than elaborating on these activities, however, the author reframed environmentalism as a personal battle against sin: “the crises we face today are only symptoms that are on the surface of a much more intensive pollution problem. . . . It’s soul-pollution, man’s rebellion, that separates him from God” (“Pollution” 1970, 2.10). Retaining ecology as a metaphor only,

⁹ [“Will 1970 Really Be a New Year”] 1969, 1.6; “Is the Jesus Movement Illegal on Campus” 1971, 3.14; Ruckle, “Amnesty” 1972, 4.2; Pederson, “Soda Pop Saviors,” 1973, 5.3.

“Pollution” assured readers that “the solution to all our problems . . . was proposed nearly 2,000 years ago,” further claiming that “Jesus said a man could clean out the waterways of his soul because the water He would give them ‘becomes a perpetual spring within them[.]’” (1970, 2.10). After explaining how to initiate a relationship with Jesus, the article invited readers to “join God’s forever family, there’s even no danger of over-crowding” (“Pollution” 1970, 2.10).

The *HFP*’s Earth Day edition offered even less insight into America’s pollution problems, immediately plunging into a discussion of humanity’s sinful status (“Ecology of Man” 1970, 2.8). Positing that “man [*sic*] is not basically good,” the article concluded that only Jesus’ presence in a person’s life could end worldly suffering (“Ecology of Man” 1970, 2.8). Although Pederson published both articles within a month of Earth Day demonstrations, the *HFP* provided little information about either pollution or ecology. Instead, both articles appropriated contemporary events to promote personal conversion to the Jesus People’s version of Christianity.

Other events fared similarly. The *HFP*’s coverage of the 1972 Presidential election warned readers that “all the presidential candidates are going to promise the ‘best plans’” (Horton, “Money Power,” 1972, 4.9). Instead of comparing political platforms, however, the article encouraged readers to put their faith in “the claims of one person who never failed in any of His promises – Jesus Christ” (Horton, “Money Power,” 1972, 4.9). A 1971 *HFP* dedicated to answering the question “How Moral Is War?” quickly clarified that “we’re not talking about Viet Nam [*sic*], we’re talking about personal warfare inside of the individual” (“End the War in Your Head,” 1971, 3.10). A week after Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine members hijacked and blew up several airliners in Jordan,¹⁰ the *HFP* used the language of hijacking not to elaborate

¹⁰ These events were later known as the Dawson’s Field hijackings. For more on the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine’s campaign of air piracy, see Ensalaco (2008, 14-27).

on conflicts in the Middle East, but rather to encourage readers to “start living on the eternal highs that only Jesus offers” (“Hijacked Again?”, 1970, 2.18). While religion led to discussions of politics and current events in Jones’s sermons and Berg’s *MO Letters*, Pederson’s *HFP* used politics and current events as invitations to discuss religion.

Despite oversimplifying world events, this rhetorical technique held at least two benefits. First, the *HFP* adopted a nonpartisan tone. Apart from vague position statements such as “nobody digs war” or “nobody’s gonna hassle the fact that earth pollution is a bummer,” the *HFP* seldom took sides on the issues that it referred to (“End the War in Your Head,” 1971, 3.10; “Soul Pollution is a Bummer!”, 1970, 2.17).¹¹ As a result, Pederson avoided distancing readers who espoused any particular perspective on a given event, issue, or policy. Whatever one’s opinions regarding pollution, America’s involvement in Vietnam, or conflict in Palestine, readers could consume the *HFP* without feeling alienated. Moreover, the *HFP*’s failure to substantially discuss contemporary issues meant that apathetic, turned-off readers would not feel lost or alienated. The *HFP*’s nonpartisan stance, ultimately, marketed the paper’s message to as wide an audience as possible.

Second, the *HFP*’s consistent efforts to relate large-scale concerns and global conflicts to personal faith bridged the gap between disaffected individuals and society. In Pederson’s theology, the individual reader’s soul became a microcosm of the world. The individual’s struggle with sin reflected global conflicts, and as a result the individual’s acceptance of Jesus became a panacea for all of the world’s problems. Changing oneself, in other words, amounted to changing the world (see Kent 1993, 46). This internalization of external issues granted agency to readers – joining the Jesus People contributed to righting the wrongs that disenfranchised

¹¹ In fact, these two position statements precluded the possibility of partisan feelings, since – apparently – everybody shared such sentiments.

individuals found in 1970s America. Without forcing potential converts to re-enter or re-join social systems that they had dropped out of, the *HFP* empowered readers to achieve social change through personal decision-making.

Jesus Freaks

In addition to appropriating events, Pederson also appropriated the countercultural language that he expected youth to be familiar with. This language established the Jesus People's identity as both countercultural and hip, clarifying the *HFP*'s target audience. Notably, Pederson's vocabulary choices adjusted the derisive phrase "Jesus *freak*." While in some cases he used *freak*'s connotations to emphasize the countercultural qualities of the Jesus People, Pederson did not invert *freak* to disempower the movement's opponents. Whereas "niggers" in Peoples Temple gained a noble heritage and hookers in the Children of God found validation in their godly promiscuity, Jesus freaks gained relatively little power over their opponents.

In its own eyes, late 1960s counterculture had already freed *freak* from pejorative connotations. Tom Wolfe's *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, for instance, explained that "*freak* referred to styles and obsessions. . . . It wasn't a negative word" ([1967] 1999, 11). Despite this lack of negativity, Stevi Costa's summary of the counterculture's appropriation of *freak* suggests that *freak* helped separate experimental or radical youth culture from traditional American values (2019, 74). In Murphy's terms, *freak* participated in the structuring of asymmetrical relations between traditional/conventional figures and emergent/unorthodox initiatives. Rather than a pejorative term, *freak* became a celebration of diversity and a condemnation of homogeneity. As Costa notes,

by borrowing the aesthetic weirdness, infinite bodily diversity, and radical individuality of the freak show, counter-cultural movements of the 1960s, 1970s and beyond,

effectively appropriate[d] a utopic vision of the freak show in their quest to become something other than middle-class conformists (2019, 76).

While this quest separated the mundane from the extraordinary, it also encouraged coalescence on society's fringes. *Freak*'s emphasis on diversity and individuality functioned – ironically – as a rallying cry that gathered countercultural individuals together.

Pederson's use of *freak* – and its adjectival and verbal forms *freaky* and *freaked* – exhibited less semantic focus than Jones's use of *nigger* or Berg's use of *harlot*. Drug users "freaked out," surprising solutions were "so simple, it's freaky," Satan "is out on the town doing his freaky thing," friends "tried to freak" friends in debates, apocalyptic predictions meant that "it almost freaks you out to watch the news," and the *HFP* was a "dynamite freak paper."¹² *Freak* referred to members of mainstream society, people in positions of power, peace protestors, self-centered theologians, or high school students.¹³ This variety of deployments matched the informal, changeable style of the *HFP*'s text. Rather than developing a tightly argued theology, Pederson focused on peppering his invitations to follow Jesus with linguistic signals familiar to young Americans. *Freak*'s appearance in so many semantic roles also indicates language's fluidity and adaptability. Using the same word, Pederson described society's leaders, social dropouts, turned-on believers, and demonic forces.

Regularly, however, *freak* appeared in the *HFP* as a descriptor for those who participated in nontraditional, countercultural activities. This behavior appeared as part of a quest for personal fulfillment or purpose, or as a rebellion against inherited norms and values. Pederson

¹² "Michael Gets Out of Krishna, Into Christ," 1970, 2.2; "Soul Pollution is a Bummer," 1970, 2.17; "Satan's Snowstorm," 1971, 3.2; Dale Hicks, "What D'Ya Know," 1971, 3.4; "Let's Get Ready!", 1971, 3.12; "Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ," 1971, 3.1.

¹³ "We've All Been Had!", 1970, 2.18; "Danger! Breaking Plaster," 1970, 2.19; "Forecast: Continuing Darkness Through the Night," 1971, 3.6; "Superstar," 1970, 2.23; "Back to School With," 1972, 4.8.

and other *HFP* contributors used *freak* to equate the Jesus People with American counterculture, drawing on pre-existing social sentiments to craft the movement's stance towards traditions and institutions. Jesus freaks, like other freaks, explored individuality and experimented with new habits to find personal fulfillment. Pederson also, however, used *freak* to asymmetrically situate youth high on Jesus against youth high on drugs. While the counterculture's freaks suffered loss, addiction, and imprisonment, Jesus freaks experienced joy, freedom, and community. This contrast situated the Jesus People as the successful fulfilment of youth rebellion.

