

Erin Freeman
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“Harlem’s Negro God” and “White Girls”: Stereotypes and Interracial
Intrigue in Father Divine’s Struggle with his Orthodox Adversaries

“I hope you will look into the matter and take steps to put an end to Father Divine if it is only for white womanhood.”

–Joy Wonderful, ex-Divinite, 1942.¹

“There are thousands and thousands of people this Country over, they know they have lied maliciously, antagonistically and committed vice and crime in their attempts to destroy the Kingdom of GOD; they know they have lied from start to finish!”

–Father Divine, 1938.²

Father Divine, God, stood at the head of the Holy Communion table, looking out at his flock. Rows of girls, forming the Rosebud choir, sang softly behind him as he began to preach. Their matching jackets, each with a “V” for “Virtue” stitched onto the breast, created a swath of red to frame Father Divine, in a black tuxedo, and Mother Divine, in her frothy white gown. Those Peace Mission members fortunate enough to attend the Divines’ anniversary banquet at the Mission’s estate in Pennsylvania gathered around the table, echoed by similar celebrations around the world. By marrying the young, pure, white Sweet Angel, Father Divine had given the devout members of his movement the ultimate gift.

¹ Joy Wonderful, Letter to J. Edgar Hoover, FBI Archive File “Father Divine,” 1942.

² Father Divine, “Attempts to Destroy the Kingdom of God,” *The New Day*, Dec. 29, 1938, A-4.

They were now marking the first observance of the Peace Mission's most cherished holiday.

Of course, the interracial union between Father and Mother Divine, though spiritual rather than physical, was as infernal to some as it was heavenly to others. One anonymous New Yorker was so appalled by their flagrant festivities that he or she wrote directly to FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover the day before the banquet.

Dated April 28, 1947, the writer steamed:

This negro faker has the habit of doing everything in a big way. On April 29th, to celebrate his first wedding anniversary to that white girl he will hold a full 7-hour 350 course dinner. They have 60 barrels of chicken, 1800 lbs. of the finest beef and 800 lbs. of ham. U

He or she then posed, "Wonder where he gets his money."³ Hoover would receive many letters about Divine and his Mission, volunteering endless accusations, conspiracies, and pleas for his punishment. Newspapers, books, and magazines ran similar stories, fueling the public's mistrust. Like this letter writer, many would be particularly suspicious about the "negro's" interactions with "white girls."

To onlookers, Father Divine was a heretic. A malevolent maverick. The "other." In the public eye during the early twentieth century, Father Divine was a man of color grasping for power by claiming to be God, and organized those he brainwashed into a racially integrated cult. He bought up more and more property throughout New York State, mindfully choosing the predominantly white Ulster

³ Anonymous, Letter to J. Edgar Hoover, FBI Archive File "Father Divine," 1947.

County as the hub of his “Promised Land.” He even bought the estate across the Hudson River from President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s.⁴ People’s loved ones were acting differently, changing their names to things like “Darling Heart,” and moving off to one of Father Divine’s communes (or “heavens”).

To believers, Father Divine was God embodied on earth to save their souls. He found them jobs and fed them for next to nothing through the Depression, freed them from the confines of racial categories, and showed them the way to a virtuous life.⁵ This was what made Father Divine so dangerous to the orthodox majority. He wasn’t simply a “negro faker” rambling in a vacuum, another “other” who was quiet enough to ignore; Father Divine preached and crowds responded “amen!” His radically unorthodox teachings, which threatened the social structures and sacrosanct spirituality so many held dear, were spreading. Someone had to stop him.

Father Divine clashed with defenders of the mainstream from the Peace Mission’s genesis in the 1910s through its declining years in the 1960s. Father Divine’s detractors knew that they needed a pitiable victim to highlight the threat he posed. Despite Father Divine’s emphasis on breaking down racial differences and keeping the sexes separate, or perhaps because of it, detractors accused Father Divine of a variety of abuses against “white girls” throughout his reign. They strengthened these claims by drawing on stereotypes of black men and white women, as well as existing anxieties concerning their interactions. After decades

⁴ Carleton Mabee, *Promised Land: Father Divine’s Interracial Communities in Ulster County, New York* (Fleischmanns, NY: Purple Mountain Press, 2008), 73.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 16-17, 103.

of such accusations, Father Divine ultimately partnered with a “white girl” to save the Peace Mission, manipulating and soothing the same stereotypes and fears. These strategies run through the letters Father Divine’s detractors sent to J. Edgar Hoover, the newspaper articles on the most publicized legal case in Peace Mission history, and Father and Mother Divine’s sermons and writings on their marriage. This conflict illustrates the perennial struggle between influential nonconformists and the proponents of the orthodoxy which he or she threatens, and demonstrates the power of stereotypes and existing widespread anxieties in each side’s campaign for dominance.

I

J. Edgar Hoover,
U.S. Dept. of Criminal Investigation,
Washington, D.C.

Dear Sir:-

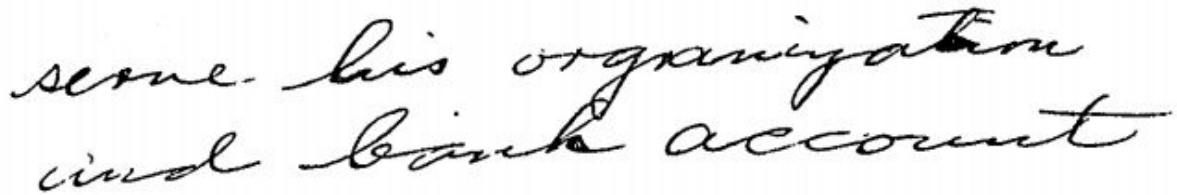
The Federal Bureau of Investigation’s file on Father Divine is full of letters from concerned Americans. From the 1930s through the 50s, as reports of Father Divine and his racially integrated movement spread throughout the country, several dozen Americans suspicious of the man claiming to be God addressed their complaints and anxieties directly to FBI director J. Edgar Hoover. The writers’ accusations largely follow the broader cultural fears of the periods in which they

were written: Father Divine taking advantage of the poor during the Great Depression, signaling to enemy U-boats from Mission heavens near the coast during WWII, working with the Reds to create covert communist communes within his Promised Land during the Cold War. One fear runs throughout the decades in these letters: Father Divine's relationships with

white girls
 (white) girl
 white young women

This cache of letters, hibernating among the several hundred pages that make up the FBI's file on Father Divine, provides a direct line to Father Divine's detractors. Each letter was written by someone who placed themselves in the role of the orthodox majority, sniffing out the iconoclastic "other" and snuffing out his influence. The writers' drives, objectives, and tactics underlie their accusations about Father Divine's abusive treatment of "white girls." These accusers weaponized the stereotypes standing at the intersections of race and gender, using mythic versions of young, white women as the foil to Father Divine's role as the villainous brute. Each of these letters gravitates toward two major themes: Father Divine using white girls to gain money and power, and Father Divine sexually abusing or exploiting them. Threatened by Father Divine's divergent practices and spreading influence, Father Divine's detractors incorporated these stereotypes

and pre-existing anxieties in letters addressed to the man they believed could restore the social order.



some his organization
and bank account

The financial practices of the Peace Mission were, and continue to be, enigmatic. Divine organized the business side of the movement so that he could ultimately control the money and property without being personally liable or seeming materialistic; he refused to accept personal gifts, was never paid for his work, and never owned property himself.⁶ Instead, donations went to the Peace Mission as a whole, which Divine then controlled.⁷ Followers purchased Mission properties themselves, often listing multiple buyers to ensure communal ownership.⁸ Father Divine consciously kept no financial records for himself or the movement in order to foil any opponents' investigations.⁹ As the Mission began rapidly buying property in New York,¹⁰ throwing regal parades in Ulster County,¹¹ and buying custom Rolls Royces,¹² Father Divine's detractors cited his hazy sources of income and lavish displays of wealth as a sign of corruption. Some of the opponents writing to Hoover saw white girls as a potential source of power and

⁶ Carleton Mabey, *Promised Land*, 17.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 18, 22, 27.

