

The Familiar Perspectives of American History: Thomas Merton on Black and Indigenous Oppression in the United States

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The collection of essays entitled *Ishi Means Man* is not among Thomas Merton's most well-known works.¹ This short, posthumously published volume collects a handful of Merton's writings on American Indians. They are interesting and compelling pieces and deserve to be read more frequently and studied more closely. These reflections take on heightened significance, though, when they are read alongside other of Merton's writings – particularly his reflections on racism in the twentieth-century United States. Merton's reflections on the struggle for racial justice in the era of the Civil Rights Movement were incisive and provocative, and pushed beyond superficial characterizations of “race relations” to challenge the deep-seated pathologies at the root of American racism. Merton wrote the essays that became *Ishi Means Man* during the last years of his life – the same time during which he wrote the essays that were eventually published together as *Faith and Violence: Christian Teaching and Christian Practice*.² This latter volume includes such powerful reflections as “Vietnam – an Overwhelming Atrocity” (87-95), “From Non-Violence to Black Power” (121-29) and “The Meaning of Malcolm X” (182-88).

Reading the essays in *Ishi Means Man* in light of the essays in *Faith and Violence*, as well as other of Merton's writings on race and racism, reveals that Merton's perceptive eye recognized that the dynamics of exclusion and oppression that plagued black Americans in the twentieth century were not *sui generis*, nor wholly unique to the experiences of that racial group. He saw connections between racial oppression in the United States and violence and oppression in other contexts, spanning the whole of American history, from the beginnings of European colonization through the Vietnam War. Merton saw recurring patterns in the ways that white people have maltreated, abused and exploited non-white people

1. Thomas Merton, *Ishi Means Man: Essays on Native Americans* (Greensboro, NC: Unicorn Press, 1976); subsequent references will be cited as “*IMM*” parenthetically in the text. (The volume has been recently reissued: [New York: Paulist Press, 2015]).

2. Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence: Christian Teaching and Christian Practice* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968); subsequent references will be cited as “*FV*” parenthetically in the text.

over the centuries of their presence in the Americas. His analyses of these distinct though potentially analogous instances of racialized violence and oppression shed light on common themes that carry through to racism and racial violence in the present day. These writings from the last years of Merton's life illuminate his critique of consistent white supremacy, and a corresponding mythos of white moral purity, in the American story. Merton's critique suggests that there may be something uniquely American in the phenomena of black and indigenous oppression, and thus highlights a troubling dark side of the American ideal. This essay will highlight three specific modes of racial control that white people have leveraged against people of color throughout the American story.

Merton was himself cognizant of the natural connections between his thoughts on twentieth-century racism and earlier indigenous oppression. In a section of *Ishi* titled "The Cross Fighters: Notes on a Race War" (*IMM* 35-52), Merton surveys a history of conflict among white and indigenous inhabitants of the Yucatán peninsula during the late 1800s. The essay opens, though, with a broader perspective: "The traumatic clash between races is one of the standard problems of our time. Everywhere it tends to take somewhat the same form" (*IMM* 35). For a book published in 1968, a reference to "clash between races" cannot be mistaken for anything but an allusion to that decade's Civil Rights Movement and persistent racial tension throughout the country. Interestingly, an earlier version of "The Cross Fighters" made this connection explicit. The piece appeared originally in an obscure publication called *The Unicorn Journal*, and it began there with a paragraph that is omitted from the version in *Ishi*.³ In that original text, Merton opens the essay with the following words:

The Black Power movement in the United States is a violently critical rejection of white supremacy. It proposes (among other things) a separate Negro nation and threatens a violent break with white society in general by means of guerilla warfare in the inner cities. This may be new and disquieting to white Americans: but there have been racial wars before and it is instructive to study the causes, the development and the outcome of one such war that was waged over a hundred years ago in Yucatán.