The *HFP* typified freaks as seekers of self-realization or authenticity, and release from society's confines. On the first page of the *HFP*'s first issue, for instance, a wayward daughter explained that she'd met "a lot of weirdos . . . pot smokers and speed freaks" since leaving home in her quest to be "free to be myself" (Wark, "We Love You, Call Collect," 1969, 1.1).¹⁴ Later *HFP* freaks behaved similarly. In "Zach Gets It On!", a retelling of Luke 19:1-10 in hip language, Zach – Zacchaeus – appeared as a "messed-up freak" and a "weird freak" who needed to be "liberated" (1970, 2.24).¹⁵ In a February 1972 comic, a character condemned draft-dodging "freaks" who travelled to Canada to escape the responsibilities imposed on them by a society that they did not endorse ("Forecast: 'Amnesty'," 1972, 4.2). Later in 1972, the *HFP* printed a story in which David, an "ex-Krishna," recounted his life "freaking out" with other youth in "the early hip movement" of 1966 San Francisco (David, "Only 1 Way?", 1972, 4.9). David represented the *HFP*'s prototypical freak. In addition to his journey to California in search of a new life, David used – and served time for possessing – narcotics ("Only 1 Way?", 1972, 4.9). He

¹⁴ The *HFP*'s "We Love You, Call Collect" reprinted the lyrics to a dialogue performed by Art and Diane Linkletter (words by Martin Wark, music by Ralph Carmichael).

¹⁵ In keeping with the biblical story, however, Zach wasn't a drop-out. Instead, he "worked for the corrupt establishment" ("Zach Gets It On!", 1970, 2.24).

abandoned Catholicism to explore Westernized versions of Hinduism, including the Self-Realization Fellowship (founded in the 1920s) and the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (founded in the 1960s), as well as Zen Buddhism (David, “Only 1 Way?”, 1972, 4.9). David realized, however, that “all these rituals” only replaced the Catholic traditionalism he had abandoned (David, “Only 1 Way?”, 1972, 4.9). Disenchantment, rejection of inherited tradition, a quest to find fulfilment or freedom, and drug usage typified the freak narrative.

April 1971’s *HFP* debuted a segment where Jesus People described their conversion. The first two contributors, Steve and Mike, fit the template of freaks seeking self, freedom, and happiness. Steve joined the military to “find my true self,” but after returning from Vietnam “my search lead [*sic*] me to the use of hard drugs” (“Set Free,” 1971, 3.9). Deciding that his commanding officers “would not let me be myself[, I] then deserted to go out on my own to find truth” (“Set Free,” 1971, 3.9). In his abbreviated life story, Mike “used to be an acid freak” who “hitch[ed] around” (“Set Free,” 1971, 3.9). After experiencing a “bad [acid] trip,” Mike met a Christian surf shop owner and caught rides with several cars filled with Jesus People, who convinced him to attend church (“Set Free,” 1971, 3.9). Both stories exhibited the set pieces associated with being a freak: a quest for personal fulfilment/discovery, and experimenting with substances or non-traditional mechanisms to find joy or self-identity.

The *HFP*’s description of Jesus freaks approximated these qualities as well. For instance, the Jesus People espoused a lifestyle unfamiliar to society at large. Coverage of a March 1970 “Resurrection March” proclaimed that “if you are revolutionary for Jesus . . . you were in the action, and in the know. . . . [That] there is yet another answer still untried by a majority of the people of the world” ([“There Was An Empty Field”], 1970, 2.7). Just as David had left behind familiar Catholicism to explore forms of Hinduism and Buddhism in his quest for fulfillment,

Jesus freaks embraced an unfamiliar religious message. While Zen Buddhism or the Self-Realization Fellowship's strand of Hinduism were unfamiliar for geographical and cultural reasons, the *HFP* clarified that the "majority of the people of the world" unfamiliar with Jesus' revolutionary message could be found in America's own backyard. This majority included "the religious, the rich, the poor, the intellectual, the career-minded, the pleasure seeker, the sickly, and the retired" ([*"There Was An Empty Field"*] 1970, 2.7).

The *HFP* also likened a personal relationship with Jesus to the freedom one experienced by dropping out, or the high one experienced with drugs. One issue associated being a Jesus freak with liberation: "when you and he make it together, you are free to be a totally unique person" (*"Heads Up!"*, 1970, 2.16). A later article likewise endorsed "Jesus' lib program" as a way to "make your exit from a screwed-up, hijacked, plastic society" (*"We've All Been Had!"* 1970, 2.18). The paper's use of drug metaphors, however, most clearly illustrates the *HFP*'s use of language to signal the Jesus People's identity as consonant with the counterculture.

An August 1970 letter from Cheryl, for example, claimed that "the world doesn't need funny little pills to make them turn somersaults, all they need is Jesus" (*"Fellow Jesus People,"* 1970, 2.15). Defending its "Jesus Is Better Than Hash" claim, an early 1971 issue promised that the Jesus People had found a way of "getting high and staying that way," laying out a thesis-antithesis-synthesis argument to connect drugs, the counterculture, and the Jesus People's brand of Christianity (*"Heaviest Turn On,"* 1971, 3.7). First, the article affirmed that "nobody's gonna hassle the fact that drugs make you fe[e]l groovy. . . . Turning on is a gas" (*"Heaviest Turn On,"* 1971, 3.7). The author immediately countered, however, that drugs "don't heal the nitty gritty fragmentation we experience on the inside. . . . Turning on feels like a groove, but crashing back only makes us face the fact that we're still pretty messed-up" (*"Heaviest Turn On,"* 1971, 3.7).

Along with “bad trips” and “messing up DNA,” the dangers and impermanent relief of drugs created a quandary for readers who wanted to feel groovy (“Heaviest Turn On,” 1971, 3.7). To resolve this issue, the *HFP* promised that

there is a trip that makes you high without spacing you out and making you worthless. This trip turns you on at a deeper level than physical sensations and feelings. That means it satisfies in a much deeper dimension. But more tha[n] that, this trip is eternal. . . . This kind of high turns you on and keeps you that way (“Heaviest Turn On,” 1971, 3.7).

Without departing from the quest to feel good or the language of getting high, freaks could join the Jesus revolution to transcend plastic society and experience.

The inability to achieve lasting satisfaction or happiness through drugs constituted a key feature in the freak-character’s story. As “Heaviest Turn On” proclaimed, a personal relationship with Jesus promised a longer trip to deeper levels of consciousness and greater heights of ecstasy than drugs. Instead of portraying Jesus freaks as an inversion of other freaks, Pederson’s *HFP* presented Jesus freaks as a final successful form of countercultural freaks. The difference between Jesus and speed freaks, in other words, was a difference of degree rather than kind. By retaining shades of similarity while fulfilling the freak quest, Pederson asymmetrically situated Jesus freaks in relation to their nearest social counterparts. Without alienating or condemning his target audience, Pederson provided a picture of Jesus freaks as a more successful form of freak.

In a 1970 autobiographical contribution, Ralph Abern exemplified this process of recognized similarity leading to conversion based on perceived achievement of that which the counterculture sought. In his brief story, Abern wrote,

after I had been using drugs for a short time I became [e]nraged with the ‘Establishment’ and ‘dropped out.’ . . . I moved from town to town and city to city looking for ‘truth’. Then one day in Palm Springs I met a fellow ‘freak’ or so it seemed by his appearance, but there was something different about him (“To All My Brothers and Sisters,” 1970, 2.6).

This freak had obtained what Abern searched for: “I asked him why he could seem so happy and be so much at Peace (which was what I had so long been searching for) he told me that Jesus loved me” (Abern, “To All My Brothers and Sisters,” 1970, 2.6). Abern connected freak status to rebellious behavior, citing his own drug use and itinerance. The Jesus Person who Abern labelled a freak likewise rebelled against the Establishment by being happy and at peace, finding what Abern sought in the process. While Abern recognized a fellow freak in the Jesus Person, he also recognized his interlocutor’s superior realization of rebellion.

Lest readers think that the Jesus Person’s loving lifestyle did not qualify as rebellion, Abern concluded with a warning. Rather than simply basking in Jesus’ “wonderful ‘love’,” Abern explained that “I am now in Orange County Branch Jail for preaching too near a School building during school hours. (Yes, you can also suffer even for the Bible)” (“To All My Brothers and Sisters,” 1970, 2.6). While society reprimanded freaks for draft dodging and drug use, it also punished Jesus freaks who disrupted social norms by preaching. Other early *HFPs* warned of persecution that came from expressing peace and love through a personal relationship with Jesus. Already in February 1970, Pederson’s paper announced that “the heat is on the Jesus People” (“Christian You’re Next,” 1970, 2.3). In an open letter to America, the paper alleged “hostility,” “hatred,” and “extreme cruelty” towards the Jesus People exemplified by “recent court decisions and civilian actions” (“Open Letter: America!” 1970, 2.3). The letter ended, however, with an invitation to martyrdom rather than a plea for cessation: “go to it my good officials! You will stand much better in the eyes of the populace if you sacrifice the Christians to them! Crucify us – torture us – condemn us – crush us! Your iniquity is proof of our innocence.

