

“They Were Mine and I Theirs”: The Shared Vision of Humanity of Thomas Merton and Richard Wright

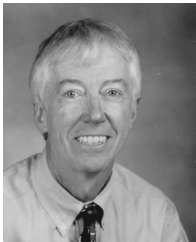
By **Thomas T. Spencer**

Thomas Merton’s writings on race and race relations in the 1960s are well known to Merton scholars and historians of the Civil Rights era. His “Letters to a White Liberal”¹ is perhaps his best remembered essay but he authored numerous other articles as well. “Religion and Race in the United States,”² “The Hot Summer of Sixty-Seven” (*FV* 165-81) and “The Meaning of Malcolm X” (*FV* 182-88) were just a few of his essays that discussed race and civil rights in America during the 1960s. His reflections remain as important today as they did when written over a half-century ago.³

Merton drew from many sources for his writings on race. Novelists such as James Baldwin captured his interest to the point that he wrote Baldwin a lengthy letter (see *SD* 302-306) and was approached about a potential dialogue with the author in *Ramparts* Magazine.⁴ He was familiar with the writings of Martin Luther King, Jr. as well as those of Black Muslims and members of the Black Power movement. Another important writer Merton referenced was Richard Wright. Though Wright died in 1960, prior to Merton’s publications on racial issues, he was familiar with Wright’s work. In his review of William Melvin Kelley’s *A Different Drummer* Merton paid tribute to Wright’s influence, stating: “We remember of course Richard Wright, whose warm voice in now silent, but who speaks still in his followers” (*SD* 74).

Richard Wright was arguably the foremost African American writer and novelist of the 1930s and 1940s. Like Merton he was a prolific author. Beginning with his short story collection *Uncle Tom’s Children*⁵ and continuing through his acclaimed novel *Native Son*⁶ and autobiographical account *Black Boy*,⁷ he articulated the issues of Black poverty and racial injustice in an era when it was not always popular to do so. He subsequently published numerous stories and non-fictional essays, including, in 1954, *Black Power: A Record of Reactions in the Land of Pathos*.⁸ This book first introduced the phrase “Black Power” that would become a rallying cry for more militant Black activism in the 1960s.⁹

Wright’s feelings about race relations and the problems confronting African Americans led him to embrace Communism as the “most effective path to solidarity between workers of all races” (Rowley 80). Disillusioned with American racism, he relocated to Paris, becoming an “expatriate” in May 1946. Several months after his arrival in Paris he was interviewed by a writer from the magazine *Action*. When asked by the reporter his opinion about the “Negro problem” in America he coined a response that continues to be widely quoted



Thomas T. Spencer

Thomas T. Spencer is a retired teacher in the South Bend Community School Corporation, and Adjunct Professor of History at Indiana University, South Bend and Holy Cross College, Notre Dame, IN. He has contributed ten previous articles to *The Merton Seasonal* on various aspects of Thomas Merton’s life and work, most recently “Portrait of the Writer as a Young Man: Thomas Merton’s Early Publications, 1931-1941” (Summer 2021).

today. He replied, “There isn’t any Negro problem, there is only a white problem.”¹⁰ Merton was quite familiar with Wright’s famous statement. Reflecting on anti-Semitism in his journal in March 1962, Merton compared Jean-Paul Sartre’s claim “that anti-Semitism is not a Jewish problem, it is *our* problem” with that of Wright on the Negro problem.¹¹ Later, in his seminal and provocative essay “Letters to a White Liberal,” Merton drew upon Wright’s remark again, stressing the necessity of awakening the conscience of the white man “so that he will be able to see that the Negro problem is really a *White* problem” (SD 46).

Wright and Merton shared a love for the vocation of writing and commitment to articulate the cause for greater racial equality and justice through their novels and essays. They also shared a mystical, ideal vision on the unity of all persons. For Merton this vision was articulated in the well-known journal entry recounting an experience in downtown Louisville at the corner of Fourth and Walnut. For Wright it was manifest through a fictional character in a book written in 1942 but not published in its entirety until 2021. Their two revelations, sixteen years apart, are eerily similar and affirmed the two men’s embrace of the unity of all humanity.

