

“The Street Is for Celebration”: Racial Consciousness and the Eclipse of Childhood in America’s Cities

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Much of the real germinating action in the world, the real leavening is among the immobilized, the outsiders. Where the good may come from is perhaps where evil is feared. The streets. The ghettos.

Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love*¹

In 1976, Motown recording artist Stevie Wonder released a double-album masterpiece called *Songs in the Key of Life*, giving brilliant and beautiful voice to the joys and struggles of life in inner-city America. With an original working title of “Let’s see life the way it is,” the album’s seventeen songs reveal a world largely hidden from suburban, middle-class, white America. I was twelve years old when *Songs in the Key of Life* debuted at number one on the pop music charts, and remember well listening to the record with my older brother in our suburban home in Lexington, Kentucky. I was mesmerized by the music, even where I did not or could not understand the social and racial complexity of the songs. Almost forty years later, I am still mesmerized. The album’s third track, for example, “Village Ghetto Land,” juxtaposes disturbing images of “life the way it is” in the city over the serene instrumentation of a chamber quartet:

Would you like to go with me / Down my dead end street
Would you like to come with me / To Village Ghetto Land? . . .
Children play with rusted cars / Sores cover their hands
Politicians laugh and drink / Drunk to all demands.²

Two tracks later, as if to say, don’t even think you understand me now, or where I come from, Wonder delivers “Sir Duke,” an incomparably funky and joyful tribute to the genius of Duke Ellington and other black artists, followed by “I Wish,” his playful remembrance of growing up on the streets of Detroit. “Isn’t She Lovely” celebrates the birth of Wonder’s daughter, Aisha, followed by “Joy Inside My Tears,” “Pastime Paradise,”

1. Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom. Journals, vol. 6: 1966-1967*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 231, 221; subsequent references will be cited as “LL” parenthetically in the text.

2. Stevie Wonder, *Songs in the Key of Life* (Detroit: Motown Records, 1976).

and “Black Man” – all hymns to what it *feels like* to be black in America. Like turning a many-faceted diamond, now this way, now that, Stevie refracts the mosaic colors of life as it is for many in inner-city America, life held down to street level.

Life in the Key of Black

Listening to the album today, one might be tempted to celebrate just how much things have changed in a so-called post-racial America, where a black man resides with his beautiful family in the White House and projects American military power across the world stage. Or one might lament how far too little has changed at street level for people of color in the United States in areas such as education, incarceration or political disenfranchisement. In any case, what interests me here is not the insight into “ghetto life” that Stevie Wonder’s music gives us, gives me, as a middle-class white person in America. What interests me is the critique of the *racially unconscious white listener* embedded everywhere in his music. For listeners like myself, Wonder’s artistry facilitates a powerful and potentially painful realization: namely, my own nearly complete isolation from black experience, my “confinement in the prison built by racism,”³ and the degree to which my own white “*habitus*” or groupthink – what Thomas Merton called the “conspiracy of the many”⁴ – conditions my very manner of seeing and judging reality.

In other words, the opening of “Village Ghetto Land” – *Would you like to go with me, down my dead end street?* – still resonates today as both an accusation and an invitation: an accusation of social blindness but also an invitation to wake up, to come and see life as it is more clearly than I have seen it before from my perspective of social privilege. To say yes to the invitation is to discover that what is at stake is not strictly my grasp of ghetto life so much as the music of life itself, life in the key of humanity, black, white, brown, red or yellow. It is about the music of human relationships, sorrowful and joyful, broken and redeemed.

In this essay I consider life as it is in the cities and streets of America by juxtaposing Stevie Wonder’s music with select writings of Thomas Merton (1915–68), the Catholic monk and spiritual writer whose prophetic commentaries on race remain remarkably and sadly relevant today. Wonder and Merton are both artists, albeit of a very different kind. What

3. The phrase is borrowed from Eduardo Bonilla-Silva’s superb study, *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and Racial Inequality in Contemporary America* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2010).