It may have been wise, as a stylistic matter, to excise this uninspiring first paragraph and instead cut straight to his potent statement that the "traumatic clash between races is one of the standard problems of our time," but the deleted paragraph provides a crystal-clear indication that

3. Thomas Merton, "The Cross Fighters: Notes on a Race War," *Unicorn Journal* 1 (1968) 26-40.

Merton saw an important continuity between the plight of black Americans in the twentieth century and that of indigenous Americans in previous centuries. The following pages will elucidate that continuity in terms of three “hegemonies” which have characterized racial oppression over multiple centuries.

The Hegemony of White Identity

On one level, the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s aimed at securing for black Americans the minimal conditions for decent living and the basic prerogatives of equal citizenship. Merton recognized, though, that the movement had the potential not only to advance public policy, but more profoundly to challenge the ideology of white supremacy. And this latter possibility sufficiently unnerved white Americans that even ostensible allies of the movement hedged in their support. Merton’s reflections on this phenomenon – elaborated most precisely in his “Letters to a White Liberal,” an essay published in his 1964 collection *Seeds of Destruction*⁴ – illuminate the dominance of white identity as a normative standard, even among those who would applaud improvements in black living conditions or civil rights.

In “Letters to a White Liberal” (*SD* 3-71), Merton focuses on the implicit demand, among white liberals, that African Americans defer to the leadership and direction of whites. Merton recognized that white support for civil rights was often qualified by an unspoken expectation that advances in racial equality would not go so far as to threaten the dominant status of whites in America. Merton’s essay so offended many white readers precisely because it challenged the depth and sincerity of their commitment to racial justice and full racial equality. Merton charged that these well-meaning white people would decisively reject the advance of civil rights if the movement’s success began to threaten the dominant status of whites. “Now, my liberal friend,” Merton addresses a typical lukewarm supporter of the Civil Rights Movement, “here is your situation”:

you offer a certain encouragement to the Negro . . . so that, abetted by you, he is emboldened to demand concessions. . . . He also knows, however, that your material comforts, your security, and your congenial relations with the establishment are much more important to you than your rather volatile idealism, and that when the game gets rough you will be quick to see your own interests menaced by his demands.

4. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1964); subsequent references will be cited as “*SD*” parenthetically in the text.

And you will sell him down the river for the five hundredth time in order to protect yourself. (SD 33)

Merton articulates in a way that is rarely made explicit the degree to which white society is committed to the ideal of whiteness. The struggle for civil rights must overcome not only the fact of racism and racial discrimination, but also the reluctance of ostensibly well-meaning white “allies” to cede control over the social, political and economic orders. The struggle for true racial justice, then, must aim not only to achieve conditions of autonomy, civil liberties, political representation, decent living and so on, but also to undermine the hegemony of white identity that attempts to control people of color, even while applauding their efforts at advancement.

The Black Power movement posed a challenge to white supporters of the Civil Rights Movement who advised moderation. Merton saw that Black Power represented an overt rejection of the normative dominance of whiteness. It was “*part of a world movement of refusal and rejection of the value system we call western culture*” (which is, of course, an inevitably racialized notion) (FV 128). Nonviolent protest, while disquieting in its own way, was a much easier pill to swallow for sympathetic whites than the ready endorsement of violence in the Black Power movement. More than the notion of violence itself, though, it was Black Power’s open rejection of whiteness as an ideal that so disturbed white would-be supporters.

Merton claimed that the hegemony of white identity pervaded the very logic of white support for civil rights. White people often assumed that the proper aim of better living conditions for African Americans was that they might strive to become just like those white people. The ideal of whiteness informed their assumptions about what the Civil Rights Movement must be striving toward. Merton writes: “It is simply taken for granted that, since the white man is superior, the *Negro wants to become a white man*” (SD 58). White people tend all too often to presume that their customs, mores, practices and comprehensive identity constitute the normative ideal at which all people must aim. When Merton says that people think Black Americans want to become white, he is pointing up the hegemonic status of white identity in the popular mind. The folly and self-contradiction of the white liberal is his resistance to affirming black people in themselves, rather than as (imagined) aspiring white people.