⁹ Ibid., 17.

¹⁰ Ibid., 18, 22, 25, 31, 38, 46, 50, 52.

¹¹ Ibid., 28.

¹² Ibid.

money for Father Divine, fearing that he was drawing them into his movement in order to sap them of their resources and status. The details and language of these accusations highlight assumptions about black men's and white women's supposedly inherent natures, how these natures motivate their actions, and how these conceptions of black men were predisposed to preying on "white girls."

In 1938, Peter Pelosi of Massachusetts wrote to Hoover, claiming that "Father Devine on a larger scale uses his I'm God tactics to lure white girls and women for different reasons that will serve his organization and bank account."¹³ Pelosi equates these "I'm God tactics" with drugging the women, comparing this to how "the Chinese use Drugs to get the white girls."¹⁴ Pelosi portrayed the white girls involved as completely helpless, as incapable of effectively taking care of themselves or their money. The idea that Divine's white female followers independently made the decision to join the Peace Mission based on rational thought doesn't seem to occur to Pelosi. Instead, Pelosi assumes that these women must have been "lured."

To complement the portrayal of white girls as delicate dupes, Pelosi portrayed Father Divine as manipulative, asserting that this was a part of his nature as a "colored" man. Pelosi stuck to two racial categories in this letter: "colored and white people."¹⁵ He argued that Divine shouldn't be "on the loose, Because I know that a colored person always will be quick to take advantage where it will concern an opening to serve his desires and satisfactions."¹⁶ According to

¹³ Peter Pelosi, Letter to J. Edgar Hoover, FBI Archive File "Father Divine," 1938.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

Pelosi, Father Divine, because he is a “colored person,” is driven by instinct to hunt instant gratification without concern for morals or consequences. For Pelosi, a “colored” man seems to be the exact opposite of a white woman in nature, so that Father Divine’s assumed deviousness makes him the perfect antagonist to the white girls’ vulnerability. By juxtaposing this villainous portrayal of Father Divine against the wispy white girls, Pelosi uses the latter to heighten sympathy, and therefore urgency. Based on his conceptions of Father Divine’s and the white girls’ natures, the white girls don’t stand a chance in defending themselves against his exploitation. Surely J. Edgar Hoover would launch into action for their sake.

Joy Wonderful, a former Divine follower, continues this dynamic from the perspective of one of the white girls in question. Wonderful wrote to Hoover from New York City in 1942, and explicitly placed herself and Father Divine into racial categories in her opening sentences: “I should have written you long time ago about Father Divine who calls himself God but he is only a coloured man and his real name is George Baker. First I want to tell you that I am a white woman who was with Father Divine (George Baker) a long time, in fact more than 10 years.”¹⁷ By specifying that she was a “white woman” and Father Divine was a “coloured man” before plunging into the role of damsel in distress, she betrayed her expectation that racial categories would bolster her accusations. Wonderful explained that “Father Divine is the lowest devil on earth he took what money I had and when it was all gone he treated me like a dog until finally I got away from him.”¹⁸ Wonderful also weaved implied sexual abuse through her accusations of

¹⁷ Joy Wonderful, Letter.

¹⁸ Ibid.

financial exploitation, insisting that “he has killed many people and took their money he has ruined many a white women and girls.”¹⁹ Using the word “ruined” added an underlying sexual threat, further solidifying Father Divine’s character as one without morals, shame, or limits. Wonderful fortified the stereotypes of white girls and “coloured” men used by Pelosi, embracing the former role herself in order to add urgency and importance to her allegations against Father Divine.

Peter Pelosi (writing in 1938) and Joy Wonderful (writing in 1942) carve out two stereotypes through their accusations toward Father Divine: the black man driven solely by base instinct and the white woman who is too naive to withstand coercion. Both letter writers portray Father Divine as valuing instant gratification above all else, unable or unwilling to consider the welfare of others. Pelosi, writing from the perspective of an outsider, explicitly claims that this is inherent to all “colored people”; Wonderful, writing as an alleged victim herself, implied the connection between his villainy and race by constantly emphasizing her own whiteness. The writers’ conceptions of white women don’t seem to be driven by anything, but are instead pulled; they are inactive, dependent, and open to coercion. Both of these stereotyped conceptions seem to lack the ability to think rationally for themselves.

Though these assumed natures are both portrayed as weak in these letters, they add to the dangers of black men and white women interacting with one another; black men are portrayed as inherently manipulative, while white women are portrayed as inherently susceptible to manipulation. This predator and prey

¹⁹ Joy Wonderful, Letter.

dynamic encapsulated the threat that Father Divine posed as an individual, as well as the threat of the racial integration he championed. Drawing on stereotypes bolstered the writers' accusations by making them both familiar and urgent. These two letters, two of the earliest on the subject, establish the basis of the anxiety, racism, and sexism that streamed through most of the criticisms that pit Father Divine against white girls.

harem of white girls

Father Divine's "International Modest Code" outlined the basic rules of the Peace Mission, reminding angels to abstain from things like obscenity and smoking for the good of their souls.²⁰ Near the bottom of the list reads "no undue mixing of the sexes."²¹ Life-long celibacy was one of Father Divine's main priorities in his teachings,²² and men and women were segregated in the Missions to smother temptation; men and women slept in separate buildings,²³ the genders were not to sit by one another during banquets or gatherings,²⁴ and couples who entered the Mission already married were separated from one another.²⁵ Despite these rules and values, some outsiders feared that interracial sex proliferated in the Promised Land. People writing to Hoover about these fears emphasized the dangers that racial integration posed to "white girls'" sexual purity, enflaming

²⁰ Mother Divine, *The Peace Mission Movement* (Philadelphia, PA: Imperial Press, Inc., 1982), 69.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 53.

²³ Carelton Mabee, *Promised Land*, 22.

²⁴ Ibid., 104.

²⁵ Jill Watts, *God, Harlem U.S.A: The Father Divine Story* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992), 66.

the established stigma of interracial sex. Father Divine's detractors used sexual scandal to sharpen the threat which black men's supposedly depraved nature posed to vulnerable "white girls" to strengthen their pleas for Divine's punishment.

CB Alexander of Knoxville, TN portrayed the white girls involved with the Peace Mission as concubines enslaved by the dastardly Father Divine. Alexander wrote to Hoover in 1956:

Dear Sir:

I have always suspicioned, the Negro "Father Devine" as being a crook. If it is true what I have just read about his harem of white girls, I think he should be hanged and quickly.

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Alexander described an article he had recently read about "white girls being sold into slavery to harems in Arabia," and how the United Nations was urging France, the "custodian of this country," to intervene.²⁷ According to Alexander, the United States wasn't in a place to step into this slave trade in Arabia while allowing Father Divine to do the same thing at home.

Alexander seems equally concerned with the race of both "the Negro 'Father Devine'" and the "white girls." In fact, neither party is mentioned without an accompanying "Negro" or "white," implying that this alleged sexual slavery wouldn't be an issue if he perceived either party to be of a different race. He wrote "I cannot conceived of any civilized country that would permit a Negro like Father Devine to get away with what he is doing."²⁸ Alexander's wording implies that a

²⁶ CB Alexander, Letter to J. Edgar Hovver, FBI Archive File "Father Divine," 1956.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

white man could be permitted to form a harem, but not “a Negro like Father Devine.” In other words, the crux of the issue isn’t the sexual slavery itself, but Father Divine’s blackness in relation to the women’s whiteness. Alexander is placing each party in simple roles: Father Divine as the sexually depraved abuser, and the white women as the damsels in distress. With Alexander’s constant connection between their respective races and identities, Father Divine’s sexual depravity seems inextricable from Alexander’s conception of black men, as purity and vulnerability were inherent to his conception of white women.

