

Op/Ed - The Nation

In Radical Matrimony

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Suzanne Wasserman's documentary *Thunder in Guyana*, which airs on PBS's Independent Lens series at 10 pm on February 22, is the first in-depth look at Janet Jagan, former president of Guyana. Attribute that to the subject's obscurity: Guyana is roughly the size of Britain, but as an economically strapped country whose population grazes 800,000, it's a blip on America's radar.

Or attribute it to the subject's enormity: Jagan's life story is so much larger than life, it's almost too cinematic for cinema. That story delivers dramatic narrative tropes--rebellion, revolution, racial tension--in operatic proportions. It begins in 1943, when Janet Rosenberg, a pretty Jewish girl from Chicago, immigrates to the land of her new husband, Cheddi Jagan, the son of East Indian sugar workers in what was then the colony of British Guiana. It ends in 1997, when 77-year-old Janet Jagan takes the helm of what is now Guyana--to become the only American-born woman elected president of any country.

Guyana's story, like Jagan's, is familiar yet fantastic, at once a typical postcolonial ordeal of independence and creolization, and a grotesque hyperbole of these things, punctuated by crises--race riots, rigged elections, political paranoia--that make our 2000 election woes feel like, well, a blip on the radar.

Considering the grand scale of her subject, first-time filmmaker Wasserman--a cousin of Janet Jagan's and associate director of the CUNY Graduate Center's Gotham Center for New York City History--had her work cut out for her. Recounting the life of a politician is itself a challenge, because it means striking a compelling balance between two narratives that threaten to overwhelm each other: history and (in Jagan's case) her story, public and private. When these two halves of the saga are as sensational as they are here, achieving this balance is more than a challenge; it's an all-out battle between competing narratives. *Thunder in Guyana* navigates that battle, but just barely. Its goal is lofty, particularly for a fifty-minute documentary: to give us public and private--not just Janet Jagan but Janet Rosenberg.

Set during Guyana's 1997 election, *Thunder in Guyana* is a deftly edited fusion of newsreel footage, photos and interviews with Janet Jagan, her two children and her political allies. The film is narrated by Wasserman, who embarks on an odyssey to flesh out the cousin she knows via weathered photographs and family gossip. It lands her in Georgetown, Guyana, where Jagan pilots her campaign headquarters with grandmotherly repose. Wasserman voices the skepticism that her cousin clearly lacks: "I wondered if the Guyanese people would really elect a 77-year-old American-born Jewish woman for president." The film is thus framed as a question: How did Rosenberg become Jagan, and how did Guiana become Guyana?

It began, we learn, as a love story. Beautiful, athletic, fiercely intellectual Janet Rosenberg met dental student Cheddi Jagan during her college years in Chicago. Both were fervently committed to Marxist politics and, soon, to each other. To Janet's family, Cheddi was a triple blow--"a foreigner, a person who wasn't white, a person who wasn't Jewish," Jagan says--but by 1943, an undeterred Janet ("nothing much frightens me," she shrugs) had married Cheddi and was off to rural British Guiana, where she found her rightful place: not in the kitchen with the women but in political trade unions with the men. In 1950 Janet, Cheddi and London-educated lawyer Forbes

Burnham launched the People's Progressive Party (PPP), which propounded ardent socialism in a newsletter titled *Thunder*.

The PPP represented more than national unity. A country that naturally confounds categories--geographically, it is South American; culturally and politically, it is Caribbean--Guyana is known as "the land of six peoples" because it's a postcolonial pilau, born of Amerindian natives, European colonizers, African slaves and indentured servants from China, Portugal and East India, imported to work the plantations after Britain abolished slavery in its colonies in 1833. An alliance between the Indo-Guyanese Cheddi and the Afro-Guyanese Burnham was thus an alliance of Guyana's principal ethnic groups. Although Janet eluded any such category, in 1953--when Cheddi was elected the first Marxist leader in the Western Hemisphere--she became Guyana's Minister and Deputy Speaker of Parliament. In the American press, she was likened to Eva Perón and vilified as "the ablest Communist organizer in the Western Hemisphere," adept at spreading "propaganda among the hungry, ignorant natives."

As Cheddi's story takes center stage, then, Janet's is never just its footnote: A bright-red expatriate, she attracted all the attention her husband did. It was not the right kind of attention: 133 days after Cheddi assumed office, Winston Churchill sent troops into Georgetown to topple a so-called Communist regime. It was the end of a golden era, because it was followed by a racial rift that now defines Guyanese life: Burnham moved far to the right of Jagan, founding an opposition party--the People's National Congress (PNC)--that appealed directly to Afro-Guyanese voters, exploiting their fears of Indo-Guyanese domination. Gang-style political warfare erupted in most Caribbean countries, but thanks to its uniquely diverse population, Guyana (like the similarly populated Trinidad and Suriname) added race to the mix and bred a monster: *apanjaat*, or divisive racial politics. Afro-Guyanese endorsed the PNC; Indo-Guyanese stood with the PPP; exceptions to that rule were scarce.

The US government, for its part, regarded *apanjaat* as a way of weakening Cheddi Jagan, and worked covertly to encourage this shameless race-baiting. Re-elected in both 1957 and 1961, he confronted a hostile media in Britain and the United States, where his socialist convictions made cold war leaders shudder. "Where do you stand on this fundamental division in the world today, between Communism and Western democracy?" an O'Reilly-like anchor asks him on *Meet the Press*, in language eerily reminiscent of President Bush ([news](#) - [web sites](#))'s evocation of a world starkly divided between the forces of "freedom" and those of "terror," between us and them.