A discussion in *Ishi Means Man* sheds light on the phenomenon behind this resistance: an insistence on white identity as the normative standard of human excellence. In “The Shoshoneans,” the book’s opening essay (IMM 5-16), Merton is discussing the confinement of Native Americans to reservations (a topic to which we’ll return below). He observes that

this confinement is conditioned in a certain way. The Indian “has another choice” (*IMM* 10) than to remain on the reservation. The Indian may, at any moment, leave the reservation, discard his indigenous identity, and adopt the manners and mores of whiteness. “He is free to raise himself up, to get out and improve his lot, to make himself human, and how? Why, of course, by joining us, by doing as we do, by manifesting business acumen and American know-how, by making money, and by being integrated into our affluent society” (*IMM* 10). Of course, the “we” in this sentence (“doing as we do”) refers to white Americans. Native Americans are not captives to their fate, Merton notes, but rather may escape their reservation lot if they are only willing to strive toward the signifiers of white identity. By doing so, a Native American may “make himself human.” Merton is not being subtle. He is stating very clearly the assumption of white supremacy: that humanness is identical with whiteness, and that other people are human to the degree that they are white. To leave no confusion about this, Merton prints the following sentence in all capital letters: “IT MEANS THAT AS FAR AS WE ARE CONCERNED THE INDIAN (LIKE THE NEGRO, THE ASIAN, ETC.) IS PERMITTED TO HAVE A HUMAN IDENTITY ONLY IN SO FAR AS HE CONFORMS TO OURSELVES AND TAKES UPON HIMSELF OUR IDENTITY” (*IMM* 10).

Of course, this “permission” is not without its own difficulty. Merton notes that people of color face an intrinsic obstacle in their ultimate inability to become fully white: “But since in fact the Indian, or the Negro, is in the position of having a different colored skin and other traits which make him unlike ourselves, he can never be like us and can therefore never have an identity” (*IMM* 10). That is, while white society holds out to people of color the ideal of whiteness as an identity to which they may (*should*) aspire, that same society also denies them entry to whiteness by fixating on phenotypical characteristics such as skin tone. The consequence is that, as Merton writes, white identity remains inaccessible for those whom white society has deemed unsuited. As Merton puts it, the person of color “can never sell himself to us as fully human on our impossible terms” (*IMM* 10).

The category of whiteness has always been constructed on the basis of a contingent and variable set of class and cultural markers, as much as on skin pigment. There has never been any fixed and objective condition that qualifies a person as white. Rather, the bounds of whiteness have always been defined and policed by white people themselves.⁵ Crucially, though, white people, by and large, do not recognize their racial categories as contingent or socially determined. It is indeed a constituent element of

5. See Nell Irvin Painter, *The History of White People* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010).

white hegemony to treat white identity as a fixed characteristic that no amount of social engineering can alter or overcome, just as white racism has regularly leaned on spurious science to identify biologically inscribed inferiorities in people of color. Merton is perceptive, then, to recognize that when white people extend to people of color an implicit offer of admission to their stratum of society, that offer is intrinsically fraudulent. His discussion of white identity in relation to indigenous Americans in *Ishi* neatly parallels the thesis of his “Letters to a White Liberal” in this respect. As much as white people may appear to want – and may *genuinely* want – to aid people of color and contribute to their liberation, they will tend to resist dignifying modes of existence that deviate from the ideal of whiteness.

The Hegemony of White Violence

White people in America have long been swift to punish failures to be white – from indigenous Americans in the sixteenth century to African Americans in the twenty-first century. As they have done so, they have relied on a moral hierarchy that valorizes white violence while criminalizing *both* non-white violence and non-white non-violence. If this seems a strange statement, Merton shows how, in both the Civil Rights Era and in earlier anti-colonial struggles, whites in America have punished non-white people not only for their acts of violence, but also for their *insufficient* violence, at least in comparison to that of white people.