One orphaned letter, with no signature and marked as received in 1943, rambles through sightings of white women and not-white men of upstate New York flirting with one another. For a letter completely devoted to condemning interracial flirting, the lines between racial categories are constantly blurred. The writer opens the letter by describing a specific incident that troubled him or her: “I wish to let you know that I seen a Real Blond haired young woman, and I believe she was a white woman, but she was looking kind of like a colored woman in her face, and she was flirting with a colored feller in a little cigar store.”²⁹ Beginning with such an uncertain perception of this particular woman’s race, the letter continues to waffle about the racial categories in which the writer is placing his or her subjects. The writer mentions Italian men, whom he or she doesn’t seem to regard as white or “colored”: “the Italian Fellers is pestering the White women all the time, and seting the colored men up to Flirt with white young women.”³⁰ Jewish women are also set aside from either group, as the writer complains about

²⁹ Anonymous, Letter to J. Edgar Hoover, FBI Archive File “Father Divine,” 1943.

³⁰ Ibid.

men “pester[ing]” them separately. The vague, uncertain lines that the writer draws between his or her subjects exposes a fledgling racial ideology still unwieldy in the hands of the fervent writer. This writer’s anxious yet wavering use of racial categories indicates that the 1940s (when he or she was writing this letter) was a period in which white Americans were still in the early stages of refining their racial ideologies.

The writer of this particular letter places as much of the responsibility on the white women as he or she does the “colored fellers” that are “pester[ing]” them, indicating that he or she considered both parties a threat to maintaining the developing racial hierarchy. The writer continually places white women in the active role in his or her complaints. The “Real Blond haired young woman,” for example, was the one flirting with the “colored feller” in the opening incident. Similarly, it is a “white young lady flirting with a colored soldier,” not the other way around.³¹ The writer emphasizes that these are working women, mentioning that the bus stop outside of the General Electric Company is a particular hotspot for these interactions after work lets out each day. Because the writer repeatedly references these white women’s status as working women, their active role in the writer’s anxieties also indicates an association between women working outside of the home and promiscuity. This writer offers a different perspective on women’s nature: white women’s purity and vulnerability were not inherent, but were dependent on their conforming to traditional gender roles. By stepping outside of their role in the home, this writer perceived them as shifting from victims to

³¹ Anonymous, Letter, 1943.

equally culpable in their interactions with “colored fellers.” The white women’s active role in the complaints suggests that the writer was more afraid of men that he or she perceived as not white and white women entering consensual sexual relationships than exploitative ones; the threat of dissolving racial categories, no matter how ill-defined, was far greater if white women were actually attracted to not-white men.

The anonymous writer ties the interracial flirting back to Father Divine by theorizing that they are connected to “Father Divine’s Heaven in Newark, N.J.”³² Any connection between these sightings in Albany and Schenectady, NY and the Newark Heaven over two hours away seems like a stretch, but the writer uses the Peace Mission to connect his or her local concerns with the nation as a whole. The writer theorizes that Father Divine is starting a “Race war or something like that in this Beautiful country of ours, united states of America.”³³ Whether this theory is a genuine belief or is there to add a justification for reaching out to J. Edgar Hoover about specific concerns in upstate New York, the writer connects Father Divine’s racially integrated Heavens and unrelated interracial flirting to accentuate the urgency of each threat. This writer perceived Father Divine’s public efforts to dissolve segregation and racial categories as a threat, and tacked him on to the end of his or her letter as the face of this danger. For this writer, Father Divine personified the dissolution of the ill-defined racial ideology that seems to have lent him or her a sense of security.

³² Anonymous, Letter, 1943.

³³ Ibid.

As with most of the people outside of the Mission that wrote to Hoover about Father Divine, those accusing him of sexually pursuing or abusing white women disregarded the Mission's actual beliefs and practices. There is no evidence to support the accusations that Father Divine formed harems or encouraged interracial flirting; in fact, all evidence indicates that he took an active role in preventing sex or flirting of any kind among his followers. Not only did he set up the Missions to keep men and women from interacting, but he would go so far as to punish offenders by stripping them of status, publicly condemning them, and even excommunicating them altogether.³⁴ CB Alexander and the anonymous writer did not base their accusations against Divine and the Mission in any evidence, but instead placed Divine and the Mission in their pre-existing anxieties about interracial relationships. Both incorporated implicit or explicit interracial sex to try to convince Hoover that Father Divine was a threat to a teetering racial hierarchy. Though the anonymous writer added qualifications to the stereotypical "white girl," both used white women to highlight black men's supposed carnal sexuality and ultimately vilify Father Divine. Framing the threat of Father Divine's racial integration efforts as sexually dangerous was a way for these writers to focus the dangers that they saw in Father Divine's growing influence.

J. Edgar Hoover, or more likely his secretary, responded to every letter. Each accusation against Father Divine is coupled with an assurance that the FBI has investigated the Peace Mission and found no evidence of illegal activity. Father

³⁴ Carleton Mabey, *Promised Land*, 211-212.

Divine may have defied the categories, institutions, and beliefs that his detractors held dear, but not in any way that Hoover could prosecute him for. Despite the accusers' failure to get Father Divine arrested or executed, the same strategies recurring through different writers' letters indicates that they had reason to believe that they would be effective. Perhaps jabbing sore anxieties, stressing threats to the social order, and weaponizing popular stereotypes more successfully ignited rage with people not bound to legal procedures.

All of these writers must have felt that they benefited from the social order which they were defending. They perceived Father Divine as a threat to this security; perhaps a man of color gaining influence and wealth jeopardized their own; a man claiming to be God, perhaps the most cherished figure in their lives, may have been too heretical to overlook; a leader using his influence to racially integrate his followers may have been too strong of a blow to the racial categories that they used to make sense of the world around them. To bring these fears into focus, these writers emphasized the fallout that these threats had on the ever-vulnerable "white girls": Father Divine exploiting their naivete to profit from their status and generosity, using his "I'm God tactics" to brainwash their impressionable minds, and inspiring interracial sex both in and outside of his racially integrated communities. Stereotypes boosted each of these accusations, touching on an embedded belief to add urgency easily and concisely. By imposing stereotypical flaws of black men on Father Divine, detractors sought to tear him down and restore the established social order that they benefited from. By placing

Father Divine in conflict with the stereotypical vulnerability of “white girls,” detractors strove to vilify him and emphasize the urgency of their accusations.

Though Father Divine’s critics focused their letters to Hoover on suspected relationships between white girls and Divine himself, it would be a white, male follower who would be legally accused of taking advantage of an underage white girl.

II

Cultist Sought in Girl Case

Delight Jewett strode into the office wearing the affections of the man she was there to help hunt. She was a classic 1940s ingenue; reaching the end of her “schoolgirl” years, her fur coat and sculpted black curls pronounced her youth rather than veiled it.³⁵ In the coming months, reporters would steep their descriptions of Delight in naivete and purity, drawing largely on her femininity, youth, and whiteness. Her youth would stoke the scandal of her accusations against 33-year-old Divinite John Wuest Hunt (or “John the Revelator”), her whiteness casting shadow on his assumed conspirator Father Divine. Delight wouldn’t accuse Father Divine of anything directly, but the coming court case

³⁵ LA Herald Examiner, *Delight Jewett*, 1937, Photograph, 32 x 20 cm., Herald Examiner Collection.

between Delight and John would also publicize the conflict between Divine and his detractors. Weeks earlier, Delight believed that these men were sharing heaven with earth, and that she was destined to play a crucial role in this miracle. Since her mother yanked her out of the Promised Land, Delight's perception of these men and their influence on her began to fracture: were John's prophecies true, or was her mother right about his lustful intentions? Dragged back into the realm of mortality by her parents, Delight agreed to answer the federal investigators' questions in March 1937. A photographer from the *Los Angeles Herald Examiner* immortalized the moment she entered the agents' office; she crossed the threshold with a zealous smile, wearing the shin length fur coat John the Revelator had given her months earlier.³⁶

John Wuest Hunt had chosen the name "John the Revelator" after Father Divine delivered him from his gluttonous Hollywood lifestyle.³⁷ John's mother, "Mary Bird Tree," had inherited her husband's dairy fortune, which the three surviving Hunts used to lavish gaudy gifts on Father Divine and help him spread his gospel.³⁸ John's wealth offered him the time and money to devote himself to his savior in ways that most angels simply couldn't match; he toured the country in his "Golden Chariot" (a Packard limousine) to speak at Peace Mission conferences,³⁹ created a film to educate folks about Divine's teachings,⁴⁰ and commissioned a custom "throne car" for Father Divine for an estimated \$21,000

³⁶ LA Herald Examiner, *Delight Jewett*, Photograph.