(“Open Letter: America!,” 1970, 2.3). Living as a secular or Jesus freak broke government rules and invited suffering.¹⁶

Adoption Without Opposition

The *HFP*’s emphasis on personal salvation as the key to violence and greed, however, did not provide a systemic, robust alternative to the society that Jesus freaks reacted against. While Peoples Temple established a commune to demonstrate the viability of apostolic socialism and the Children of God spread colonies around the world, the Jesus People focused on individual change without establishing an alternative social system. In fact, the *HFP* claimed that social change could not curb systemic injustice until individual change had taken place. Clearly stating its personalist priorities, the *HFP* taught that “before we can get the world together we need to get ourselves together – that’s the initial problem. The race problem, class fragmentation, the credibility gap is never going to get bridged until man [*sic*] is somehow changed on the inside” (“Danger! Breaking Plaster,” 1970, 2.19).

While cultivating a personal relationship with Jesus empowered members to change society, the *HFP* offered limited resources to realize these changes. Pederson’s opportunistic riffs on current events provided little information about the issues themselves, to say nothing of outlining systematic solutions to the America embroiled in Vietnam or that endangered the environment. Rather than staying dropped out, in fact, some contributors began encouraging established Christianity and Jesus People to merge. This proposed alliance promised benefits for both sides (injecting youthfulness into churches while bolstering movement leadership), but re-

¹⁶ Two articles in the March 17, 1970 issue described Jesus People being harassed and arrested for passing out Pederson’s paper or fighting with police (“Earth Tremors,” 1970, 2.5; “Biker’s Welcome!!! Christ’s Patrol!”, 1970, 2.5)

inserted radical youth into the very system that they'd picked up the *HFP* to escape. In May 1971, Jesus People musician Larry Norman outlined a sense of growing confusion in the movement and called for established churches to provide leadership and support:

The young Christians struggle alone, unhelped, or struggle in groups with other new Christians and often experience great confusions and disappointments. . . . Is there no burden within the established church for the movement of the street Christians, the Jesus People, the Jesus Freaks? Where are the workers and elders needed to help the new flock grow strong and scripturally sound? ("As I See It," 1971, 3.10).

Far from extending the "turn on, tune in, drop out" mindset of freaks, Norman called for a return to tradition to stabilize the fledgling Jesus People.

Although some Jesus People rejected Norman's suggestion of integration, alternate means of strengthening the movement to provide a viable alternative to American Christianity did not appear in the *HFP*. Moreover, Pederson's framing of challenge or hardship as an invitation to turn to Jesus failed to generate a robust organizational theology for resolving inner-group conflict. Disagreements within the Jesus People regarding belief, practice, or inclusion/exclusion simply recapitulated the invitation to embrace Jesus. In a 1972 debate about the movement's attitude towards homosexuality, for instance, one interlocutor – David – rejected his opponents' use of biblical criticism as a means of determining orthodoxy, but provided no alternative for adjudicating between competing beliefs. Asserting that "our concern is not one of Biblical gymnastics, but whether or not you know Jesus," David somewhat-weakly concluded that "when you know Jesus, He takes care of the details" (David, "[Edward Was Offended]," 1972, 4.4). Pederson's coupling of experiencing-unhappiness-or-challenge and accepting Jesus effectively related the movement's central message to the everyday experiences of potential converts. It did not, however, provide tools for dealing with inner-group conflict or produce an organizational administration that linguistically disempowered the group's opponents.

Whether politicians and policymakers or social issues, these opponents remained amorphous in the *HFP*. In the blossoming debate concerning a freak's relationship to the establishment, however, Pederson provided a similarly amorphous description of the Jesus People. While his inclusivity marketed a Jesus People identity to a wide audience, it struggled to craft a nucleus of identity around which to organizationally, rhetorically, or linguistically re-structure asymmetrical relations. Instead, Pederson bridged the gap between freaks and straights: "Jesus People may dress in faded jeans or neat flares. . . . Jesus People may worship in crowded apartments . . . or on a beautiful beach . . . or in a church. . . . Many of these Jesus People are young (but not all of them)" ("Who Are the Jesus People?", 1972, 4.6). Neither age nor dress nor ritual setting defined movement participants, despite the *HFP*'s appropriation of countercultural language.

Eventually, Pederson's decision to market the *HFP* to prison inmates demonstrated his willingness to re-integrate with – rather than reject– dominant American social frames. After several years of erratic publication, in January 1975 Pederson announced that "I intensely believe that God would have us take the Hollywood Free Paper ministry into every prison, penitentiary and correctional institution in America" ("Open Letter," 1975, 7.1). By September, the *HFP* was distributed "almost exclusively in prisons" (Pederson, "Hollywood Free Paper Sixth Birthday," 1975, 7.5). This transition retained the early *HFP*'s emphasis on personal freedom and appeal to marginalized social groups but shifted from promoting freedom *from* the system to freedom *within* the system. The appearance of *freak* in the *HFP* diminished, and Pederson encouraged meaningful convalescence or rehabilitation in prison rather than rebellion against the authorities who created laws and structures that confined readers.

Pederson's appropriation of *freak* mirrors Berg's use of *hooker* or Jones's use of *nigger* in some ways. Anticipating or reacting to pejorative designations from outsiders, he embraced *freak* in rhetorical and linguistic decisions that contributed to identity creation and boundary maintenance in the Jesus People. Tapping into pre-existing sentiments of dis-ease, disillusionment, and disenchantment, the *HFP* re-cast Jesus as a long-haired, loving social outcast whose itinerant lifestyle and rejection of inherited political/religious systems mirrored contemporary hippies.

Pederson's appropriation of hip lingo allowed Christian youth to connect to the counterculture without losing their connection to a familiar worldview, translating Christianity's message to echo the linguistic hallmarks of contemporary discontent. To attract secular youth, the *HFP*'s contributors created a recurring narrative of rebellion, a quest for personal fulfilment, the search for pleasure or enlightenment, a geographical journey, and drug use. While acknowledging the partial success of such trips, Pederson identified getting high on Jesus as a permanent solution to resolving the counterculture's quest. The *HFP*'s depiction of Jesus freaks, however, wavered between an un-adapted borrowing of secular freak identity and a widely inclusive vision devoid of traits that would limit the label's application.

Unlike Peoples Temple and the Children of God, Pederson's appropriation of pejorative labels empowered Jesus People without significantly disempowering anybody. Certainly, the *HFP*'s contributors structured asymmetrical relations between real and imagined groups and classes. Christ-followers stood higher than traditional Christians, God's love eradicated the Devil's hold on individual's lives, and Jesus freaks realized the goals that secular freaks chased. *Freak*, moreover, set the tone for the movement's basic identity, transposing youth protest into the register of sacred concerns while likewise re-conceptualizing Christianity as a radical

lifestyle. These transpositions and re-conceptualizations crafted group boundaries based on fluency and comfort. Particularly in its earliest iterations, the *HFP* used specialized vocabulary that its target audience – youth, addicts, and protestors – would find familiar and that critiqued its complacent opponents.

Appropriating *freak*, however, did not aid Pederson and other *HFP* contributors in resolving conflict between the Jesus People and their critical targets. While Jones's use of *nigger* turned the tables on racist/capitalist/Christian America and Berg's use of *whore/hooker* countered Churchianity's sanctimonious suppression of sexuality, Pederson adopted *freak* (to guide identity formation, and to suggest group boundaries) without substantially adapting the term (to navigate conflict). This lack of adaptation reflected the Jesus People movement's relationship to mainline Christianity and American society. Jesus freaks created change in society not by leaving America or rejecting Christianity, but by continuing to participate in those social structures and worldviews as changed/reborn individuals. Jones and Berg changed the (religious/political) System through a process of rejection and rebuilding, which in turn impacted the lived experience of the System's constituents. Pederson, by contrast, changed the (religious/political) System by changing its constituents. This latter approach resulted in a less extreme rejection of society and – correspondingly – a lesser emphasis on language appropriation's ability to resolve conflict through (dis)empowerment.