While the PPP's mission statement--"to build a just socialist society, in which the industries of the country shall be socially and democratically owned"--was clear enough, Cheddi refused to take sides in the cold war: "I don't like this sort of either Communist or West, you know? I think this tendency toward black or white is a tendency which can lead to a lot of harm," he tells a reporter. America, however, turned a deaf ear to this reasoning, determined as it was to avoid another defeat in the Caribbean after the Bay of Pigs. So the CIA ([news](#) - [web sites](#)) committed what Kennedy adviser and historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. later admitted was "a great injustice" against Cheddi Jagan, funding strikes and race riots in Georgetown in an effort to destabilize his government. (Schlesinger's apology, delivered to Jagan at the *Nation* offices in 1990, was the subject of the magazine's June 4 lead editorial that year.) As the violence spread, scores of people died, Guyana's economy was crippled, a state of emergency was declared and, by tweaking Guyana's electoral system (Britain replaced popular with proportional representation), the West got its wish: In 1964 Burnham became Guyana's president. And in 1966, with the country still in a state of emergency, Guyana became independent.

Burnham is hardly seen in *Thunder in Guyana*--no PNC advocates are interviewed--but he is the film's villain. After taking office he turned sharply to the left and, much to America's dismay, out-Jaganned Jagan, nationalizing the bulk of Guyana's industries. As Guyana became the second-poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere, the PNC retained its power by rigging elections until

the 1992 presidential race, when the Carter Center arrived in Georgetown as monitors--and Cheddi Jagan ended Burnham's run.

Janet Jagan ran for office after her husband died of a heart attack, but the results were so disputed her victory was not declared until days after the election. The "eureka" moment of victory was thus never quite there for Wasserman's camera to capture; after winning Jagan heads home to rest. Still, her level-headed triumph is the crescendo of the film. Her presidency may have been short-lived--because of health problems, she stepped down after twenty months--but it was the climax of Janet Rosenberg's transformation into Janet Jagan.

Such is the plot of *Thunder in Guyana*--and it is hardly impartial. In fact, there were gaffes on both sides of the political fence: Afro- and Indo-Guyanese parties relentlessly used their respective realms of influence--the public-service sector and the agricultural sector--to sabotage each other's agendas. And while Burnham was indeed a corrupt dictator, he is not Guyana's principal villain. That dubious honor goes to race itself: a synthetic system of biases that Guyanese and Western politicians consciously milked, engaging in what Cheddi Jagan, in his book *Forbidden Freedom*, called "the familiar imperialist game of divide and rule." Professor Ralph Premdas concludes his study of Guyana with a grim diagnosis: The country suffered--and still suffers--from "ethnically inspired collective insanity."

It is a surreal plot twist that at the crux of this racial "insanity" sits a woman who confounds race altogether. Who--what--was Janet Jagan? To the Western media she was a dangerous Jew misidentified by journalists as a relative of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg. To Burnham she was a "stupid American" (he allegedly addressed her as such during sessions of Parliament). To many Indo-Guyanese she was simply white: "They used to call me a blue-eyed bouchie," Jagan recalls ("bouchie" is a brother's wife; "brother," here, is Cheddi). Rolling her eyes, Jagan shrugs. "I'm not even blue-eyed."

It's one of the few moments in the film where Jagan addresses her racial identity; another is prompted by an Associated Press reporter who directly inquires about it. Jagan replies, "I don't know if people see white when they look at me--except, you know, the diehard politicians. But maybe I am living in a dream world.... I don't feel anything like being a minority." She pauses and adds that perhaps her identification with the underdog was a product of growing up Jewish in America.

It's a plausible explanation, as well as a familiar one. Janet Jagan is one in a long line of Jews--from 1920s-era musicians George Gershwin and Mezz Mezzrow to civil rights martyrs Michael Schwerner and Andrew Goodman and hip-hop Hebrews the Beastie Boys--who have, in various degrees and contexts, identified cross-racially. How such crossover figures negotiate the conflicting facets of their identities--how, for instance, a Jewish-American woman feels about being, as daughter-in-law Nadine Jagan puts it, "more Guyanese than most Guyanese"--is a profound issue that *Thunder in Guyana* could have probed.

It doesn't, perhaps because Wasserman's interviews with her cousin, more informational than emotional, emphasize the public over the private, history over her story. We learn little about Janet and Cheddi's relationship, and only slightly more about Janet's rift with her Jewish family: "Unfortunately," states Jagan, speaking flatly of her father's death, "my husband and my father never met." Jagan seems uninterested in reflecting on the emotional dimension of her cross-identification--which alone could indicate how deep this identification runs: Analyzing one's identification with the "other" (as Mezzrow did in his memoir *Really the Blues*) means standing apart from that group; taking this identification for granted, by contrast, suggests a sense of peace with one's cultural crossover and, perhaps, with the inherently vexed nature of race and identity.

The film's only reading of Janet Jagan's racial identity comes from Nadine Jagan, who suggests a rich tension at the heart of *Thunder in Guyana*. "She fell in love with [Cheddi], and they had a common goal." Jagan's daughter-in-law shrugs. "That's all they saw."

The cruel irony of Janet Jagan's story is that her personal narrative and her public one--her story and Guyana's story--are at odds. Janet may have fallen in love with Cheddi, and from then on seen cause over color. But her beloved Guyana could never do the same; it evolved into a nation that privileged color over cause. In Janet's triumphant personal saga, politics trumps race; in Guyana's tragic one, race trumps politics. And though the latter saga is the more disquieting one, it is also, in our race-fixed world, the more universal and familiar one--and thus the easiest one to recount. To plumb the depths of Jagan's personal story is an altogether different coup, one that *Thunder in Guyana* comes tantalizingly close to achieving.