In both cases of indigenous Americans and of African Americans, Merton diagnoses ways in which their white oppressors have justified their aggression and domination by reference to supposed acts of violence on the part of their victims. Often, this takes the form of a self-reinforcing feedback loop: oppression begets reactionary violence, which begets further oppression, and so on. In *Ishi Means Man*, Merton notes that the confinement of Indians to reservations was often justified by reference to Indian acts of violence, against which white settlers needed to be protected. One example – described by one source as an example of Indians’ “depredations” – involved Native Americans’ stealing horses as a source of food following the disruption of traditional means of sustenance (see *IMM* 6). Clearly, an act of violence need not rise to the level of dangerous aggression to be leveraged as justification for retaliation. The trespass of the Indian, though, can only confirm his corruptness, while the violence of the white person is a necessary guard against aggression.

In *Faith and Violence*, Merton notes that the Black Power movement was, perversely, welcomed by some white people because it justified the use of violence against black people (see *FV* 122-23). The criminaliza-

tion of black violence, and its subsequent punishment by white violence, is a phenomenon that continues today: Georgetown law professor Paul Butler's recent book *Chokehold* details the ways that police forces commit offensive violence against black men and then, *post hoc*, point to any forceful resistance as legitimating grounds for their original violence.⁶ The result is a self-justifying system of white violence in which black people are provoked and then punished heartily for their reaction.

Interestingly, and perhaps paradoxically, the hegemony of white violence also *expects* certain kinds of violence from people of color, and punishes their failure to act as violently as whites would in their place. A passage from "The Cross Fighters: Notes on a Race War" provides an illustrative example. Merton describes a moment in the prolonged conflict between indigenous Maya Indians in the Yucatán peninsula and their European and European-descended ("Ladino") colonizers when the Maya have risen up in rebellion and have gained control of most of the Yucatán peninsula. Basing his discussion primarily on a study by Nelson Reed, *The Caste War of Yucatán*,⁷ Merton recounts that as the Maya approached the precipice of victory, they declined to mount the attack that would likely have finished their campaign and rendered them the decisive winners: "The whites had been pushed all the way to the east coast," the Bishop of Mérida had fled to Havana, and the Governor was preparing for "a last stand against the onslaught that would probably bring victory to the Indians and make them masters of Yucatán." The indigenous rebels stood on the brink of an improbable victory. All that was left was one final strike to seal the deal. "But the final attack never came" (*IMM* 41).

The failure of the Maya to finish their campaign decisively came as a surprise to the white forces. It was, Merton says, a product of the Maya's particular worldview. In contrast to the white conquerors, the Maya "were not interested" (*IMM* 41) in taking political power over the Yucatán. Instead, having resisted the force that threatened them, they slid back into familiar and customary manners of life. These ways, Merton writes, "were basically peaceful, constructive, humanly healthy" (*IMM* 42). But they were antithetical to the mentality that drove their white aggressors. This mentality, in turn, "is based on the American pragmatic imperative to push for the competitor's unconditional defeat" (*IMM* 42). That the Maya would refrain from delivering the kill shot could make sense only from the vantage of a "peaceful and constructive human instinct." This, Merton says, is "a voice which has to be silenced if efficiency is to be

6. See Paul Butler, *Chokehold: Policing Black Men* (New York: New Press, 2017).

7. Nelson Reed, *The Caste War of Yucatán* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1964).

total” (*IMM* 42). That they withdrew from the brink of victory to their benign and traditional ways of life could not register, then, as a sign of their beneficence, humility or mercy. Rather, Merton notes that “modern man can only look upon it as a complete collapse of reason, a farcical proof of our contention that primitive races are ‘inferior’” (*IMM* 42). The only explanation possible for this act of non-aggression from a position of strength advantage is some sort of cognitive or values failure. Perversely, their forbearance becomes evidence of their deficiency. Unsurprisingly, the Ladino forces took advantage of the reprieve granted them to regroup, and they proceeded to retake all the land that they had previously lost.