4. See Thomas Merton, *The Behavior of Titans* (New York: New Directions, 1961) 83-84.

joins them is their remarkable capacity to open our imaginations to the life-worlds of people and places well beyond our habitual comfort zones. An elder African American woman in my parish recently reminded me of Merton's significance as a voice for justice during the civil rights movement. She told me that for her, as a young black woman growing up in a racially explosive Cincinnati in the 1960s, Merton's *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* was her "bible." "I carried it with me everywhere," she added, with a pained look on her face. "Merton got it, when few others did."⁵

There is some irony to that fact. As a cloistered monk living in a remote monastery in rural Kentucky, Merton was about as distant geographically from urban America as one could be. It is true that before he entered the monastery in 1941, Merton had lived the better part of his life in cities throughout Europe and then for five years as a student and teacher at Columbia University in the heart of New York City. Indeed he even considered taking up residency in Harlem, living and working among the poor.⁶ But Merton's deep sensitivity to the black situation

5. Several factors contribute, in my view, to Merton's enduring trustworthiness on matters of race. First, he never described black experience (or "Negro experience," in the parlance of the day) in a monolithic, naively romantic or sociologically detached way. That Merton saw and rejected the dangers of race essentialism (black or white) is clear (see for example a remarkable passage from the hermitage on January 31, 1965, his fiftieth birthday, in Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage. Journals, vol. 5: 1963-1965*, ed. Robert E. Daggy [San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997] 200-201; subsequent references will be cited as "DWL" parenthetically in the text). Second, removed from the public fray as he was, Merton's commentary was comparatively clear-eyed and free of bias. He could be just as critical of the nihilist rhetoric of the black power movement as he was of the ignorance and complicity of white Christian liberals. In fact, he was suspicious of any rhetoric that elevated ideals, principles or social constructs (including race) over *persons*. Third, Merton recognized with epistemic humility that he was in many respects an alien and stranger to the struggles of the city, an outsider looking in, a guilty bystander. Reflecting on Malcolm X in 1967, for example, he noted, "I realize I don't fully know what I am talking about" (LL 233). Nevertheless he risked the attempt to understand life as it is for many blacks in this country, even where his social location prevented full comprehension. "I ought to learn to just shut up and go about my business of thinking and breathing under trees," he wrote in 1967. "But protest is a biological necessity" (LL 240).

6. For the considerable impact of Harlem on Merton's consciousness and emerging sense of vocation during these years – especially the influence of Catherine de Hueck Doherty – see Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948) 337-52, 357-60; Thomas Merton, *Run to the Mountain: The Story of a Vocation. Journals, vol. 1: 1939-1941*, ed. Patrick Hart (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1995) 384-85, 448-51, 455-56, 464-65; also "Holy Communion: The City" and "Aubade—Harlem," in *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977), 39-40,

during the 1960s was rooted not in geographical proximity so much as in basic human empathy, that is, in his radical openness to the life-worlds of others. “Most of us,” as he wrote in 1964, “are congenitally unable to think black, and yet that is precisely what we must do before we can even hope to understand the crisis in which we find ourselves.”⁷

Merton and Harlem: 1964

As detailed in his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, it is clear that when Thomas Merton entered the Trappist monastery of Our Lady of Gethsemani in 1941, he saw his vocation in the traditional way as *fuga mundi*: flight from the world. By the late 1950s, however, Merton’s awareness was turning dramatically back toward the secular world, to the realities of “life the way it is” for ordinary people in America who struggle simply to make ends meet and live with some kind of dignity. Like the Catholic Church on the eve of Vatican II, he was learning to re-discover God in unexpected places, which is to say, *everywhere*. The Christian contemplative way is not an escape from the world after all, Merton discovered, but a deepening grasp of all things in God, inclusive of the world’s social and political problems.

Most casual readers of Merton will be familiar with that pivotal moment in March of 1958 at the corner of Fourth and Walnut in Louisville, Kentucky, when he suddenly heard the music of the city in a new key, a key resonant with Christianity’s gospel of incarnation.⁸ But there is another urban epiphany of sorts that I would like to consider here. Detailed in Merton’s private journals, it is much more hidden and, to be sure, rather less idealized than the famous Fourth and Walnut passage. It happened in the summer of 1964, when Merton boarded an airplane for New York City for a meeting at Columbia University with Zen scholar D. T. Suzuki, with whom he had engaged in serious interreligious dialogue for many years. Flying over the city at 35,000 feet, Merton noted in his journal, harkening back to his life before Gethsemani, “I suddenly realized after all that I was a New Yorker.” Arriving at Columbia in late morning, he found his way to his room in Butler Hall, overlooking the streets of Harlem. He writes:

82-83; subsequent references will be cited as “CP” parenthetically in the text.

7. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1964) 60; subsequent references will be cited as “SD” parenthetically in the text.

8. See Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 140-42 (subsequent references will be cited as “CGB” parenthetically in the text); also Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk’s True Life. Journals, vol. 3: 1952-1960*, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 181-82.

[T]he noise of traffic and the uninterrupted cries of playing children, cries of life and joy coming out of purgatory, loud and strong the voice of a great living organism. Shots too – and there is no rifle range! Frequent shots – at what? More frequent than in the Kentucky woods behind the hermitage in hunting season. And drums, bongos, and the chanting of songs, and dogs barking and traffic, buses like jet planes. Above all the morning light, then the afternoon light, and the flashing windows of the big new housing developments. (*DWL* 114-15)

The passage is vintage Merton. Notice how Merton observes everything and seems to find something beautiful even in the “flashing windows of the big new housing developments.” But there were gunshots too – at what, he wonders. But then, “drums, bongos, and the chanting of songs.” In sum, *the incomparable music of Harlem*: “Cries of life and joy coming out of purgatory, loud and strong the voice of a great living organism.”

Just a month later, back at the monastery, the key darkly changes:

Jim Forest sent me clippings from Monday’s *New York Times* about the big riots in Harlem last weekend. It all took place in the section immediately below Butler Hall. . . . The police shot thousands of rounds into the air but also quite a few people were hit, and one man on a roof was killed. In the middle of all the racket and chaos and violence a police captain was shouting “Go home! Go home!” A Negro yelled back “We *are* home, baby!” (*DWL* 130)

Suddenly the description of Harlem as “purgatory” – a place of “purification” – bears much more ominous meaning.

“The Street Is for Celebration”

These memories of Harlem must have been fresh in Merton’s mind when in the fall of 1967 he wrote “The Street Is for Celebration,” an essay originally intended to serve as the preface for a picture book entitled *Summer in the City*, celebrating Monsignor Robert Fox’s work with children in Spanish Harlem. Though the book was never published, Merton certainly had this setting in mind, and surely the children of Harlem as well, when he wrote the piece, which finally came to print in the posthumous collection *Love and Living*.⁹

9. Thomas Merton, *Love and Living*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone and Brother Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1979) 46-53; subsequent references will be cited as “L&L” parenthetically in the text. Monsignor Fox’s associate Mary Cole did publish a book entitled *Summer in the City* (New York: P. J. Kenedy, 1968), that ended up being a kind of substitute for the originally planned picture book – without Merton’s contribution – which she sent to Merton with a letter of June 13, 1968 (archives, Thomas Merton

On the surface “The Street Is for Celebration” is a much gentler read than Merton’s fiercely prophetic commentaries on race such as “Letters to a White Liberal” (*SD* 3-71). Indeed, race is never mentioned at all. Rather Merton focuses our attention on cities and streets themselves as reflections of *what human beings do with space*. How we arrange and navigate the physical spaces of our cities, he suggests, reveals a great deal about who we are, what we value, and what we do not value in the everyday practices of our lives. The essay hinges on a distinction Merton draws between “alienated spaces,” where people simply submit, and “inhabited spaces,” where people actually live and can participate in the creation of their lives. The question at hand is this: “Can the street be an inhabited space?” Can the street be a place for living, for creativity, even for celebration? He writes:

Suppose the street is an impersonal no-man’s-land: a mere tube through which a huge quantity of traffic is sucked down toward the glass walls where business happens. Suppose the street is a tunnel, a kind of nowhere, something to go through. Something to get out of. Or a nightmare space where you run without getting away.

Then the street cannot be an inhabited space. . . . [Then] the street is not where they live but where they have been dumped.

When a street is not inhabited it is a dump.

A street may be a dump for thousands of people who aren’t there.

They have been dumped there, but their presence is so provisional they might as well be absent. They occupy space by being displaced in it. . . .

An alienated space, an uninhabited space, is a space where you submit.