Chapter 8

Final Thoughts and Further Study

Chapter 2 began with Smith's assertion that scholarly analyses of religion create and configure, rather than simply describe, their objects of study. I demonstrated that Murphy's critique of phenomenology is based in part on phenomenology's failure to recognize that theoretical frameworks are complicit in this creation/configuration, and that Murphy's constructive contribution to religious studies encourages self-critical interrogation of the effects of one's theories on one's data. This final chapter comprises just such an interrogation of the benefits and limitations of my language appropriation-focused analysis of texts created by Scientology, Peoples Temple, and the Children of God, and the Jesus People. The chapter addresses two tensions or complexities that my work reveals about new religions, explores two ways in which this thesis only partially shows "how the world really is," and indicates two veins for further study. I begin with a summary of my findings, and end with an overview of my contribution to scholarship on new religious movements in religious studies.

In this thesis, I have identified instances of pejorative language appropriation and adaptation in new religious discourse as sites of identity formation, conflict management, and boundary maintenance rather than catachrestic errors. I used Murphy's definition of religion as a catalyst for examining rhetorical and linguistic processes in new religions that avoided the problematic presuppositions of a hermeneutic of meaninglessness. To better understand the semantic elements of new religious texts that came into focus in Murphy's signification-centered lens, I supplemented his work with Halliday's notion of antilanguages as well as sociolinguistic observations relating language to identity, conflict, and boundaries.

I began by tracing Murphy's semiotic contribution to religious studies, emphasizing the roles of interlocution and contest/differentiation in his (re)imagining of religious behavior. I highlighted his definition of religion as an opportune vantage point with which to (re)consider NRMs, a field of research that he did not originally address. Noting his lack of concrete examples and his potentially formulaic conception of signification, I encouraged a more processual stance as well as a narrower, sociolinguistic focus. In chapter 3, I outlined sociolinguistic insights that address those aspects of discourse that Murphy's definition of religion foregrounds in new religious communities. I emphasized language's ability to shape/signal identity, address/create/resolve conflict, and establish/transgress social boundaries. In particular, I discussed Halliday's work on antilanguages as a conceptual frame for thinking about new religious language. These observations situated new religious communication as contiguous with language use in other social groups, combatting a hermeneutic of meaninglessness and justifying Murphy's broad definition of religion.

To transition from concepts and theories to concrete practices, I explored the organizational functions of language and fluency in Dianetics and Scientology. Some of L. Ron Hubbard's claims (like his assertion that words attain meaning only in communicative context) harmonized with established principles, while other ideas (like perceptics) relied heavily on group-specific doctrines. The contours of Hubbard's theory of language, however, coalesced to show that an individual's social affiliation affected their understanding of language, and that this organizationally cultivated fluency in turn affected their prescribed behavior. Hubbard's writings demonstrated that semantics and vocabulary can play a practical role in shaping NRMs and their members.

Hubbard explicitly articulated several language-related doctrines that other NRM leaders addressed in this thesis used implicitly – or unconsciously – to adapt vocabulary. I demonstrated that Hubbard valued communicative clarity, and believed that linguistic choices could reflect both the speaker's qualities and the topic's nature. Moreover, he recognized communication's rule-governed yet flexible nature. I then laid out Scientology's mechanisms for fostering fluency through socialization, Hubbard's encouragement of faithful repetition in individual practice, and the group's connection between organizational success and group-specific linguistic comprehension. Lastly, I discussed language's role in conflict, both within Scientology (via *squirreling*) and between the group and its opponents (via *psychiatry*).

While the specifics of Hubbard's arguments suited Scientology's aims, his teachings regarding language's contextual adaptation, functions in group mechanics, and concept of propaganda through the redefinition of words set the tone for new religious language use in the following chapters. In chapters 5-7, I analyzed instances of language appropriation in Peoples Temple, the Children of God, and the Jesus People between 1969 and 1978. Following Halliday's claim that antilanguage alterations cluster around subjects of special concern, I selectively traced the rhetorical functions and shifting meanings of a key term – or terms – that reflected a crucial point of social contestation between each group and their social interlocutors. In keeping with Murphy's focus on difference and hierarchy (and countering charges of illogical language use levelled by the hermeneutic of meaninglessness), I focused on pejorative terms that each movement's leader seemingly deployed in counter-productive fashion. By analyzing language appropriation in three different NRMs, I highlighted the range of adoption and adaptation that can take place to test the limits of my analytical approach. Peoples Temple and the Children of God provided two different sets of insights into substantial acts of language

appropriation, while the Jesus People's language borrowing highlighted lesser degrees of social rejection as a limiting factor for my research.

Chapter 5 portrayed Jones's use of *nigger* as a straight-forward act of language appropriation and adaptation in Peoples Temple. Analyzing Jones's sermons, I focused on the "asymmetrical relations" portion of Murphy's definition of religion, tracing a pattern of persistent asymmetry in Temple audiotapes despite the group's emphasis on equality and socialistic sharing. To draw out *nigger*'s contributions to identity formation, conflict management, and boundary maintenance in Peoples Temple, I demonstrated that Jones both supported and subverted *nigger*'s negative associations. On one hand, Jones expanded *nigger*'s negative breadth, replacing race with economic/systemic oppression as its key distinguishing characteristic. On the other hand, Jones inverted *nigger*'s connotations, retelling the story of slavery's origins to cast "niggers" as noble descendants of an enlightened civilization (and their captors as deceptive, depraved, and afraid).

This simultaneous emphasis on exploitation and empowerment allowed Jones to exhort Jonestown's residents to utilize *crazy nigger tactics* to challenge their perceived opponents. Insisting on solidarity as the key to escaping racist/capitalist American influence, Jones's call for revolutionary suicide in November 1978 embodied the most extreme form of these tactics. Ultimately, I demonstrated that *nigger*'s shifting meaning served as a key to understanding broader doctrinal themes and correspondent movement practices, and amplified Murphy's assertion that religions function to structure asymmetrical relations between entities.

In chapter 6, I explored a less direct process of language appropriation in the Children of God, emphasizing the "real or imagined groups or classes" component of Murphy's definition of religion. In particular, I tracked three seemingly synonymous classes of promiscuous women:

whores, *harlots*, and *hookers*. Rather than using these terms interchangeably, Berg appropriated and adapted each word to a different extent in his *MO Letters*.

A doctrinal framework that relied on a dual linguistic identity, emphasized a relationship between names and behavior/nature, and reconsidered the social/contextual determination of morality supported these appropriations. By using *Churchianity* or *Systemite* in place of names and titles supplied by Christian/American institutions, and by encouraging members to select new personal names, Berg crafted a theology that closely linked terms to the qualities or behaviors of their referents. Conversely, Berg stressed that one could not determine an action's morality without knowing the actor's motivation or intent. To justify flirty fishing, Berg dissociated promiscuous sexuality from its sinful status in Churchianity by emphasizing intention or motivation as the determinant of an action's morality. Alternately, Berg argued for God's primacy as a creating deity, explaining that all created activities – even those used by the forces of evil – could safely transmit a sacred message of love.

In this linguistic environment, *whore/harlot/hooker* overlaid religious, moral, and pragmatic identities onto their referents. As pejorative designations, Berg's appropriation and adaptation of each term helped contest the Systemite norms that motivated opponents to criticize the group's sexual practices. Each term, however, served a separate purpose in the Children of God's beliefs and practices. *Whore* tied into the group's apocalyptic condemnations of America, and later highlighted the group's rejection of inherited social conventions. *Harlot* emphasized the close connection between following Jesus and social marginality. *Hooker*, finally, inverted Christian sexual mores by modernizing Jesus' invitation to become "fishers of men," promoting flirty fishing as a form of empowerment and outreach. Each real or imagined class of

promiscuous person – historical or contemporary, allegorical or literal, sacred or sinful – affected identity, conflict, and boundaries in the Children of God.

Tensions and Complexities

My focus on language appropriation draws out two tensions or complexities that characterize the study of new religions. First, my work on language appropriation searches for and identifies discursive commonalities between new religions, but in doing so reveals divergences and discrepancies in rhetorical and linguistic techniques (to say nothing of corresponding divergences in doctrine, practice, and organization). Second, my work emphasizes cultural and linguistic borrowing, highlighting the persistence of terms and meanings in new religious circumstances. My work also, however, highlights inversions, reversals, and creative adaptations of these extant cultural or linguistic elements. These two tensions – commonality/divergence and persistence/alteration – reveal the benefits and challenges of searching for a widely-applicable alternative to the hermeneutic of meaninglessness. I briefly address each tension below.