³⁷ Jill Watts, *God, Harlem U.S.A.*, 144-145.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 124.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 146.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 144.

(approximately \$390,000 today).⁴¹ The Holy Communion banquets that John hosted in his Beverly Hills mansion were the perfect opportunity to share his earthly and spiritual excess. Mirroring Father Divine's banquets on the other side of the country, hundreds of angels and potential converts would gather at John's home to feast and worship.⁴² As John's confidence and dedication grew, his banquets and guests followed suit. On November 13, 1936, John experienced spiritual "vibrations" which sent him flailing around his home, spreading his fervor until a mob of angels were convulsing and crying out loud enough to rustle John's neighbors into calling the police.⁴³ Later, John would describe the experience:

"At about 5:30 p.m. on November 13, 1936, I felt myself lifted by a vibration completely out of my consciousness. Something came over my body, a vibration came into my system. I felt like I was hanging on to an electric light wire. I had no control over my system at all. The pumping of my wind pipe seemed to life me up."

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Ever the fulsome showman, John allowed the vibrations to carry him up his staircase, where he tossed \$10,000 for his guests to fight over.⁴⁵ John was ultimately arrested and convicted of disrupting the peace,⁴⁶ but that night seemed

⁴¹ "Hunt Inspects Throne Car Being Built for Divine," *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles, CA), Apr. 15, 1937.

⁴² Jill Watts, *God, Harlem U.S.A.*, 146.

⁴³ "Hunt Tells of Scolding Given Him By Divine," *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles, CA), June 30, 1937.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ "Cultist Sought in Girl Case," *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles, CA), Mar. 31, 1937.

to be a turning point for John. He wasn't simply a follower of Father Divine, but was a divine figure himself. Within a month, Hunt would find the girl who would lift him from "John the Revelator" to "Jesus the Christ." He was indestructible. From the earthly perspective, however, Hunt's religious zeal landing him in court in November 1936 set a precedent.

The Jewett family's mission for justice collected attention daily as the manhunt for John the Revelator continued throughout the first weeks of April 1937. William Randolph Hearst's *The New York Evening Journal* took the lead in spreading word of the Peace Mission's most recent scandal, and even paid for Delight's lawyer.⁴⁷ As the juicy meat of John's exploitation of Delight grew more exposed, newspapers in New York and California, and some sprinkled in between, began sharing in the suspense of the investigators' search. *The Los Angeles Times* first reported on the manhunt on March 31, and spent the next eleven days calibrating their portrayals of the major players. The age difference between Delight and John was emphasized from the paper's first sentence on the scandal:

Charged with transporting 17-year-old Delight Jewett by chauffeured limousine from Denver to his Beverly Hills home for illicit purposes John W. Hunt, 33-year-old follower of Father Divine, was being sought by United States Marshal Clark last night.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Jill Watts, *God, Harlem U.S.A.*, 149.

⁴⁸ "Cultist Sought in Girl Case," *Los Angeles Times*.

In the following days, reporters continued to characterize Delight in much the same way, sticking with phrases like “school girl”,⁴⁹ or mixing in some flair with “demure Denver miss.”⁵⁰ They had more fun with John Wuest Hunt. For Hunt, the simple term “cultist”⁵¹ evolved into dry mocking with “elusive Messiah,”⁵² “chubby dealer in the supernatural,”⁵³ or “rotund disciple of Father Divine”.⁵⁴

The *Los Angeles Times* leaned into the unorthodox religious side of the scandal in their portrayal of John and Father Divine, invalidating the Peace Mission by treating the men’s beliefs as man-made curiosities. John became “self-styled ‘St. John the Revelator’”⁵⁵ or “self-styled ‘Jesus the Christ.’”⁵⁶ John never stood alone in these articles; wherever there was “Jesus the Christ” “Harlem’s Negro god”⁵⁷ was never far behind. In fact, the *Los Angeles Times* reporters never missed a chance to revel in Father Divine’s race and almost exotic spirituality, christening him as “Negro cultist”⁵⁸ or “Harlem’s Negro evangelist.”⁵⁹ Father Divine’s movement and John’s activities within it were hyped as “cult rituals,” highlighting the group’s use of “heavenly names” and dedicating sections of articles to “rites” that appear nowhere else in testimony or Peace Mission literature, like “Hunt provid[ing Delight] with a set of flowing robes as a

⁴⁹ “Grand Jury to Launch Inquiry in Hunt Cult Case,” *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles, CA), Apr. 6, 1937.

⁵⁰ “Jury Indicts Divine Aides,” *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles, CA), Apr. 22, 1937.

⁵¹ “Girl’s Story Spurs Hunt for Cultist,” *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles, CA), Apr. 1, 1937.

⁵² “Grand Jury to Launch Inquiry in Hunt Cult Case,” *Los Angeles Times*.

⁵³ “Hunt Will Take Stand at Mann Act Trial,” *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles, CA), June 27, 1937.

⁵⁴ “Hunt Likely to Surrender,” *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles, CA), Apr. 9, 1937.

⁵⁵ “Girl’s Story Spurs Hunt for Cultist,” *Los Angeles Times*.

⁵⁶ “John Hunt to Surrender,” *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles, CA), Apr 4, 1937.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ “Girl’s Story Spurs Hunt for Cultist,” *Los Angeles Times*.

⁵⁹ “Hunt Gives Up in Cult Case,” *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles, CA), Apr. 10, 1937.

badge of her new rank.”⁶⁰ Whether this oversimplification and fabrication of the Peace Mission Movement’s beliefs and traditions was due to newspaper space constraints or the reporters’ apathy, the *Los Angeles Times*’ articles indicate that the reporters’ interest in them lay simply in adding kindling to the scandal.

A few weeks after John the Revelator’s raucous banquet, John and a few close angels rode the “Golden Chariot” from Los Angeles to Denver where John was to give a speech for the local Peace Mission.⁶¹ Giving these speeches suited John; he was a performer, loved the attention, and never passed up a chance to fawn over Father Divine.

On December 16, 1936,⁶² as John raved to Denver about the wonders of Father Divine’s influence, Lee Jewett steeped himself in the speaker’s zeal. Lee regularly attended Peace Mission meetings, hoping that Father Divine’s miracles could soothe a raging toothache that conventional dentistry couldn’t seem to help.⁶³ Wading deeper and deeper into the Peace Mission, Lee began bringing his wife Elizabeth and teenage daughter Delight along to meetings.⁶⁴ When that day’s speaker, a charismatic disciple from far off Hollywood, invited Lee’s daughter Delight for a ride in his limousine,⁶⁵ Lee must have felt honored. His faith would prove a liability.

With her parents’ consent, Delight Jewett joined John and his posse for a ride in the “Golden Chariot.” John began wooing Delight immediately. John

⁶⁰ “Girl’s Story Spurs Hunt for Cultist,” *Los Angeles Times*.

⁶¹ Jill Watts, *God, Harlem U.S.A.*, 146.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 147.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 146.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 147.

praised Delight's exceptional spirituality, dubbed her "Mary Dove," and took her on an \$800 shopping spree.⁶⁶ After a day of flattery and religious epiphanies, John took Delight back home, and made sure her parents knew just how spiritually special she was.⁶⁷ John went back for Delight later that night, this time not bothering with her parents' permission.

Reporters would later spin the details of John and Delight's road trip back to Beverly Hills in multiple directions, but Delight seems to have embraced her companions' assertions that she had special powers and a divine destiny. Delight was an average high school girl, and such adventure and praise, especially from such otherworldly charmers, must have been mouthwatering. All accounts seem to agree with the *Los Angeles Times*, who wrote:

It was during the trip from Denver to Beverly Hills, according to investigators, that Hunt assertedly told Miss Jewett she had been chosen to become mother of a "new Savior" and gave her the name of the "new Virgin Mary."