You stay where you are put, even though this cannot really be called “living.” You stop asking questions about it and you know there is not much point in making any complaint. (Business is not interested in your complaint, only in your rent.) “I live on X Street.” Translated: “X Street is the place where I submit, where I give in, where I quit.” (*L&L* 46-48)

Note the crucial point about persons living an alienated life: “their presence is so provisional they might as well be absent.” To whom in American society today would such a description apply? To how many children

Center, Bellarmine University, Louisville, KY). I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer of this article for providing me valuable details on the genesis of Merton’s 1967 essay, and other references to his early experiences in Harlem.

residing in our inner cities? How about the millions of young men of color locked behind bars inside our sprawling prison system?

Here I pause to mention two contemporary authors who have opened my eyes to the trajectory of this line of thought as it applies to systemic racial injustice in the United States today. The first is Jonathan Kozol, whose books have long cast an ominous spotlight onto the plight of minority children and the state of public education in our cities. The titles of Kozol's books – *Death at An Early Age*; *Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools*; *The Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America*¹⁰ – tell the story of whole populations of young people, disproportionately black and Latino, whose presence in America "is so provisional they might as well be absent." The second is legal scholar Michelle Alexander, whose critically acclaimed study, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*,¹¹ details the devastating effects of mass incarceration and systematic disenfranchisement on communities of color in the United States. Like Kozol, Alexander's painstaking scholarship unmasks patterns of injustice directed against whole populations that most of us would rather not see, and many simply choose to deny.

Fifty years ago the face of racial animosity was epitomized in openly racist organizations like the Ku Klux Klan, in men like Bull Connor, the bigoted public safety commissioner of Birmingham, Alabama, and in horrific tragedies like the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham. Then it was quite clear what racial hatred and violence meant: it meant to will the nonexistence of black people, to seek their *erasure*. Merton's poem, "And the Children of Birmingham" is a powerful lament for this kind of race hatred; likewise his "Picture of a Black Child with a White Doll," an elegy for Denise McNair, one of the four children killed in the church bombing.¹²

10. Jonathan Kozol, *Death at an Early Age: The Destruction of the Hearts and Minds of Negro Children in the Boston Public Schools* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1967); Jonathan Kozol, *Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools* (New York: Crown, 1991); Jonathan Kozol, *The Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America* (New York: Crown, 2005); see also Jonathan Kozol, *Amazing Grace: The Lives of Children and the Conscience of a Nation* (New York: Crown, 1995).

11. Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: New Press, 2010).

12. For "And the Children of Birmingham," written before the bombing, see Thomas Merton, *Emblems of a Season of Fury* (New York: New Directions, 1963) 33–35 (subsequent references will be cited as "ESF" parenthetically in the text); CP 335–37. For "Picture of a Black Child with a White Doll," see CP 626–27. See also John Howard Griffin, *Black Like Me* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961), a riveting account of Griffin's experiment in

Today racial animosity manifests much more subtly than this, though its effects are no less quotidian, oppressive, or potentially violent, as Kozol and Alexander demonstrate in unflinching detail. In the decades since the civil rights movement, racism's implicit strategy has not been the erasure of the feared and marginal other (e.g., young black men) so much as their *eclipse* from meaningful participation in society. To eclipse is to ignore, to refuse to deal with a person as a person, as a somebody – a Child of God, as we say – who matters. To eclipse is to blot out the light. As the great Howard Thurman often noted, to destroy a people I don't have to kill them, I only have to convince them that they are not worth anything – to hold a bushel basket relentlessly over their light.¹³ It is this form of violence, violence by systematic neglect and creeping despair, which concerns Merton here: *X street is the place where I submit, where I give in, where I quit.*

To his credit, Merton acknowledges the temptation to violence among the marginalized, violence as a means of reminding the world “that you are there, that you are tired of being a non-person” (*L&L* 49). Yet violence cannot succeed in making the city inhabitable, he continues, because “it accepts the general myth of the street as no-man's-land, as battleground, as no place.” Violence is “another kind of submission . . . another way of giving up” (*L&L* 50).¹⁴ How, then, can the street become an inhabited space, a place where people are present to themselves, with full identities, as real people, as happy people? Merton begins to gesture toward a positive answer, toward hope.