Returning to the twentieth-century Civil Rights Movement, Merton recognized a similar incommensurability between the outlook of white America and the strategy of non-violent resistance employed by African Americans in the U.S. Civil Rights Movement. Non-violence, Merton says, is a strategy for social change with great possibility, but which requires certain dispositions on the part of the oppressor in order for it to work. By the time that *Faith and Violence* was published in 1968, Merton recognized that many people would have reached the conclusion that nonviolence is naïve and ultimately impotent. The problem, Merton says, is that “non-violence apparently presupposed a sense of justice, of humaneness, of liberality, of generosity that were not to be found in the white people to whom the Negroes made their stirring appeal” (*FV* 132-33). The strength of nonviolence lies in the compelling witness that its enactors make when they bear unjust suffering for the sake of righteousness. Their pain dramatizes the errors of their oppressors and makes the virtue of their pleas apparent. When onlookers fail to be moved by the suffering of nonviolent activists, however, the strategy may fail to achieve its intended results.

Merton thinks that this failure is what has happened in the United States. The modicum of good will that civil rights activists assumed was present in their oppressors failed to manifest itself. The suffering of blacks made plain did not move them. As Merton writes, “The problem of American racism turned out to be far deeper, far more stubborn, infinitely more complex” (*FV* 133). Beyond simply failing to stir whites’ sympathy, the strategy of nonviolence may even have inadvertently confirmed for some whites the subordinate status they judged appropriate for African Americans. “In the Negro ghettos of America [non-violent protest] has turned out to mean, to Negroes and to whites in general, another admission of Negro inferiority and helplessness” (*FV* 133). Insofar as nonviolent resistance failed in the U.S., then, Merton suggests that it was because the strategy of forbearance, self-abnegation and voluntary suffering failed

to register with white people. Rather than recognizing the virtue and strength in protestors laying their bodies on the line, whites saw protestors beaten, attacked by dogs and sprayed with fire-hoses as confirmation of the misguidedness and inferiority of those protestors themselves. As Merton characterizes it, "The Negro is always the one who lets his head be bashed in" (*FV* 133). Rather than move them to mercy, nonviolent witness hardened those oppressors' hearts.

In the cases of both the Maya, reluctant to deal the final blow and secure total victory over their white colonizer, and the nonviolent protestors of the U.S. Civil Rights Movement, unwittingly providing fuel for racists' fire by their deference and willingness to bear harm, Merton identifies the hegemony of white violence. White society assumes the legitimacy of violence as a tool of oppression against people of color, all the while punishing responsory violence on the part of those very people. Moreover, this assumption is taken to be universal and normatively superior, such that the failure of the Maya and blacks alike to adopt the values and practices of their white oppressors only further solidified their status as inferior and "other." Indeed, their failure to adopt the violent manners of their white antagonists proved to be both their most confounding and their most offensive act. According to the ideology of whiteness, the only thing worse than a non-white person is a non-white person who does not wish that he were white. And non-white people who act in ways not prescribed by dominant white ideologies prove the need for whites to direct and control them.

The Hegemony of White Space

The third theme that emerges from Merton's writings on anti-black racism and oppression of indigenous Americans is the way that whites use geography as a means of punishing non-white people and as a psychological tool for perpetuating white supremacy.

The opening essay in *Ishi Means Man* is a review, originally published in the *Catholic Worker*,⁸ of a book called *The Shoshoneans*,⁹ which recounts the author's encounter with Shoshone Indians in the states of Nevada and Idaho. Merton focuses much of his review on the phenomenon and logic of Native American reservations. The essay opens by quoting a government document purporting to explain how it has come to pass that the majority of indigenous Americans live on strictly defined parcels of land, while their white colonizers enjoy the bulk of the American conti-

8. *The Catholic Worker* 33 (June 1967) 5-6.