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With this road trip, Delight was ordained with the holy role at the core of her experiences with John, and the flock of angels rode over the state lines that would later be the basis of their criminal trials.

The Virgin Mary, Jesus the Christ, and their band of angels finally arrived at the Hunt mansion in Beverly Hills. Like the road trip, the relationships and actions

⁶⁶ Jill Watts, *God, Harlem, U.S.A.*, 147.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ "Girl's Story Spurs Hunt for Cultist," *Los Angeles Times*.

between John, Delight, and their three companions depend on the storyteller.

Delight would later testify that John and his compatriots kept her on the outside of things during her time at the mansion.⁶⁹ She described being lonely and confused, unable to convince anyone to help her:

“The next morning I told Mrs. Peters that I needed help, but she said, ‘The spirit doesn’t move me now to help you.’ No one told me anything or explained things to me.”⁷⁰

Delight testified that, without Mrs. Peters or any of the other angels at the Hunt mansion willing to stop John, he took her to various hotels around Southern California to “attack” or “betray” her.⁷¹ The “new Savior” that Delight was destined to bear was to be conceived with Jesus the Christ, which would make it an immaculate conception.⁷² According to Delight, John convinced her that the two of them having sex was a sort of responsibility they had to the world; it was both Delight’s duty and destiny to have sex with John, conceive a child, and birth this “New Redeemer” in Honolulu.⁷³ Later, in front of a judge, reporters, and a courtroom brimming with Divinites, John would confess to having sex with Delight in scandalous detail.⁷⁴ He would also claim that she initiated it.⁷⁵

For now, with the Virgin Mary by his side at home, John wished to share his achievement with God. He sent a telegram:

⁶⁹ “Girl Accuser in Cult Case Tells Attacks,” *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles, CA), June 23, 1937.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Jill Watts, *God Harlem, U.S.A.*, 147.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ “Hunt Tells of Scolding Given to Him by Divine,” *Los Angeles Times*.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

Which God has put together,
 Let no man put asunder.⁷⁶

John's choice of words in this telegram poses a question: did John's revelation include God's coming wrath? Father Divine preached personal modesty, complete separation of the sexes, and lifelong abstinence. Claiming to be "Jesus the Christ," John claimed divinity more directly than Father Divine did himself, who only referred to himself as Reverend M.J. Divine.⁷⁷ John and Delight's cohabitation and sexual relationship was in bold opposition to Divine's teachings, which John made even bolder with his telegram. With this message, John asserted to Father Divine that John and Delight's relationship was Divine's own doing. He implied a sort of condescension by using "man" in the second line; John was telling Father Divine that supporting the couple would be godly, while separating them would be a step down to human.

Father Divine was livid. Those close to Divine had been warning him about John's erratic, self-serving behavior since the latter's arrest in November, but Divine hadn't punished him.⁷⁸ He had chosen to keep John, with his open wallet and zealous support, happy. Divine could overlook being arrested for hosting a rowdy banquet, but John divinizing himself was brazenly heretical. He summoned John and Delight as soon as he received the telegram.⁷⁹ John and Delight shipped out on another road trip, this time all the way out to New York.⁸⁰ Upon their

⁷⁶ "Girl Accuser in Cult Case Tells Attacks," *Los Angeles Times*.

⁷⁷ Jill Watts, *God, Harlem U.S.A.*, 148.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 146.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 148.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

entering the Promised Land, God scolded the pair for their sins, and demoted Jesus the Christ to John the Revelator and the Virgin Mary to Mary Dove.⁸¹ Attempting to quietly maintain their membership and keep them separated, Divine placed Delight in a heaven in Kingston, NY.⁸²

Lee and Elizabeth Jewett, Delight's parents, came to Father Divine soon after. After weeks of not knowing where Delight was, Elizabeth was able to convince Lee that they needed to go confront Father Divine about her whereabouts. Father Divine reassured the couple that their daughter was safe, and drove them out to the Kingston heaven. Despite a warm welcome, plentiful food, and comfortable (though separate) accommodations, Elizabeth's pleas to be taken to her daughter were dodged for days. Finally, a few days after arriving, Elizabeth tracked down Delight herself at mealtime. Delight had changed; she pulled away from her mother's embraces, afraid that her mother's mortality would be transferred by touch; she asserted that she wasn't "Delight," but was actually "the Virgin Mary" and future mother of the "New Redeemer"; she refused to leave the heaven.⁸³

Elizabeth then searched for her husband, hoping for help coraling their daughter out of the heaven and her new delusions. Lee, however, had been spending time with Father Divine and other Peace Mission leaders (including John the Revelator), and was in awe of the New York operations.⁸⁴ Father Divine had recognized Lee's reverence, and enriched his devotion with charm and a job offer.

⁸¹ "Hunt Tells of Scolding Given to Him by Divine," *Los Angeles Times*.

⁸² Jill Watts, *God, Harlem U.S.A.*, 148.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

Considering moving the family to New York to run one of the Peace Mission's farms, Lee was more devout than ever.⁸⁵ Elizabeth eroded Lee's stubbornness with the story of her reunion with Delight enough that he agreed that they should approach Father Divine and Hunt for financial compensation.⁸⁶ They refused. Perhaps considering this a betrayal, Lee snapped out of his infatuation with the Peace Mission, and the couple took their daughter to New York City.⁸⁷ Seeking retribution, the family approached newspapers with their story, and took on a lawyer paid for by mogul William Randolph Hearst.⁸⁸ Delight eventually agreed to share her story, press charges against John Wuest Hunt, and help the authorities hunt him down. Father Divine could no longer stage-manage the situation.

Hunt Gives Up in Cult Case

**Father Divine Disciple
Goes Free Under Bail
in Mann Act Case**

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John Wuest Hunt was on the run after being charged with breaking the Mann Act, which prohibits "knowingly transport[ing] any individual in interstate or foreign commerce [...] with intent that such individual engage in prostitution,

⁸⁵ Jill Watts, *God, Harlem U.S.A.*, 148-149.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 149.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ "Hunt Gives Up in Cult Case," *Los Angeles Times*.

or in any sexual activity for which any person can be charged with a criminal offense.”⁹⁰ Though John didn’t intend to force Delight into prostitution, the combination of crossing state lines and statutory rape brought the case under the Mann Act, also referred to as the “White Slave Traffic Act.” Though an informal name, “White Slave Traffic Act” betrays the implicit key to the anxious undercurrent of the act: it was meant to keep *white* women safe from sexual abuse.

After about a week of serving as the hidden villain, John the Revelator turned himself in and became an active player in the reporting of his case.⁹¹ Now armed with access to their antagonist, the *Los Angeles Times* could begin adding depth to their characterization. From the beginning, reporters portrayed John’s behavior as unnervingly genial. On April 10, the day after John turned himself in, the *Los Angeles Times* wrote that he entered the Commissioner’s office “smiling affably and expressing the hope that his actions will not reflect on the teachings of Father Divine.”⁹² John seemed to revel in the attention, cracking jokes, alluding to juicy details, and grinning at cameras while gripping the bars of his jail cell.⁹³ With enough cameras flashing and questions hurled to prompt him to quip that he was getting “more publicity than Greta Garbo,” Hunt kept pulling the conversation back to Father Divine.⁹⁴ Between John’s wisecracks, the *Los Angeles Times* writes:

⁹⁰ Legal Information Institute, “18 U.S. Code § 2421,” Cornell Law School, pub. May 29, 2015, <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/18/2421>.

⁹¹ “Hunt Gives Up in Cult Case,” *Los Angeles Times*.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

“Now, what I want to impress on you folks,” he said to reporters, becoming serious for the first time, “is that Father Divine is not linked with any of my actions or trouble.”