To acquire inhabitants, the street will have to be changed. . . . The people who are merely provisionally present, half-absent non-persons must now become really present on the street as *themselves*. They must be recognizable as people. . . .

Instead of submitting to the street, they must change it. . . . [T]hey must transform the street and make it over so that it is livable.

“becoming black” in the deep South during the 1950s. A close friend of Merton and his original authorized biographer, Griffin's story is one of the most compelling, yet strangely overlooked, narratives of cross-racial solidarity during the civil rights era. Both the book and a recent documentary, *Uncommon Vision: The Life and Times of John Howard Griffin*, dir. Morgan Atkinson (Louisville, KY: Duckworks, 2010), expose the question of social empathy (our capacity for it and our resistance to it) in US society.

13. See Howard Thurman, *Howard Thurman: Essential Writings*, selected with an Introduction by Luther E. Smith (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006).

14. The film *Crash*, dir. Paul Haggis (Lions Gate, 2005), brilliantly dramatizes intersecting racial tensions and the cumulative impulse to violence across the color line in contemporary Los Angeles – even while illuminating the humanity and latent impulse for good in the most racially bigoted of the characters.

The street can be inhabited if the people on it begin to make their life credible by changing their environment.

Living is more than submission: it is creation.

To live is to create one's own world as a scene of personal happiness. (L&L 48-49)

Here we come to the heart of things. Living, says Merton, is more than submission: it is creation. And here he contrasts the streets of modern America as places of alienation with the first Mayan cities of North America, which were places of festival and celebration. What is celebration? Celebration "is the creation of a common identity, a common consciousness. . . . Celebration is when we let joy make itself out of our love. . . . Celebration is the beginning of confidence, therefore of power" (L&L 53). He continues, redirecting our imaginations back to the streets of urban America:

When we laugh at them, when we celebrate, when we make our lives beautiful, when we give one another joy by loving, by sharing, then we manifest a power they cannot touch. We can be the artisans of a joy they never imagined.

We can build a fire of happiness in this city that will put them to shame. . . .

Can the street become an inhabited space?

Yes, when it becomes a space for celebration. (L&L 53)

Of course to remake the street and one's own life in the face of creeping despair will not be easy. "We can dance in the street, but that will not change the fact that our buildings are lousy, the rent is too high, the garbage is not taken away, and the back yards look like bomb craters." Nevertheless, Merton continues, "We [can] begin to discover our power to transform our own world. He who celebrates is not powerless. He becomes a creator because he is a lover" (L&L 52).

Invoking the theme of power as Merton did here was to engage the aims and rhetoric of the Black Power movement. Implicitly Merton is wrestling with the question of subjugated populations everywhere during the revolutionary 1960s: what are the conditions of the possibility for the empowerment of the poor, for justice and equal opportunity, for positive social revolution? Does Christianity, at its heart *a narrative of power through love and redemptive suffering*, have any wisdom to offer the black community? What are the implications, by contrast, when the demand for justice is framed by the logic of violence and revolution "by any means necessary," as it was by the Black Power movement? Implicitly Merton

is making the case here, in the tradition of Jesus, Gandhi, Day and King, for nonviolent resistance through interracial solidarity and love: love not in the abstract, but love as it sings and marches and rises up fiercely in an embodied, joyful, hopeful people.¹⁵

Two further points are worth noting about this remarkable essay. First, by the middle of the piece Merton is no longer analyzing the situation objectively, as it were, from an abstract, third-person distance. Like Stevie Wonder, Merton draws his audience into the streetscape itself, inviting us, through a kind of imaginative empathy, to identify ourselves with the occupants of the alienated street: *We can build a fire of happiness in this city that will put them to shame*. Second, note how Merton gradually shifts the locus of power from the impersonal to the personal, from behind the shiny glass walls of skyscrapers “where business happens” to the inner landscape of lives and relationships down at street level, where hope can catch flame and burst forth again in human hearts. Yet such an outcome remains tenuous and unpredictable. Merton lays the burden of hope partly, if implicitly, upon the reader. Can I identify *myself*, my own kind – “‘Kind’ which means ‘likeness’ and which means ‘love’ and which means ‘Child’” (SS 182)¹⁶ – with my suffering brothers and sisters in the city?