Examining texts produced by three different NRMs over the same time period demonstrates language appropriation's frequency in new religions while highlighting the disparate forms that such adaptations take, as well as the variety of objectives that it serves. Peoples Temple, the Children of God, and the Jesus People all borrowed and altered key terms to establish group identity and delineate social boundaries. In proportion to each group's overt rejection of surrounding social/political/religious norms, moreover, each NRM used language appropriation as a tool for initiating/resolving conflict. My research demonstrates that language appropriation was a regularly occurring rhetorical technique present across multiple North

American NRMs active in the 1960s and 1970s. This recurrence suggests that my language appropriation-centered method of textual analysis is suitable as a general analytic technique insofar as it draws out repeated patterns across NRMs.

Not all NRMs, however, use language appropriation in the same way. My research adds a social/relational explanation for such differences, extending – for example – Lincoln’s contextual account or McAdam’s political opportunities account. Regarding context, Lincoln’s work on responsible comparison in religious studies identifies recurring patterns across religions without positing that these patterns are necessary hallmarks of the category “religion,” and without losing sight of key differences (2018).¹ To do so, he argues that “these [shared] features are the product of similar forces and conditions” (2018, 40). Shaped by similar cultural elements, multiple new religions may develop similar doctrines, practices, or goals. Peoples Temple and the Children of God, for instance, both portrayed the American government as immoral or criminal in the early 1970s. According to Lincoln’s premise, the fact that both movements developed these doctrines during rising public disapproval of Richard Nixon’s presidency (a shared cultural condition) accounts for these similar sentiments.

McAdam’s political process model of social movement formation, alternately, argues that insurgent social movements are most likely to succeed when the balance of social/political/religious power in an area is destabilized ([1982] 1999, 41). This “restructuring of existing power relations” encourages the formation of oppositional groups “either by seriously undermining the stability of the entire political system or by increasing the political leverage of a single insurgent group” (McAdam [1982] 1999, 41-42). Circumstances that destabilize extant

¹ For instance, Lincoln’s work might try to explain why Peoples Temple and the Children of God both prioritized the King James Bible when quoting scripture, a) without suggesting that use of the King James Bible is a characteristic of all NRMs, and b) without submerging Jones and Berg’s different opinions of the translation.

power relations, in other words, act as a mutual starting point for various social movements by weakening the power-holder's ability to rebuff challengers or by strengthening the legitimacy of challengers' claims. Again using the Children of God and Peoples Temple's critique of American governmental authority as an example, McAdam's theory suggests that both groups crafted similar doctrines as opportunistic responses to the same political opportunity: Nixon's loss of public trust due to the Watergate scandal.

Neither Lincoln nor McAdam, however, articulate their contextual/political explanation of why different NRMs develop similar beliefs, practices, or goals using the language of social relationship and communication. As my research demonstrates, conceiving of NRMs as social interlocutors whose communicative patterns rely on an Other is crucial for understanding language formation in new religious texts. In the case of each NRM that I analyzed, the organization's relationship to extant/dominant social groups affected its appropriative articulation of an antilanguage worldview. Although Lincoln's "forces and conditions" and McAdam's "restructuring" opportunities shaped the doctrines in which these appropriative acts appear, the discursive relationship between emergent/illegitimate/unauthorized NRMs and extant/legitimate/sanctioned social bodies accounts for the commonality of language borrowing and adaptation across NRMs. Creating, navigating, and rectifying this asymmetrical relationship using rhetorical and pragmatic techniques designed to resonate with a particular audience produces the linguistic pattern that my research identifies.

This pattern emerges, however, within a canon's use of unique vocabulary in unique organizational frameworks to achieve unique goals. Although Peoples Temple, the Children of God, and the Jesus People all used the same rhetorical and linguistic techniques (language appropriation) to construct identity, navigate conflict, and mark boundaries, each group deployed

language adaptation differently. These differences stem from each organization's unique target audience, available resources, relation to extant social/political/religious entities, and motivating goals, and in turn influenced the range of appropriative maneuvers available/viable in each organization.

For instance, Jones's rehabilitation of *nigger*, Berg's use of *hooker* to demonstrate divine love, and Pederson's embrace of *freak* indirectly highlight different perspectives on globalization or self-indulgence. The Children of God promoted worldwide colonization, while Peoples Temple criticized white colonialism's legacies. Berg's call for God's faithful followers to be happy hookers and Pederson's claim that Jesus provided the ultimate high, moreover, clashed with Jones's rejection of hedonism and self-pleasure. The doctrinal particularities that arise from the textual analysis necessary to identify language appropriation, in other words, encourages scholars to explore difference when illuminating commonality. Rather than casting all new religions in the same mold, a focus on language appropriation draws out movement-specific elements for analysis. This approach embraces – rather than submerges – distinctive practices and positions in NRMs while affirming the presence of shared linguistic mechanisms.

The second tension – namely, persistence/alteration – asks the question: what is new about new religions? Psenicka's work on 1960s countercultural vocabulary echoes Hubbard's lament about using old words to describe new discoveries. She writes that “since American youths so drastically separated from their parents' society during [the 1960s], many components of their new lifestyles lacked a predetermined description. . . . Thus, they had no preexisting names to describe the elements they encountered in their journeys” (2014, 25; see also Tarrow 2013, 14). After exploring the origins of *psychedelic* as an example of the link between new experiences and new vocabulary, however, Psenicka admits that the counterculture “did not

develop the vocabulary most often associated with the movement: ‘peace’ and ‘love’” (2014, 27). Like Hubbard-the-explorer, Psenicka’s countercultural linguistic inventors failed to escape the use of established vocabulary. While new words signaled fresh explorations of social identity and political participation, adapting extant terms provided countercultural organizations with a language to describe – and reimagine – the world around them. DeBernardi sheds further light on this tension between new and established symbols by referencing authority’s utility for emergent groups. In her work on marginal religious communities, she notes the social value of invoking familiar symbols when constructing new organizations: “the advantage to [employing] traditional forms in the construction of a new ethos is that they sound authoritative, but can be used to give new meaning to an emergent social form” (1987, 322).

Similarly, my analyses of NRMs demonstrate that a new religion’s ability to attract and mobilize participants depends on that movement’s ability to harness existing social sentiment. Hubbard, Jones, and Berg all crafted their ideologies as novel solutions to already-present social contests regarding mental health, race, or sex. Pederson individuated and internalized social contests as personal, spiritual conflicts, but nevertheless depended on extant social problems to promote his message. This tension – between drawing on extant cultural products and demonstrating novelty – addresses what exactly is *new* about new religions.

Murphy accounts for the rise of new religious forms by touching on persistence and innovation. As quoted earlier, he provides a deceptively-simple answer to the question “from where do religions come? From other religions,” explaining that religions are comprised of “pre-existing cultural materials” (2007b, 156). Murphy complicates this quip by acknowledging that new religions alter cultural materials through processes of “permutation,” “reversal,” “transformation,” “combination,” and/or “inversion” (2007b, 156). Studies of social legitimation

strategies in new religions offer a similar grounded-yet-unique argument. Portraying a NRM's doctrines/practices as anchored in – but separate from – established religious traditions can both cement that NRMs validity and encourage conversion. As Stephen Kent argues in his work on “spiritual lineages,” this connection-to and departure-from established traditions serves as a legitimizing tool by demonstrating a community's continuity with, supersession of, or combination of familiar – that is, authoritative/legitimate – religions (2003). Even a hermeneutic of meaninglessness acknowledges both persistence and innovation insofar as it characterizes new religious discourse as a bastardization of extant canons and concepts.

These emphases on continuity, perpetuation, and persistence create a potential misnomer: new religious movements are not particularly new. Instead, they are social permutations whose borrowing of components and abiding by pre-formed communicative rules ties them to long-established religious bodies. The Children of God and the Jesus People characterized themselves as twentieth century instantiations of first-century Christ-following communities. Jones's vision of apostolic socialism found its roots in similar claims. Even Hubbard alleged that early Scientology discoveries approximated Buddhist enlightenment.² Berg's insistence that names should reflect their referent's nature, moreover, renders *new religious movement* an inaccurate label at best. Hubbard published *Dianetics* nearly seventy years ago, Peoples Temple ended more than forty years ago, Pederson's *Hollywood Free Paper* ceased publication over thirty years ago, and the Children of God's founder passed away twenty-five years ago. Certainly, more recent NRMs exist, but it is pertinent to ask what exactly “new” denotes, if both decades-old organizations with chapters located across the world and highly localized, recently initiated fledgling communities both fall under the NRM label.

² See “The Scientologist” ([1955] 1976, 3).