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Father Divine actively separated himself from John in the media, asserting that he separated the couple as soon as he found out about their affair, and making it clear that he would assist with the investigation and trial against John however he could.⁹⁶ The *Los Angeles Times* reported on the schism between the men as early as April 4, writing that John Wuest Hunt’s “wings [had been] assertedly shorn by Father Divine.”⁹⁷ Despite both men’s early attempts at keeping Father Divine and the Peace Mission separate from Hunt’s trial, reporters still emphasized their relationship and speculated about whether or not Divine would come out to California to help defend John. By late June, midway through the trial, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that John was back in Divine’s good graces.⁹⁸ John was represented by one of the Peace Mission’s attorneys, Hugh Macbeth, who matched his client’s theatrical flair.⁹⁹ Macbeth told the *Los Angeles Times* that Father Divine had sent John his blessings, and that the lawyer was considering summoning Divine to testify for the defense.¹⁰⁰ Though Father Divine never appeared in court, reporters were clearly enthusiastic about the possibility of the added drama. Reporting on the relationship continued to change. The headline on June 25 read:

⁹⁵ “Hunt Gives Up in Cult Case,” *Los Angeles Times*.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ “John Hunt to Surrender,” *Los Angeles Times*.

⁹⁸ “Divine May Fly Here to Help Cultist Hunt,” *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles, CA), June 25, 1937.

⁹⁹ “Hunt Will Take Stand in Mann Act Trial,” *Los Angeles Times*.

¹⁰⁰ “Divine May Fly Here to Help Cultist Hunt,” *Los Angeles Times*.

DIVINE MAY FLY HERE TO HELP CULTIST HUNT¹⁰¹

Five days later, the headline read:

HUNT TELLS OF SCOLDING GIVEN TO HIM BY DIVINE¹⁰²

Whether or not Father Divine supported John, the latter's crimes and trial were inseparably linked with Divine. Divine already had enough to worry about.

Father Divine Routed Out by Police From Hiding Place Behind Furnace¹⁰³

Thirteen days after John the Revelator turned himself in, Father Divine was arrested and charged with "felonious assault."¹⁰⁴ According to the *New York Times*, Father Divine fled from New York to Connecticut once he heard that police were searching for him in order to question him concerning a group of his angels assaulting three white men who were visiting one of his heavens.¹⁰⁵ While the *Los Angeles Times*' article on John's surrender had a humorous tinge based on John's banter, the *New York Times*' article on Father Divine's arrest was highly racialized

¹⁰¹ "Divine May Fly Here to Help Cultist Hunt," *Los Angeles Times*.

¹⁰² "Hunt Tells of Scolding Given to Him by Divine," *Los Angeles Times*.

¹⁰³ "Father Divine Routed Out by Police From Hiding Place Behind Furnace," *New York Times* (New York, NY), Apr 23, 1937.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

and condescending. The article teems with the word “Negro”: “two Negro detectives” had to watch over the “Negroes on the main floor” as the police Captain searched for Divine in their basement, the alleged assault had taken place in his “Negro heaven,” “500 Negroes” surrounded the police office as Divine was being booked.¹⁰⁶ The reporter’s preoccupation with race played out more subtly in their portrayals of Father Divine himself, as he is described walking through photographers’ flash bulbs with his “dark bald head glistening.”¹⁰⁷ The article kept circling back to Father Divine attempting to hide from the police behind a furnace, describing him “dodging” from one side of the furnace to another, trying to “‘invisibilize’ himself.”¹⁰⁸ The article outlines Divine’s ongoing troubles, including a former angel suing him, another ex-angel’s recently published expose, his failure to visit his dying first wife in the hospital, and three ongoing criminal trials related to the Mission, including that of John the Revelator.¹⁰⁹

GIRL ACCUSER IN CULT CASE TELLS ATTACKS

Delight Jewett’s youth and beauty were central to her characterizations, but any implications of vulnerability were washed away once she appeared publicly in Los Angeles. Reporting on her court appearance, the *Los Angeles Times* emphasized

¹⁰⁶ “Father Divine Routed Out by Police From Hiding Place Behind Furnace,” *New York Times*.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

her age and described her dress, but also wrote that she “made no display of feeling as she walked to the witness stand.”¹¹⁰ The article continues:

Miss Jewett was the first witness called. She showed poise and her voice, instead of the barely audible one usually heard in such cases, was distinct and easily understood throughout the courtroom.

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All published photos of Delight, spanning from the manhunt to the end of the trial, show her smiling, seemingly at ease. All quotes published in the *Los Angeles Times* describing her experiences are succinct and assertive, rarely, if ever, dipping into emotional vulnerability. John the Revelator, the logical villain of the story, was constantly mocked for his weight and unorthodox zealousness. Father Divine, unlucky in his inescapable connection to the affair, was always racialized in reporters’ portrayals. These portrayals are unsurprising considering the time and circumstances, but Delight’s confidence and tranquility seem to surprise even reporters. Noting the contrast of Delight’s “poise” with the “barely audible [voice] usually heard in such cases,” the *Los Angeles Times*’ portrayal of Delight is one of unexpected strength.¹¹² Despite her youth, femininity, and betrayal, all of which were central to the story, Delight overcame these implied vulnerabilities with seemingly unwavering confidence.

Despite Delight Jewett’s passivity toward Father Divine and his flimsy connection with the case, John Wuest Hunt’s trial and conviction cast the Peace

¹¹⁰ “Girl Accuser in Cult Case Tells Attacks,” *Los Angeles Times*.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid.

Mission in a new light. Newspaper reporters had come after Father Divine before, usually portraying the Peace Mission as a mass of black followers. The real damnation came with Delight Jewett. Now, with papers reporting on the case nearly everyday in New York and California, John Wuest Hunt's trial was one of the most publicized stories in connection to the Peace Mission. Delight wasn't a part of the abstract mass of black followers. She was a white girl. Delight's story revealed how Father Divine's influence and teachings could be used to harm white people. As historian Jill Watts argues, "Reverend Divine's harmful influence no longer terrorized only the black community but fundamentally threatened white America."¹¹³ People who had never heard of Father Divine or the Peace Mission were introduced to them through the Hunt case, spreading suspicion to new crowds. For those already familiar, Delight Jewett came to embody the anxieties that had been festering for years. Father Divine's detractors could now point to an actual white girl that he had harmed, condensing their abstract mass of "white girls" into the one on the front pages.

The limitations of Father Divine's influence became brutally clear. He could preach, condemn, and charm, and his angels would listen. The world outside of his heavens would not. Father Divine openly denounced John. Reporters acknowledged that he had separated the couple. He distanced himself from the case whenever possible. It did not matter. Father Divine wasn't God to the majority of Americans. To them, he was only a "Negro cultist."

¹¹³ Jill Watts, *God, Harlem U.S.A.*, 151.

Delight Jewett was ultimately avenged. John Wuest “the Revelator” Hunt was convicted of breaking the Mann Act.¹¹⁴ Millennia earlier, the biblical John the Revelator was excommunicated for his Christian beliefs, stranded on the island of Patmos to write the Book of Revelations in solitude.¹¹⁵ John Wuest Hunt followed suit, sentenced to three years in McNeil Island Prison where he planned to write a book:

“The name of it is to be ‘A Little Child Shall Lead Them.’ It’s to include everything and will be a beautiful thing.”

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The Virgin Mary continued on in the Peace Mission, though Delight Jewett had nothing to do with her. Three years after the Hunt scandal, Father Divine would get married.¹¹⁷ Like Delight, his wife would be a young (but of age), white, zealous, ingenue. Unlike John Wuest Hunt, however, Father Divine had the authority to deem his partner the Virgin Mary reincarnated.

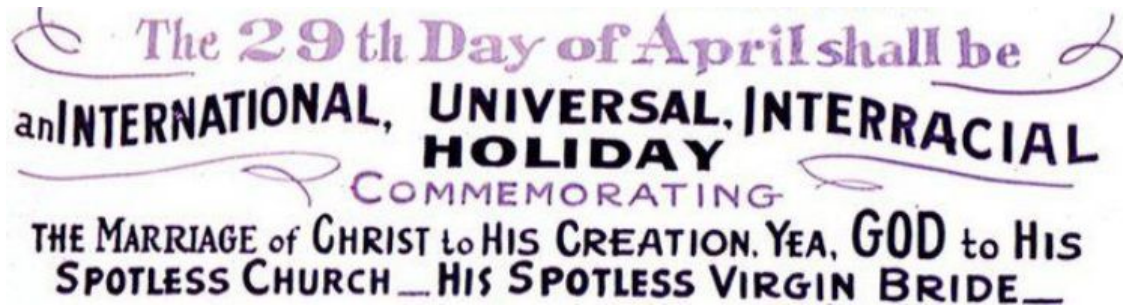
¹¹⁴ “John Wuest Hunt Leaves for M’Neil Island Prison,” *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles, CA), July 20, 1937.