9. Edward Dorn, *The Shoshoneans: The People of the Basin-Plateau* (New York: William Morrow, 1966).

ment. The justification offered emphasizes the need to somehow protect white people from the threat posed by Indians. The document states: “Placing [the Indians] on reservations was an act to protect the white settlers from acts of depredation, which became more common as the Indians were pushed further back out of their original holdings” (*IMM* 5). (These “depredations” include the example cited above of poaching horses in order to replace the traditional food sources disrupted by the presence of colonizers.)

Merton carefully unpacks the significance of this characterization of the reservation phenomenon over the course of his review, focusing especially on the purported safety rationale for reservations. That rationale, of course, is an entirely fraudulent representation of the motives for confining Indians to specific areas. The real reason for reservations, Merton explains, is to dramatize in physical space the Native Americans’ subordinate status, and to impose psychological conditions of subordination on those people themselves. Confinement of Indians to reservations served, in Merton’s words, “to protect white settlers from . . . any loss of self-esteem by an admission that the Indians might be humanly their equals” (*IMM* 10). Reservations, in other words, were a punishment for failing to be white. The physical segregation of Native Americans from white society provided geographic confirmation, for white people, of Indians’ inferiority.

More than this, though, Merton notes, the reservations also provided confirmation of the very same thing for Indians themselves. Being restricted to live exclusively on a reservation conveys to the Native American that he is not white and by virtue of this fact does not belong in white society – which, of course, is the society of affluence and opportunity. The way in which reservations encourage their residents to internalize a belief in their own inferiority is perhaps their most pernicious feature. Merton writes:

the ultimate violence which the American white man, like the European white man, has exerted in all unconscious “good faith” upon the colored races of the earth (and above all on the Negro) has been to impose on them *invented identities*, to place them in positions of subservience and helplessness in which they themselves came to believe only in the identities which had thus been conferred upon them. (*IMM* 10)

That sentence is a particularly clear example of Merton’s drawing an explicit connection between the situation of Native Americans and that of African Americans in the United States. That same connection is implicit

in the parallels between Merton's discussion of Indian reservations and his treatment of African-American "ghettoes." Merton is especially interested in the African-American neighborhood that he encountered first-hand during his time at Columbia. In an essay in *Faith and Violence* titled "Religion and Race in the United States" (FV 130-44), Merton describes the concentration of African-Americans in urban centers as a product of white society's use of geographic segregation to impose material and psychological conditions of subordination, just as for Native Americans on reservations. "The fact remains," Merton writes, "that the Negro is now in the home the white man has given him: the three square miles of broken-down tenements which form the ghetto of Harlem, the biggest Negro city in the world, type of all the Negro ghettoes in America, full of crime, misery, squalor, dope addiction, prostitution, gang warfare, hatred and despair" (FV 137).

The effect of ghetto confinement is not merely to limit the economic and social prospects of the people restricted to live within them. As with Indian reservations, the effect is also psychological. It is to convince the ghetto inhabitants that they are of degraded or inferior value, and that they do not belong in white society. On this psychological point, Merton draws the ghetto-reservation connection most clearly. In *Ishi*, he writes poignantly:

The ultimate surrender of the Indian is to believe himself a being who belongs on a reservation or in an Indian ghetto, and to remain there without identity, with the possible but generally unreal option of dreaming that he *might* find a place in white society. In the same way the ultimate defeat of the Negro is for him to believe that he is a being who belongs in Harlem, occasionally dreaming that if only he could make it to Park Avenue he would at last become real. (IMM 11)

The pernicious effects of racial discrimination play out in both the psychological and physical landscapes of America, and the segregation of people in physical space contributes to the reinforcement of racist ideology in the psyches of oppressor and oppressed alike.