The answer to this question doubles as a rejoinder to the hermeneutic of meaninglessness's stance that NRMs craft dull, nonsensical texts. The fact that NRMs draw on surrounding society and extant conflicts does not mean that Scientology, Peoples Temple, the Children of God, or the Jesus People lack(ed) creativity, uniqueness, or imagination. On the contrary, each organization's leaders and members exercised ingenuity and resourcefulness in their emergent approaches to resolving ongoing issues. Jones parlayed civil rights sentiments into a bid for socialist revolution in a post-colonial, Cold War world while exposing religious hypocrisy. Berg reimagined evangelical Christian apocalypticism as a form of liberal, irreverent youth protest, later balancing cosmopolitan permissiveness with austere nomadism to transform his movement from a last-days warning to a network of nationally embedded establishments. Hubbard merged replicability with ingenuity and creativity with conventionality in his reliance on objective measurement to imagine subjective states, depicting organizational adherence as personal allegiance. These creative maneuvers found expression in each leader's linguistic choices and influenced the lived experience of each organization's participants.

Murphy's theory of religion situates new religions as discursive communities whose beliefs and actions constitute communicative processes between themselves and other facets of society. Both literally and metaphorically, new religions must deploy a shared vocabulary and grammar to produce an intelligible – if not necessarily familiar – response to their interlocutors. In the active discourse between new religions and other entities, both sides reference shared/familiar “vocabulary” (news, policies, figures, texts, data, sentiments, etc.) using a range of shared/familiar behavioral forms, or “grammar” (protests, gatherings, lectures, publications, experiments, community-building, etc.). For Murphy and other scholars who insist that the term *religion* “isolate[s] or demarcate[s] a portion of the complex, observable behavior of

biologically, socially, and historically situated human beings and human communities,” these shared/familiar – even mundane – elements that comprise religion are crucial (McCutcheon 2001, 11).

These shared/familiar/mundane features appear in the acts of language appropriation that I examined. *Freak*, *whore*, and *nigger* all have long histories – as Hubbard quipped, “in using the English language, you are not using your own ideas, you did not invent the words.” By appropriating terms to improve communicability, it seems that there is very little that is new about new religious language. Ironically, this admission allows scholars of NRMs like Mooney to dismiss a hermeneutic of meaninglessness, asserting that “one of the most pervasive constants in cult discourse is the borrowing of established forms” (2005, 150). Turning the tables on those who view NRMs as meaningless or aberrant, this emphasis on communicating through shared/familiar forms renders new religious discourse only as intelligible as surrounding society’s vocabulary and grammar allows. Even groups that reject social norms have to abide by common linguistic practices to articulate their message or gather a following.

To balance these assertions of familiarity and sharing, one must remember Sally Falk Moore’s caution that an overly rigid/structured understanding of group behavior and communication obscures the ways in which each communicative act refines the symbolic order on which it relies. These ongoing adaptations and adjustments reconfigure the components and mechanisms of social interaction, just as communicative acts reconfigure the context of interaction. Like their social and political settings, NRMs are processes, not simply structures. It is in this processual alteration of symbols and symbolic orders that one can locate what is new about new religions.

Each NRM whose texts I analyzed exemplify this processual nature, both in terms of doctrinal evolution and in terms of language use. Regarding doctrinal evolution, each group's message developed and changed to keep pace with new temporal/geographical contexts and new social sentiments. In Peoples Temple, social gospel and early civil rights activism gave way to socialist revolution. As the civil rights movement waned and the Cold War heated up, Jones's broad conception of *nigger* allowed him to re-focus the Temple's identity and opponents. Oppressed "niggers" clarified the boundaries of their subjugation and rediscovered their noble heritage in American Temple sermons, while Jonestown's residents deployed "crazy nigger tactics" in socialism's struggle against American capitalism.

The Children of God, likewise, transitioned from its apocalyptic denunciation of America the Whore to demonstrating God's love around the world as Happy Hookers. Even Pederson's *Hollywood Free Paper* retargeted its message of freedom/liberation from countercultural youth to prison inmates. Scientology's strict denunciation of deviation when learning and practicing Scientology technology, by contrast, demonstrates the dangers of rejecting processual change. To cope with the inevitability of altering doctrines/practices to maintain the movement's relevance, David Miscavige side-stepped Hubbard's moratorium on adaptation by rectifying supposed transcription errors in Scientology's canon (ironically defending alteration through fidelity).

Individual key words in new religious discourse are exemplary microcosms of the newness that this processual development generates. By appropriating *nigger*, *whore*, or *freak*, the new religions covered in chapters 5-7 all re-worked extant symbolic orders to promote revised worldviews, resolve – or create – conflicts, and break down or build up boundaries and distinctions. Peoples Temple, the Children of God, and the Jesus People did not invent most of the words that they used, but they exercised ingenuity and creativity to adapt those words to

challenge dominant social structures and promote a new vision for a more satisfactory world. These alterations of connotation and denotation – as well as the behavioral/organizational alterations that they invoked or supported – constitute a major form of newness in new religions.

These adapted terms, moreover, can undergo further alterations as the organization's needs, goals, audience, or context changes. *Nigger* shifted from a term Jones embraced to cultivate camaraderie with his primarily black audience to a revolutionary call for re-imagining the limits of political protest against Cold War super-powers. Berg's triplet of terms for promiscuous sexuality – *whore*, *harlot*, and *hooker* – began as titles of condemnation and damnation but became adulatory addresses for in-group members. To a lesser extent, *freak* first appeared in the *HFP* as a sign of disenfranchisement and anti-authoritarianism but increasingly promoted personal fulfilment/satisfaction within a world ripe for change. From a non-pejorative standpoint, Hubbard's conception of *religion* shifted as the scientific certainty of Dianetics incorporated some supernatural elements in Scientology. The adaptability of language that allows language appropriation to take place ensures that even borrowed-and-changed terms can continue to morph in new religious contexts.

“How the World Really Is”?

Finally, my work encourages scholars to revisit Murphy's claim that theory's purpose is to “account for, as best we can, how the world really is” in light of his warning that scholars actively shape their objects of study (2005, 75; Murphy 2007, 154). In chapter 1, I argued that scholars who deploy a hermeneutic of meaninglessness to avoid understanding new religious texts misrepresent their objects of study. I demonstrated the insufficiency and inaccuracy of such a hermeneutic by appealing to Murphy's work and Halliday's concept of anti-languages.

Textual evidence that disproves the accuracy or sufficiency of this hermeneutic, gathered from the very documents that it dismisses, however, offers a stronger and more topical indictment. Moreover, this textual analysis identifies, displays, and analyses previously unexamined linguistic choices in Peoples Temple, the Children of God, and the Jesus People (as well as summarizing Hubbard's voluminous writing about language). Chapters 4-7 demonstrate that each new religion's texts generated – and operated according to – coherent and deliberate linguistic and rhetorical choices designed to enlarge – rather than obfuscate – the meanings of key terms. Examined as repositories of doctrine that guided members' lived experiences, Jones's sermons, Berg's *MO Letters*, Pederson's *HFP*, and Hubbard's technical texts display the internal fluency necessary to generate worldviews, navigate conflict, and establish boundaries. While this assertion does not exonerate any movement or leader from the practical consequences of each text's teachings, it does disprove the notion that new religious texts are created solely to confuse/hoodwink potential converts and lack intelligibility.

Beyond the complexity introduced by the twin tensions of commonality/divergence and persistence/adaptation, there are two major caveats to my depiction of new religious language as an explanation of "how the world really is." First, despite my use of primary sources generated by the movements themselves to present each NRM's doctrines, practices, and organization, the depictions of new religious doctrine that appear in this thesis are the product of an imposed systematization crafted by combining discursive moments. Second, my focus on language appropriation as an empowering technique masks simultaneous disempowering trends towards participants in Scientology, Peoples Temple, and the Children of God. To avoid the critiques that Murphy levels against the phenomenology of religion, I explore the consequences of my analytical framework's limiting ramifications in this section.

Chapters 4-7 rely heavily on a multitude of texts produced through each leader's discursive activities. Although all of these discursive moments took place within the same NRM and involved the same actors/creators, the doctrinal picture that emerges is more systematic or homogenous than the authors originally produced or than participants encountered. Dorthe Refslund Christensen identifies the danger of such systematization in her own study of Scientology's texts. Presenting her work on Hubbard's canon as a reading of "changing representations" over time, Christensen explains that her chronological exposition "stresses the dynamic process itself, rather than making a thematic reading that might tend to create a theology" (2017, 47-48). Elaborating on this methodological choice, Christensen warns that "Hubbard did not intend to produce a coherent representation of the central issues, but always represented the different issues as singular and *ad hoc* statements" (2017, 48). A strictly thematic reading of new religious texts, in other words, risks misrepresenting changing and piecemeal remarks as deliberately constructed theology. In this thesis, language appropriation is both a guiding principle for selecting sources to analyze and a structuring frame that produces a coherent belief system from those sources.