¹¹⁵ Rev 1:9-11 (NIV).

¹¹⁶ “John Wuest Hunt Leaves for M’Neil Island Prison,” *Los Angeles Times*.

¹¹⁷ Jill Watts, *God, Harlem USA*, 168.

III



Father and Mother Divine's anniversary was a movement-wide holiday. Missions around the world held special Holy Communion Banquets to honor the marriage as the couple themselves hosted a celebration at the Mission's mansion in Pennsylvania. Anniversary celebration photos show Mother Divine in wedding dresses year after year. In one such photo, two lines of red-clad Rosebuds create an archway with their raised arms as Mother Divine ducks through the tunnel. She wears a lacy, modest white gown, a veil draped back across her precisely curled, dark blonde hair. She smiles up at the camera as the Rosebuds smile down on her. The photo is dated "late 1960s."¹¹⁸

At 67 years old, Father Divine remarried.¹¹⁹ His second wife, and thus the second Mother Divine, was 21 years old, Canadian, and white.¹²⁰ Born Edna Rose Ritchings, later choosing the Peace Mission name Sweet Angel, the second Mother Divine joined a Canadian Peace Mission while in high school.¹²¹ By the time she

¹¹⁸ *MOTHER DIVINE*, Photograph, ca. 1960s, on International Peace Mission Movement website, accessed May 14, 2020, <http://peacemission.info/mother/mother-divine-shall-be-called-blessed-by-all-nations/>.

¹¹⁹ Jill Watts, *God, Harlem USA*, 168.

¹²⁰ Jill Watts, *God, Harlem USA*, 167.

¹²¹ Jill Watts, *God, Harlem USA*, 167.

graduated, Father Divine had moved the headquarters of the Peace Mission to Pennsylvania, angsty over how New York neighbors and legal authorities had treated him and his movement.¹²² Father Divine's influence, membership, and property were waning.¹²³ Undeterred, Sweet Angel moved to Pennsylvania after graduation.¹²⁴ Confident, well-spoken, and loyal, Sweet Angel worked her way up in the movement, until she was appointed as one of Father Divine's personal secretaries.¹²⁵ As the story goes, she one day approached Father Divine, and said "I want to marry you because

"I Know You Are GOD" ”¹²⁶

Father Divine accepted Sweet Angel's proposal, and the two drove around to bordering states looking for a place that legally allowed interracial marriages. They finally married in Washington, DC on April 29, 1946.¹²⁷

The couple kept their marriage a secret for a couple of months. As one angel close to the couple explained later: "If we had [disclosed their marriage], there would have been no telling what might have happened. The marriage was such a world-shaking event, it might have made followers vibrate strongly enough to destroy themselves."¹²⁸ An issue with Sweet Angel's immigration status eventually forced Father Divine to announce their marriage in order to save her from

¹²² Jill Watts, *God, Harlem U.S.A.*, 167.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 168.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Mother Divine, *The Peace Mission Movement*, 56.

¹²⁷ Jill Watts, *God, Harlem U.S.A.*, 168.

¹²⁸ William Grimes, "Mother Divine, 91, Dies," *New York Times* (New York, NY), Mar. 15, 2017.

deportation.¹²⁹ With the marriage now out in the open, Father and Mother Divine had some explaining to do. Not only was the age and racial difference troubling to some inside and outside of the movement, but marriage in general went directly against Father Divine's teachings. One of the major tenets of the Peace Mission was gender segregation; all Peace Mission communes had separate living areas for each sex, any couples who were already married upon joining the Mission were separated upon arrival, and no new marriages were permitted. So why would Father Divine marry not once, but twice?

As Mother Divine wrote in *The Peace Mission Movement*:

In the face of this prohibition on marriage in the Peace Mission Movement, it has seemed exceedingly disruptive to many that FATHER DIVINE married. With characteristic fortitude, however, HE pursued the course that HE perceived to be essential for the elevation and salvation of the people, knowing that HIS action would be widely misunderstood.¹³⁰

Father and Mother Divine used three major justifications for their marriage: they used their different races and nationalities to strengthen Father Divine's call for interracial and international unity, held up their marriage as an example of lifelong sexual purity, and portrayed their union as the symbolic marriage between God and all of his followers. These preachings were mixed together in the celebration of the couple's wedding anniversary, which became the major holiday of the Peace Mission Movement. The anniversary celebrations didn't just honor

¹²⁹ Jill Watts, *God, Harlem U.S.A.*, 168.

¹³⁰ Mother Divine, *The Peace Mission Movement*, 54.

the couple's marriage, but took on a role in the Mission comparable to Easter. It was a decadent spring festivity used to emphasize the central teachings that the couple represented, celebrate the rebirth made possible by their example of purity, and even honor their union as the salvation of humanity. These methods brought most skeptical followers to see their marriage as sacred, and their marriage, and Mother Divine herself, became highly cherished within the Movement. Through these explanations, Father and Mother Divine were not only able to soften the scandal of their interracial marriage, but were also able to further Father Divine's central teachings and strengthen the Movement during a volatile time in its history.

INTERNATIONAL, UNIVERSAL, INTERRACIAL

Father Divine denounced nationalism and racism; his stances on both were contradictory, but he preached that national ties and racial categories were both artificial, toxic barriers created and sustained in people's minds.¹³¹ The second incarnation of Mother Divine was not only white, adding the controversial yet on message interraciality of their marriage, but was also Canadian. In the section "Concept of Marriage" in her book *The Peace Mission Movement*, Mother Divine outlined the major reasons why she and Father Divine were a valid exception to the Mission's rule against marriage. One such reason was the international and interracial nature of their marriage. She wrote (in the third person): "FATHER

¹³¹ Mother Divine, *The Peace Mission Movement*, 35; Jill Watts, *God, Harlem U.S.A.*, 89.

stated further that She could not have been worthy to marry HIM had she not been willing to sacrifice all racism and nationalism.”¹³² Rejecting racism and nationalism, and then embodying that rejection with her marriage, was the foundation of Mother Divine’s role in the Mission.

The interraciality wasn’t only exemplified by Father and Mother Divine’s marriage, but also between Father Divine’s first and second wives. Peninniah, the first Mother Divine, was a black American, and had passed away sometime in 1943.¹³³ Because Father Divine promised immortality to any angels who followed his teachings closely enough, Father Divine kept Peninniah’s death as quiet as possible.¹³⁴ When Father Divine married Sweet Angel, he assured his followers that his second wife was his first reincarnated: “Then because HIS Personal Ministry increased so greatly, this Mother Divine [Peninniah] desired to pass and be reborn in a more youthful body in which She could be of greater service. FATHER DIVINE did not encourage Her in that thought; yet HE suffered it to come to pass as She wished.”¹³⁵ Historian Jill Watts argues that this assertion that the black Peninniah was reincarnated into the white Sweet Angel symbolized the “elimination of blackness” that was so important to the Movement.¹³⁶ She quotes an interview of a follower in *Time* magazine: “‘It is another symbol,’ said one follower, ‘that the black Mrs. Divine vanished and rose again, but as a young white girl.’”¹³⁷ Mother Divine, herself, was interracial. She embodied the dissolution of racial categories

¹³² Mother Divine, *The Peace Mission Movement*, 56.

¹³³ Jill Watts, *God, Harlem U.S.A.*, 167.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Mother Divine, *The Peace Mission Movement*, 56.

¹³⁶ Jill Watts, *God, Harlem U.S.A.*, 168.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

which Father Divine and his followers had been yearning and fighting for since the Peace Mission's genesis. Followers glorified her for it.