Merton recognized that the exclusion of people of color from white spaces isn't merely the product of dastardly acts of overt racism. It is also the product of white America refusing to permit non-whites even minimal access to the sources of their own advantage. Think again of his discussion in *Ishi* of the government justifying Native American reservations on grounds that it would prevent white settlers from "depredations" such as stealing horses. Merton notes that Indians sometimes stole those horses "not only in order to ride them, but even in some deplorable cases to eat

them” (*IMM* 6). Merton quickly punctures the logic of those who would hasten to point to such thefts as evidence of degraded character: “hunger being one of the weaknesses of aboriginal owners who suddenly learn that they are no longer in a position to live by hunting, since the white man has destroyed all the game” (*IMM* 6-7). In other words, once whites have stripped indigenous people of their customary means of subsistence, they inflict the further indignity of punishing alternative survival strategies.

With respect to contemporary housing segregation, Merton presciently notes the role of even ostensibly progressive whites in denying African Americans access to their neighborhoods. Their support for black activists in the South was “soon forgotten when black people in the North began to ask for open housing. Northern liberals might admire black dignity at a distance, but they still did not want all that nobility right next door: it might affect property values” (*FV* 122). Merton would surely despair to know the persistence of housing segregation in the United States a half-century later, and the pervasively disadvantaging effects that excluding African Americans from home ownership would have on education, crime, family wealth and so on.¹⁰

Merton recounts an anecdote from a July 1964 riot in Harlem. While people filled the streets, police fired their guns into the air and worked to disperse the rioters. The police captain yelled through a megaphone: “Go home! Go home!” One of the rioters yelled back, “We are home, baby!” (*FV* 136). Merton says that this statement “sum[s] up the American problem. There is no ‘where’ for the Negro to go. He is where he is. White America has put him where he is” (*FV* 137). Indigenous and black people alike have been confined to spaces of segregation, disadvantage and violence. To be sure, this is not to say that disadvantage and violence are geographically contained – indeed, black Americans in particular may be most at risk when venturing into wealthy or predominantly white neighborhoods. But this only confirms the point: one of the characteristic mechanisms by which white racism exerts control is by the exclusion of people of color from white spaces. The delineation of these spaces “maps” the ideology of white supremacy in geographic terms across the American landscape.

A “Profound Heritage of Guilt”

A recurring, perhaps even pervasive, American error is the assumption that racism and racial injustice are aberrations from some norm of social

10. For a particularly illuminating study, see Richard Rothstein, *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2017).

egalitarianism – or at the very least that they are relics of the past that we have transcended. But reading Merton’s reflections on racism in the twentieth century alongside his analysis of racial oppression and racial violence in a different context undermines the assumption of racism as a deviation from some virtuous American norm. From the perspective of history, from the arrival of European colonists through the present day, it is no stretch to say that racism *has been the norm* for America. That is, the American story is pervaded by patterns and systems of oppression of people of color by white people – whether in the case of indigenous Americans exploited and abused by European colonizers or Black Americans in the twentieth century confined to “ghetto” neighborhoods and denied access to the full benefits of citizenship. This is not to condemn America as irredeemable, but to recognize clear-eyed the centrality of racism and racial oppression to the American story.