The Divine-Human Child

In all of Merton’s writings there may be no more poignant or powerful symbol of our shared personhood in God than the symbol of the Child. “We do not hear the soft voice, the gentle voice, the merciful and feminine. . . . We do not see the Child who is prisoner in all the people.”¹⁷ The

15. In “Gandhi and the One-Eyed Giant,” Merton cites Laurens Van Der Post’s thesis “that the white man’s spiritual rejection and contempt for the African is the result of his rejection of what is deepest and most vital in himself” (Thomas Merton, ed., *Gandhi on Non-Violence: Selected Texts from Non-Violence in Peace and War* [New York: New Directions, 1964] 77). Author James Douglass takes his cues from Merton’s prophetic unmasking of state violence in *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966) (subsequent references will be cited as “RU” parenthetically in the text) to examine both Gandhi’s and John F. Kennedy’s resistance to Western militarism: see James W. Douglass, *Gandhi and the Unspeakable: His Final Experiment with Truth* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2012); James Douglass, *JFK and the Unspeakable: Why He Died and Why It Matters* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2008).

16. This is from the original version of Merton’s Fourth and Walnut epiphany of March 18, 1958.

17. Thomas Merton, *Hagia Sophia* (Lexington, KY: Stammeria del Santuccio, 1962) (ESF 63; CP 365); see also “The Time of the End Is the Time of No Room” (RU 65-75). For a close study of Merton’s theological anthropology as it rises from the convergence of Christ-Wisdom-Sophia in his life and thought, see Christopher Pramuk, *Sophia: The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical/Michael Glazier, 2009)

Christ of Merton's mature writings is the Christ Child of the Nativity, who hides especially in those for whom there is "no room" in society, no inhabitable space for dignity, creativity and happiness: the children of Harlem, for example, with their "cries of life and joy coming out of purgatory." What *kind* of purification, Merton might ask today, are we requiring of the nation's black and Latino children? Whose sins are being paid for as we build more and bigger prisons, fill them with young black and Latino men, and staff them with working-class whites who desperately need the jobs?

In one of my favorite passages in all his journals, Merton reflects on some children's drawings that were sent to the monastery from "somewhere in Milwaukee." After noting that the pictures are the "only real works of art I have seen in ten years," he continues, quite poignantly: "But it occurred to me that these wise children were drawing pictures of their own lives. They knew what was in their own depths. They were putting it all down on paper before they had a chance to grow up and forget."¹⁸ What is Merton getting at here? What is it that lives and shines forth especially in children that we "grow up and forget," that we – academics, pundits, common-sense adults – fail to behold in ourselves, firstly, but especially in the strange and marginal other?

Perhaps it is that same translucence and secret innocence that Stevie Wonder beheld in his newborn daughter and celebrates in the song "Isn't She Lovely?": "*I can't believe what God has done / through us he's given life to one / but isn't she lovely made from love?*" Her name, Aisha, the song tells us, means simply "Life," life made from love. What we grow up to forget is that diamond-like image of God that hides in all people, without exception, the inner potentiality and latent freedom in which God invites each of us *to be* and to participate fully in the discovery, creation and celebration of our lives. As Merton confessed of the passersby at Fourth and Walnut, "If only they could all see themselves as they really *are*. If only we could see each other that way all the time" (CGB 142).¹⁹

(subsequent references will be cited as "Pramuk, *Sophia*" parenthetically in the text).

18. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1953) 341.

19. The theme of innocence and the image of the child figure significantly in Merton's theological anthropology (see Pramuk, *Sophia* 200–202). Closely related and also prominent in the Fourth and Walnut passage is the phrase *le point vierge*, roughly the "virgin point" or secret heart of creation where God invites all things into being. With such terms Merton does not mean to suggest a regression to the freshness of childhood, in a naïve or narcissistic sense, still less a denial of sin. They speak rather to the divine image or spark in us, deeper and more primordial than sin, at once both gift (already given) and invitation (not fully realized). It is "a new birth, the divine birth in us" that grounds our freedom and creativity in history as co-creators before God.