HIS SPOTLESS VIRGIN BRIDE

Because celibacy was one of Father Divine's core teachings, he and Mother Divine emphasized the sexual purity of their marriage, underpinning it with the virginal "white girl" stereotype. Mother Divine often sported the jacket emblazoned with a "V" for "Virtue" which was part of the uniform worn by the Mission's all-female youth group. She was heralded as Father Divine's "spotless virgin bride" on posters, in sermons,¹³⁸ and in *The Peace Mission Movement*.¹³⁹ Whether the repeated emphasis of their abstinence was a response to followers' concerns or was one of the original purposes of the union, the couple went out of their way to ensure that no one questioned their purity. Father Divine assigned one of his young female followers to be a sort of chaperone for Mother Divine; the two were together constantly, assuring that the Father and Mother were never alone together.¹⁴⁰

Father Divine's first marriage to Peninniah was also held up as sexually pure, but this was never the focus of their portrayals like it was with Sweet Angel. Both women were said to be the Virgin Mary: the biblical Virgin Mary reincarnated as Peninniah when she recognized God's embodiment in Father Divine so that she

¹³⁸ Father Divine, "I am Omnipresent and Ever-present and So is My Spotless Virgin Bride" (sermon, Circle Mission Church, Philadelphia, on Feb. 18, 1955).

¹³⁹ Mother Divine, *The Peace Mission Movement*, 45.

¹⁴⁰ Jill Watts, *God, Harlem U.S.A.*, 168.

could be with him, and then reincarnated into Sweet Angel so that she could have a younger body that could more effectively spread Father Divine's word.¹⁴¹ However, unlike Peninniah, this virginity was fundamental to Sweet Angel's role in the Movement. Following an "Editor's Note" assuring the readers of *The Peace Mission Movement* that any compliments to Mother Divine's character were direct quotes from Father Divine rather than Mother Divine bragging about herself, Mother Divine wrote about her importance in the movement:

She, in her Spotless Virginity, was a Sample and Example for all others to emulate. [...] Through the perfection of the life of humanity in this One, all of humanity could be partakers of this same perfection by visualizing this Perfection in Her, and by partaking of the same consciousness of GOD's Presence in which She lives, through self-denial and consecration.¹⁴²

During Father Divine's life, Sweet Angel's major role in the Movement was to set an example; an example important enough that, if followed, humanity could reach perfection, and thus immortality. This perfection was her virginity.

THE MARRIAGE of CHRIST to HIS CREATION

The couple portrayed Mother Divine as the symbol of the entire Movement, so that their marriage was really the marriage between God and his flock. Their marriage wasn't a literal, physical union, but was instead spiritual and symbolic. In *The Peace Mission Movement*, Mother Divine wrote:

¹⁴¹ Mother Divine, *The Peace Mission Movement*, 56.

¹⁴² Ibid., 54.

FATHER DIVINE'S Marriage to MOTHER DIVINE is purely spiritual. It illustrates how all others should be joined to HIM through the conviction that HE is the Personified CHRIST. Because both society and Government require marriages to be performed according to legal procedure however, FATHER and MOTHER DIVINE motored to Washington, D.C. on April 29, 1946 and were legally married.¹⁴³

This worldly element to their marriage, their elopement and legal documentation, were not for their personal enjoyment. Instead, they were characterized as necessary sacrifices for the greater good. Regardless, the marriage itself wasn't worldly, but was purely between their spirits and the spirits of all of their followers.

This symbolic significance of the Divines' marriage was also a sign that their union brought salvation to humanity. Father and Mother Divine interpreted this union between God and his flock within the context of the Book of Revelations, preaching that it was the destined "fusion of Heaven and earth" which would bring about the New Dispensation.¹⁴⁴ Mother Divine cites Revelation 19:7-9 in her explanation of this significance in her book: "Let us be glad and rejoice, and give honour to him: for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and his wife hath made herself ready." Their union, the union between God and humanity, initiated a new era of salvation. In fact, the Peace Mission Movement's calendar restarted at Year One upon their marriage.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴³ Mother Divine, *The Peace Mission Movement*, 57.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 58.

Sweet Angel came to Father Divine when he needed a boost in influence, importance, and image. After decades of detractors using white girls to try to drag Father Divine out of his heavenly throne, it turned out that a “white girl” sitting next to him was just what he needed. That isn’t to say that Mother Divine swooped in to save poor Father Divine with her white skin and feminine virtue, nor is it to say that Father Divine took a vulnerable white girl and exploited her for all she was worth. Neither conformed to the stereotypes which Father Divine’s detractors used to vilify him and victimize white women. Father Divine wasn’t driven by base instinct to use Mother Divine to “serve his organization and bank account.” Mother Divine wasn’t weak, inactive, or exploited. They helped each other, and they used their marriage to strengthen the Movement that they believed in. Their marriage, which symbolized the fears of interracial relationships for detractors, was used to symbolize the break down of racial categories, the triumph of virtue, and promise of salvation for the couple’s followers. Father Divine was able to turn the weapon that was used against him for decades into a partnership that saved the Movement that he had spent his life building, so that it could continue after his death.

Father Divine “laid His body down” on September 10, 1965.¹⁴⁶ After Father Divine took his “funeral expression,” Mother Divine led the Peace Mission Movement until her own death in 2017.¹⁴⁷ She wrote a book explaining the Movement’s beliefs and history entitled *The Peace Mission Movement*, ran things on the Mission’s Woodmont estate in Pennsylvania, and continued preaching and

¹⁴⁶ Mother Divine, *The Peace Mission Movement*, 99.

¹⁴⁷ William Grimes, “Mother Divine, 91, Dies,” *New York Times* (New York, NY), Mar. 15, 2017.

sitting for interviews. Mother Divine's obituary in the *New York Times* emphasized the interracial, chaste, and symbolic aspects of the Divines' marriage, and the sense of salvation which she bestowed to their angels.¹⁴⁸

Mother Divine and Peace Mission followers regarded Father Divine's death as God sacrificing his physical body. Mother Divine explained that before God took his "Personal Bodily Form" as Father Divine he had been infinite, and had sacrificed this freedom to enter into a human body which his flock could "comprehend."¹⁴⁹ He then chose to "sacrifice Himself" so that "Righteousness [could] flood the earth and nothing [could] stop it!"¹⁵⁰ His earthly body rests in "The Shrine to Life" on the grounds of the Woodmont estate, which still belongs to his remaining angels.¹⁵¹

The rule of the orthodox majority, whatever form it may take in any particular time and place, depends on taming, restraining, or wiping out influential dissenters. Whether grappling with religious or political controversies, the defenders of these orthodoxies and the dissenters both recycle strategies used in similar preceding conflicts as they attempt to ennoble themselves or vilify their opponents. The conflicts between Father Divine and his detractors may not have been on the level of Catholic inquisitions or the Red Scare, but the relatively small

¹⁴⁸ William Grimes, "Mother Divine, 91, Dies," *New York Times*.

¹⁴⁹ Mother Divine, *The Peace Mission Movement*, 101.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 100.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 60.

scope of their fight has its own value. Clashes between defenders of an orthodox majorities and those who are unable or unwilling to conform to their expectations can play out at any level, in any sort of relationship, in any setting. Recognizing the ways in which writers used stereotypes and widespread anxieties in their efforts to turn readers against Father Divine betrays similar rhetoric in present propaganda, in personal conversations, and even in one's own thoughts. Father Divine's constant refusal to be bound by these stereotypes, his ability to overturn or manipulate them into something that suited his needs, shows that people are not defined by others' prejudices and that power is not monopolized by the orthodox majority.

Father Divine preached that all barriers between people, including categories of race and gender, were pernicious, unnatural creations of humans' negative thoughts; Father Divine's detractors saw these categories, and the hierarchies into which they formed them, as essential and self evident. By acknowledging this dichotomy, by vicariously experiencing such duels through the stories of people like Father Divine, one is able to choose which outlook to believe and how that will inform one's actions toward those different from oneself.

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