Merton saw, moreover, a connection between the lineage of domestic racism in America and the country’s treatment of non-white people overseas. In both *Ishi Means Man* and *Faith and Violence*, Merton compares racial oppression on the American continent to the prosecution of the Vietnam War. In the *Faith and Violence* essay entitled “From Nonviolence to Black Power,” Merton notes that one of the generating causes of the rise of the Black Power movement is the identification of African Americans with Vietnamese people. “They have . . . seen the Vietnam war as another manifestation of whiteness’s versatility in beating down colored people,” Merton writes (*FV* 122). This perception has soured African Americans on the prospect of nonviolence as a solution to their plight; instead, like the Vietcong, they turn to violent resistance as a mechanism of self-defense. The violence that either of these non-white groups proposes, then, is fully linked to the violence of whites. Merton draws a direct parallel, writing “An America that destroys Vietnamese non-combatants with napalm has no right to object when blacks at home burn down their slums” (*FV* 123). The logic of violence in each instance is the same, and the contexts are linked by the shared dynamic of the American state (in both its legal and military functions) exercising domination over groups of non-white people. For Merton, this is no mere coincidence; it is entirely sensible. “It is perfectly logical that the America of LBJ should be at once the America of the Vietnam war and the Detroit riots. It’s the same America, the same violence, the same slice of mother’s cherry pie” (*FV* 123-24), he writes, the latter phrase echoing Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee chairman H. Rap Brown’s statement that “violence is as American as cherry pie.”

Merton makes explicit the connection he sees between the Vietnam

War and maltreatment of Native Americans toward the end of the essay from which *Ishi Means Man* draws its title: “Ishi: A Meditation” (*IMM* 25-32).¹¹ Merton is prompted to mention Vietnam while discussing a California Indian tribe known as the Yahi, who apparently took great solace in the knowledge that their sufferings were not the consequence of their own failings, but of wrongs done to them by others. Merton uses this observation as an opportunity to reflect on the aggressions enacted by the United States in Vietnam: “Every bomb we drop on a defenseless Asian village, every Asian child we disfigure or destroy with fire, only adds to the moral strength of those we wish to destroy for our own profit” (*IMM* 30). He goes on to suggest the ways in which the war in Vietnam echoes the violence that white settlers inflicted on Native Americans, such as a fixation on language of “cleansing” or “purifying” an area that is “infested” by some adversary, or a willingness to justify civilian casualties on flimsy “double effect” grounds that mask a stark lack of concern for the well-being of non-combatants.

Merton goes further than simply drawing parallels between the Vietnam War and earlier violence against Native Americans. He actually suggests that the two phenomena may be expressions of the same basic impulse:

What is most significant is that Viet Nam seems to have become an extension of our old western frontier, complete with enemies of another “inferior” race. This is a real “new frontier” that enables us to continue the cowboys-and-Indians game which seems to be part and parcel of our national identity. What a pity that so many innocent people have to pay with their lives for our obsessive fantasies. (*IMM* 32)

Whether on the old Western frontier or in Southeast Asia or in city slums, white people in America have been all too keen to segregate people on the basis of race and to inflict grievous harms on those designated as non-white. Merton not only identifies this as a common thread in American history, but situates racism and racial oppression as constitutive parts of the American national identity.

On one hand, it should be no surprise that these two texts, composed of essays written around the same time, should touch on similar subjects. At the same time, attending to the connections – explicit and implicit – between the themes of these two books sheds provocative light on the role of racism and racial oppression in the narrative of American his-

11. The essay is based on Theodora Kroeber, *Ishi in Two Worlds: A Biography of the Last Wild Indian in North America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961).

tory. In a moment when racial prejudice has stepped into the spotlight of American political culture – consider, for instance, the nativism and overt white nationalism that have shaped recent debates over immigration, and which fueled the political rise of President Donald Trump – it is useful to reflect on the pervasiveness of racism in the American story. Merton’s observations from the late 1960s vivify the connection between various manifestations of that thought-line, from the nation’s founding through its present.

In one particularly evocative phrasing, Merton says that America bears a “profound heritage of guilt” (*IMM* 30). This is guilt borne not on account of some long-ago historical wrong, but rather by virtue of the fact that racism has been written into the fabric of America for its entire history. It is crucial to appreciate this fact if progress toward racial reconciliation is to be possible. Only by a full accounting of its history can America come to terms with its heritage of racial guilt, and only by a thorough rebuilding of American identity can the country move in the direction of a non-racist future.