My analysis of Jones's sermons and the *HFP* exemplify this guided depiction of new religious texts. Jones's sermons were predominantly self-contained, stand-alone addresses. Although he touched on common themes to reinforce consistent opinions, Jones's Temple addresses presented extemporaneous lessons rather than knitting together a grand, systematic theology. Pederson's *HFP*, likewise, rarely referred back to earlier editions or fostered multi-issue discussions.³ The textual corpora of Peoples Temple and the Jesus People were not created to establish and canonize a systematic theology.

³ Admittedly, some letters printed in the *HFP* responded to earlier missives sent in by other Jesus freaks, and Pederson printed recurring columns from some contributors (such as Larry Norman's "As I See It").

Berg's *MO Letters* contain slightly more self-referential techniques to foster sustained inter-textual doctrines. They include textual mechanisms (letter and paragraph numbers) that help readers and authors reference earlier letters, connecting emergent discourse with preceding/canonical texts. Berg, moreover, released some *MO Letters* as entries in larger thematic series, and used other letters to summarize the movement's beliefs. Scientology's voluminous textual base, finally, contains textual features such as indexes, reprints, and citations that supported self-referential systematization. These elements – along with Scientology's emphasis on standardized repetition – suggest that Hubbard constructed consistent ideologies supported by a web of texts that connected group members across degrees of involvement and time.

Even my depictions of Scientology and the Children of God, however, are more refined, structured, and succinct than appears in their original corpora. These refined/clarified depictions are affected by access to sources, informed by hindsight, and (as a non-member) unfettered by each organization's normative beliefs. As a result, I produced and analyzed evidence of persistent linguistic and rhetorical trends across documents and years. This production and analysis, however, likely differs from the depictions and conclusions that individual movement participants living as members of each NRM in the 1960s and 1970s might create.⁴ The picture of new religious doctrines and practices that emerged in the preceding chapters, in other words, is a product of selective representation and fulfills particular scholarly purposes. This fact does not negate the validity of my conclusions regarding the social functions of language

⁴ These likely differences are the result of matters such as limited access to information, the ongoing production of texts by founders, personal motivations for belonging to a given organization, and restrictions of orthodoxy/orthopraxy. Differences between my depictions of Scientology, Peoples Temple, the Children of God, and the Jesus People and accounts by members in each group are differences of purpose, positionality, and accessibility.

appropriation in NRMs, but it does challenge the ability of any theory to account for “how the world really is.”

The second caveat to my work on language appropriation relates to (dis)empowerment and language use. As I demonstrated, NRMs can adapt language to disempower their opponents and/or empower in-group members. Chapters 5 and 6, in particular, noted the ways that Jones and Berg rhetorically empowered African Americans (as descendants of nobility from advanced civilizations) and women (as conduits of divine love), respectively, by expanding the connotations of *nigger* and *hooker*. Peoples Temple re-signified *nigger* to combat racial oppression, while the Children of God freed *hooker* from its pejorative shackles to destigmatize sex. Temple recordings and *MO Letters* provide evidence that these goals accounted for pejorative language’s use in each organization.

Evidence also exists, however, that this rhetorical empowerment masked actual disempowering trends within each group. From a racial perspective, Peoples Temple’s leadership structure recapitulated a cycle in which a small number of primarily white leaders benefited from the labor of a primarily black population. Despite Jones’s claim that all Temple members stood equally as “niggers,” Temple demographics reveal a pattern of privileged white leadership in both Guyana and the United States (see Moore 2018, 170). In turn, the Children of God’s linguistic elevation of (female) sexuality to sacred status endangered – not just empowered – the group’s hookers. Acting as a conduit of God’s love might have empowered female members in a spiritual sense, but did not protect them from sexual abuse. As I indicated in chapter 6, Berg addressed rape in several letters as a possibility/reality in flirty fishing, and told stories of his own partner’s abuse during his exploratory use of sex as proselytization. *Hooker*’s new meanings

empowered women in the Children of God, but also encouraged them to step into situations that exacerbated their powerlessness.⁵

Linguistically, Peoples Temple and the Children of God did not only disempower their opponents – they also covertly (perhaps inadvertently) disempowered those members of their audience who rhetorically gained the most from language appropriation and adaptation. I am not suggesting that blacks in Peoples Temple experienced *only* a disguised version of racism, or that women in the Children of God existed *only* as exploited/violated sexual beings. The picture of (dis/)empowerment that my research paints, however, is – to recall Murphy’s phrase – both real and imagined. Especially in chapters 5 and 6, the rehabilitation or elevation of *nigger* and *hooker* rhetorically empowered and endangered their referents.

One could level similar charges at Scientology and the Jesus People, although the lower degree of overt conflict with surrounding society in each group makes the nature of that (dis/)empowerment seem less extreme. The eternal high of taking a Jesus trip may have been safer than drugs, but the *HFP*’s lack of robust theological content – and the Jesus People’s unbalanced quantity of new converts to mature movement leaders – threatened to strand freaks in spiritual infancy. Hubbard’s attacks on psychiatry and borrowing of scientific/engineering authorial styles rhetorically authorized Dianetics practitioners as users of mental health techniques. Hubbard’s limited scientific/engineering training (to say nothing of his lack of medical training), however, casts a pall on the effectiveness and safety of Scientology’s rehabilitation programs.⁶ The effects of language appropriation in NRMs match both Murphy’s

⁵ Susan Raine further explores the doctrinal process through which Berg simultaneously empowered and denigrated women’s bodies in her research on flirty fishing (2007).

⁶ See, for instance, Kent’s summary of potential health risks in Scientology’s Narconon program (2017, 16-20).

definitional assertion that religions structure “asymmetrical relations” and his caveat that religions deal in both “real and imagined” concepts, but the effects of asymmetry and imagination are not solely positive.

Read on its own, Murphy’s assertion that a sound theory accounts for “how the world really is” is a brazen statement of exposition or mastery. As my two caveats indicate, however, even a sound application of Murphy’s theory bolstered by sociolinguistics that draws out significant – and understudied – elements of new religious discourse represents only a partial version of “how the world really is.” While my work highlights persistent and deliberate instances of language borrowing and adaptation by new religious leaders, it relies on a selective and systematized depiction of new religious discourse. Furthermore, it identifies rhetorical and semantic maneuvers of language appropriation as techniques of imagined – but *not* always actual – empowerment. These caveats do not negate the value of my contribution to the study of NRMs. Instead, they point out the unavoidable realities of religious studies scholarship, and the importance of acknowledging one’s own positionality and goals in relation to one’s object of study.

As a rebuttal of a hermeneutic of meaninglessness, my research sought out persistent linguistic trends – and their organizational functions – as evidence of coherent and deliberate meaning-making processes in new religious discourse. This focus on persistence and coherence (combined with my afore-mentioned textual access, hindsight, and freedom from orthodoxy’s confines) resulted in a selective, systematic (re)construction of doctrines in Scientology, Peoples Temple, the Children of God, and the Jesus People. By focusing on conflict from the perspective of the challenging/contesting/disempowered organization, my research emphasized intentions and opportunities for change through power-relation inversions. This emphasis sometimes

privileged imagined – over actual – empowerment to highlight the potential for language usage to shape identity, relations, and actions.

These admissions, and the limits that they impose on my research’s ability to describe “how the world really is,” remind readers of the difficulties that scholars of religion face. On one hand, all representations of religious objects of study are partial, and highlight certain elements at the expense of others to argue a particular point. All theories of religion construct their objects of study through processes of selection and authorial interests. No theory of religion that is sufficiently concerned with context and difference will result in a homogenous depiction of its object of study, no matter how persistent the behaviors or concepts that it uncovers. My application of Murphy’s theory to NRMs demonstrates its value not by totally explaining all NRMs, but rather by drawing out doctrinal, textual, and behavioral patterns in select NRMs and then re-describing those activities to reveal their social functions.

On another hand, religious studies scholars confront discrepancies between the ways that religious organizations portray the world and empirical evidence that contradicts these portrayals. The designations “real” and “imagined,” however, do not reflect a worldview’s ability to generate empirical results. Imagined or fantastic conceptions can be real in their results, just as actual events can produce imagined states. A distinction between “affective” and “rhetorical” processes in language appropriation works similarly. In chapters 4-7, leaders’ claims rhetorically elevated the status of disempowered movement participants, but affectively perpetuated – or re-inscribed – their disempowered status in some instances. The link between doctrinal maneuvers and pragmatic results is complex, with promoted and actual results sometimes conflicting.