Notice the integral link Merton uncovers between discovery of our true self and discovery of the other. Yet how often we live under the shadow of eclipse, where neither “you” nor “I” appear as our authentic self, as a person who matters infinitely in the eye of God. *To eclipse is to blot out the light.*

How then to live more fully in the light? How to identify myself more empathetically and compassionately with the occupants of the alienated street, and so discover myself in discovering them? Merton reminds us (citing theologian Karl Rahner) that it is not enough for the Christian to spiritualize the struggle, to “build a little chapel for himself inside the Church to make things more tolerable” (LL 147). One cannot listen to Stevie Wonder records in the suburbs, pray for peace “down there” in the city, and consider oneself sanctified. Nor is it enough to pontificate from the ivory tower, taking refuge in the “[i]llusory dignity of the well-fed spokesman who justifies himself by diagnosis, planning and exhortation” (LL 262). Much less can we be content with the arm-chair punditry of so many social commentators today, who “reduce everything to zero” (LL 259) and show little desire to engage those perceived from afar as strange, and dangerously different. In a word, the Gospel calls us to risk the kinds of *attachments* to people that will cost us something. Christ calls us to be transformed from beyond ourselves by love, by an embodied and active solidarity.²⁰

Defending God’s Image in the Other

A few years ago I heard black Catholic theologian Sr. Jamie Phelps frame the question quite simply and beautifully this way: “What work are we doing to help re-establish a sense of the image of God in people of color?”²¹ Throughout the 1960s Merton confronted his readers, and confronted them theologically, with the same question: “How, then, do we treat this other Christ, this person, who happens to be black?” (SD

20. Innumerable gospel passages leap to mind: Jesus’ encounter with the rich young man, the parable of the Good Samaritan, the judgment scene of Matthew 25 and so on. The word “love” as I use it here is analogous to the terms “solidarity” and the “preferential option for the poor,” persistent themes of Catholic social teaching. Solidarity is not simply an ethical command so much as a *response* to the gift and wonder of life itself and God’s love. We love because we have come to know God’s love and mercy for us intimately through Jesus (1 John 4:19).

21. See *Uncommon Faithfulness: The Black Catholic Experience*, ed. M. Shawn Copeland, with LaReine-Marie Mosely and Albert J. Raboteau (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2009), for Phelps’ seminal essay on Catholic identity and mission with respect to social and racial transformation.

17).²² In the process he angered and alienated a great many of his white Catholic readers. Yet he chose to speak, knowing full well he was treading into dangerous waters. Today Merton still challenges us, especially those of us who are white, to look carefully into the mirror of our own neighborhoods, churches, businesses and schools, and to recognize the signs of our self-segregation from peoples of color, our sad confinement in the prison built by racism. That prison is in no way a black or brown problem confined to the ghetto, as Merton recognized; it is a human problem, woven into the whole fabric of society.

What will it take for us to venture outside well-worn comfort zones and to linger for a while in places and with people that we habitually, from good "common sense," take pains to avoid? What work will I do to help re-establish the sense of the image of God in people of color? What work can we all do to cultivate racial and economic justice in our cities?²³

Would you like to come with me to Village Ghetto Land?

Living is not submission to "the way things are." Living is creativity and celebration. It is when we let joy make itself out of our love. May God free us from every hesitation, and may God's own creativity and joy make itself out of our love.

22. Note the phrasing of the question: what matters first is the *person*, this "other Christ," who "happens to be black." We might also say that what matters ultimately for whites is not one's socially constructed whiteness but the discovery of one's true, Christ-like self, who also happens to be white. And yet for whites the need for heightened racial consciousness is especially acute since, as Merton long ago observed, whites are most inclined to be unconscious of the hidden privileges of their "normative" whiteness. Thus what Merton wrote in 1964 seems to me no less true today: "Most of us are congenitally unable to think black, and yet that is precisely what we must do before we can even hope to understand the crisis in which we find ourselves" (*SD* 60).

23. The opening to the rich histories and cultural horizons of peoples of color can take place for whites, of course, in many ways, and is certainly not limited to urban or U.S. contexts. My own religious imagination has been deeply shaped by participation in African American and Mexican American Catholic parishes, global immersion in places like Honduras and Haiti, as well as study of black literature, art and theology. I have tried to sum up what I have learned from these experiences, and give a little back, in Christopher Pramuk, *Hope Sings, So Beautiful: Graced Encounters Across the Color Line* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2013).