Examining similarities and divergences in language usage in Scientology, Peoples Temple, the Children of God, and the Jesus People highlights two opportunities for further study. First, and most importantly, further analysis of language borrowing and adaptation is needed to determine the extent of the patterns that my research uncovered. In particular, the effectiveness of my language-appropriation-guided textual analysis should be tested on non-pejorative terms in new religious doctrine, and in textual corpora produced by NRMs less overtly at odds with surrounding society. Peoples Temple and the Children of God's vocabulary choices reflected each movement's status as critic and combatant in social conflicts. Both Jones and Berg deployed pejorative language as part of their larger goals of voicing a challenge to the extant social order, which harmonized with Murphy's emphases on hierarchy, contestation, and difference. Exploring Pederson's use of *freak* (a less pejorative term in a less hostile movement), however, yielded less robust insights into identity, conflict, and boundaries in the Jesus People. While the basic claims that "language appropriation occurs in NRMs" and "appropriative acts serve social goals of identity construction and boundary maintenance" seem safe, it would be helpful to clarify the potential limitations of such an approach when applied to non-pejorative terms. My focus on texts emerging from NRMs in America during a specific time period, moreover, presents a limited geographical and temporal sample size. It would be helpful to identify – and account for – variations in processes of language appropriation found in texts from NRMs emerging in earlier/later periods, or in non-North American contexts. These investigations would clarify the utility of my research beyond the four NRMs examined here.

Second, my research focuses on new religious texts created (or, at least, directly sanctioned) by organizational founders. This focus allowed me to analyze language appropriation in the most widespread and orthodox – that is, best known or most authoritative – movement

texts. Each of the NRMs in my thesis, however, generated other texts created by participants that did not become canonical. To measure the effective extent of language appropriation in each NRM, it will be necessary to analyze these non-canonical texts as well.

Berg's letters, Jones's sermons, Hubbard's technical bulletins and dictionaries, and Pederson's newspaper reflect an official but ideal conception of each NRM. While each leader used linguistic adaptation to encourage his audience to act in particular ways, their texts only indirectly chronicle the extent to which audiences internalized or re-deployed the key terms – and their effects – that my research focused on. Jones may have been comfortable using reconceptualized racial slurs in Temple services, but did Temple participants embrace and deploy *nigger*'s new connotations in the way that he advocated? Dianetics and early Scientology generated a number of offshoots – did textual producers in these spin-off groups insist on definitional mastery of technical vocabulary in the same manner as Hubbard? In some *MO Letters* Berg referred to magazines and mailings created by specific colonies. Is there evidence that *whore*, *harlot*, and *hooker* appeared in these communal publications to signify the same registers of sexual promiscuity that they did in the *MO Letters*?

Certainly, the practical effects of language adaptation go beyond simply using the redefined terms in the way that a new religion's leaders dictate. Being a "nigger" in Peoples Temple meant more than just calling oneself *nigger* – eventually, it meant being willing to suffer hunger strikes, disrupt political events, and even kill oneself as forms of "crazy nigger tactics." Being a hooker in the Children of God meant more than not balking at a sexual slur – it meant covertly expanding the movement in hostile territory by spreading a message of embodied love. Widespread dissemination, however, determines the extent to which a newly defined term will gain traction or fade into obscurity (see Bergen 2016, 148). Non-canonical new religious texts

can help gauge the extent of such dissemination and bridge the gap between “ideal” and “actual” depictions of language appropriation’s effects in NRMs.

Exploring beyond the boundaries of a single, clearly delineated, already produced canon will also test the effectiveness of my approach to new religious texts in less formalized, less organized, or less textual settings. Scientology and the Children of God consciously generated stable bodies of literature and added textual apparatus such as indexes, tables of contents, and document types to assist users. Peoples Temple and the Jesus People created records that scholars can easily retrieve and examine. My reliance on extant canons, however, does not shed much light on the effectiveness of applying Murphy’s definition of religion or Halliday’s idea of anti-languages to NRMs that have not (yet) produced a canon. Additional research relying on non-canonical material will help clarify the extent of my work’s applicability regarding recently founded, or non-textually focused, groups.

Not So Catachrestic

As recently created organizations that appear on the fringes of society to challenge dominant ideologies, and as communities that engage with “non-obvious beings, states, and events,” it is tempting to approach NRMs from a standpoint of oddity or novelty (Murphy 2007b, 141). When confronted by texts that contest, repurpose, or radically revise familiar power structures and sources of authority, a widely deployable framework for analyzing unfamiliar new religious discourse should prove an attractive tool for scholars. This tool becomes even more attractive when new religious behavior crosses over from odd, novel, or esoteric to violent, harmful, or deadly.

One such framework is a hermeneutic of meaninglessness, which identifies unconventional linguistic acts as evidence of NRMs' logical paucity, unintelligibility, and deviance. Pejorative language's presence in new religious discourse seems particularly strong evidence of impoverished vocabulary. When set into sermons about the sacred or letters about love, profanity and slurs appear out of place and ill-conceived. When speakers use pejorative terms to address their allies, slurring speech's presence in new religious texts becomes not just uncomfortable but counterintuitive. A white preacher calling black – and white – audience members *niggers* appears counter-productive (at best) and racist (at worst). A literalist Christian letter-writer titling his young, female correspondents *whores* or *hookers* seems to undermine any liberation or social elevation that his movement bestows. A middle-aged evangelist trying to ingratiate himself to young radicals by styling his religion's deity as a proto-*freak* feels forced or heretical. The presence of pejorative language in new religious texts, in other words, seems to support those scholars and experts who contend that NRMs and their texts do not make sense.

This line of reasoning is, however, flawed. Focusing on difference and contest as meaning-making processes, I deployed Tim Murphy's semiotic theory of religion to analyze NRMs as organizations involved in "the structuring of asymmetrical relations between real or imagined groups or classes." Murphy's language-centered work prioritizes borrowing and adaptation as basic components of religious behavior. This approach foregrounds the necessity of drawing on extant cultural elements when establishing and communicating a new religion, as well as the purpose of altering or adapting these borrowed materials. To conceptualize the linguistic patterns that emerge, I coupled Murphy's theoretical frame with observations from sociolinguistics. In particular, M. A. K. Halliday's work on antilanguages bridges the gap

between NRMs as marginal social challengers and Murphy's reliance on a contestation/agonistic model of communication.

Finally, I drew on texts created by four NRMs to demonstrate that slurring and pejorative terms play a key role in constructing coherent religious systems. This investigation contributes to the study of new religions in four ways while nowhere condoning the use of such language. First, my close reading of primary sources to explore language appropriation drew out theories of language and communication in Scientology, Peoples Temple, and the Children of God that were fragmented or submerged within the source material and, consequentially, largely unacknowledged in extant scholarship. Second, I linked linguistic adaptation to behavioral expectations in each NRM, establishing antilanguage fluency as an action not just insofar as group members learned how to (re-)use certain words or parse their sacred texts, but insofar as being able to do so affected their lived experience and personal identity. Learning the new meanings of *squirrel*, *nigger*, *hooker*, or *freak*, that is, affected how one spoke/listened, but also how one understood the world and acted. Studying language change thus became a study of individual change and social change as an active/behavioral – and not solely linguistic – process.

Third, I identified clear examples of religious practice that demonstrate the actual – not just theoretical – accuracy of Murphy's foray into creating a new theory of religion. I addressed his lack of "facts on the ground," and mated his work with sociolinguistics to resolve its systematic shortcoming. Moreover, I enlivened his definition of religion, demonstrating that processes of identity formation, conflict management, and boundary maintenance are the sites and functions of religious activity as he conceives of it. Fourth, I provided an alternative to the hermeneutic of meaninglessness. I demonstrated a rigorous method of analyzing new religious texts that targets both common/persistent elements of rhetorical work for organizational purposes

(namely, language appropriation) and unique dimensions within these elements (including procedure, purpose, tools, goals – all the result of context).

Rather than ill-chosen errors, pejorative terms are sites of identity construction, conflict navigation, and boundary maintenance in Scientology, Peoples Temple, the Children of God, and the Jesus People. In fact, acts of language appropriation represent a consistent linguistic pattern in new religious discourse. While the borrowed words, discursive settings, and appropriative goals change from organization to organization, the deployment and functionality of appropriated terms – even slurring and pejorative ones – remains a persistent component of new religious discourse, and one that scholars must pay attention to.

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