Readers familiar with Merton know the story of his epiphany on March 18, 1958, in downtown Louisville. It begins with Merton stating that at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, he “suddenly realized that I loved all the people and that none of them were, or, could be totally alien to me.” He added, “I am still a member of the human race – and what more glorious destiny is there for man, since the Word was made flesh and became, too, a member of the Human Race!”¹² Merton further expanded upon that experience several years later in his book *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, noting: “I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness.”¹³

In 1941-1942 Wright authored a novel entitled *The Man Who Lived Underground*.¹⁴ Rejected by publishers at the time, a portion of the novel was published posthumously in a short story collection *Eight Men*.¹⁵ In 2021 the entire novel was published and proved timely for America’s debate on race and policing. The story focuses on a young Black man, Fred Daniels, who is deliberately framed by the police for a murder he did not commit. The police brutalize Daniels to force him to confess, but he eventually escapes into the city sewer system where he begins an underground odyssey. As he navigates underground, he tunnels his way into businesses and residences, secretly observing people who inhabit the establishments.

While on this journey Daniels has an epiphany. As he clandestinely observes a church service he is “overwhelmed” by a “strange and new knowledge,” and states “He was *all people*.” He describes it as in some “unutterable way he was all people and they were *he*. By the identity of their emotions they were one, and he was one with them.” The character further reflects that “this was the oneness that linked man to man, in life or death” (Wright, *Man* 106).

By his own admission Wright was not a religious person, noting that “religion as such never deeply interested me,” yet in the essay accompanying his novel, “Memories of My Grandmother,” he professes a fascination with his grandmother’s religious belief (Seventh Day Adventist) and the various ways religion was manifest in the personalities of others. He notes his grandmother possessed an “abstract love for all of humanity,” which was likely at least a partial inspiration for Fred Daniels’s “strange new knowledge” (Wright, *Man* 167-70).

Although their shared revelations on humanity appear as dramatic epiphanies, the idea of the unity of all human beings was central to the writings of both men from the beginning. In his autobiography *Black Boy*, Wright noted that “the problem of human unity was more important than bread, more important than physical living itself.” He believed “that without a common bond uniting men . . . there could be no living worthy of being called human” (Wright, *Black* 318). He further elaborated, stating: “If this country can’t find its way to a human path, if it can’t inform conduct with a deep sense of life, then all of us, black as well as white, are going down the same drain” (Wright, *Black* 383).

In Wright’s powerful and highly debated novel *Native Son*, the theme of unity lies beneath the surface but is still central to the significance of the message. *Native Son* is a deep psychological novel centering around an alienated and violent Black man, Bigger Thomas, who murders two women. The central theme of the novel is the white racism and oppression that motivates Thomas’s anger, but at the end of the novel Thomas, like Fred Daniels, has a revelation. Bigger notes that “for the first time in his life a white man became a human being to him.” He is remorseful over trying to frame Jan Erlone, a Communist party associate, for the murder he committed and he suddenly becomes aware of the “reality of Jan’s humanity” (Wright, *Native* 240). In another reflection he realizes that what he truly wanted was “to merge himself with others and be part of the world.” He wanted a chance to live like others, even though he was black” (Wright, *Native* 289).

The character of Jan Erlone is central in conveying Wright’s views on racial unity. While testifying at Bigger’s trial Jan is asked by a hostile prosecutor if he believed in “social equality for Negroes,” and he answered “yes.” When asked if the Communist material he circulated called for the “unity of whites and blacks,” he said it did. When asked if he “liked Negroes” Erlone replied, “I make no distinctions” (Wright, *Native* 319-20).

Wright affirmed this central tenet of his beliefs on unity again years later. Interviewed in 1955 he was asked why he wrote. He replied, “If my writing has any aim, it is to try to reveal that which is human on both sides, to affirm the essential unity of man on earth.”¹⁶ Fred Daniels’ revelation in *The Man Who Lived Underground* was not a sudden, transformative revelation as much as a further affirmation to Wright’s longstanding belief about the connectedness and importance of all human beings. Although Wright was cynical and disillusioned by the issues of race in America, he saw the solution to the race problem in unity of people, not their separation or alienation.

The message of the unity of all human beings was a consistent one in Merton’s writings, especially those regarding race and non-violence. In his well-known essay “Blessed Are the Meek,” he states: “Christian non-violence is not built on a presupposed division, but on the basic unity of man” (*FV* 15). He added, “the basis of non-violence is the Gospel message of salvation for *all men* and of the Kingdom of God to which *all* are summoned” (*FV* 16). The non-violent resister is not fighting for himself. In Merton’s estimation, “He is fighting for *everybody*” (*FV* 15). Elements of this message of the need for unity are present in much of what Merton wrote on race. In his essay “Religion and Race in the United States,” he notes the racial crisis offers Christians in America an opportunity to recapture Christian truth and not merely “institutional loyalties and doctrinal orthodoxies.” He stressed the need to get back to the “Christian sense which sees every other man as Christ and treats him as Christ” (*FV* 143). In his review essay “The Legend of Tucker Caliban,” Merton praised what he saw as the message of the Black writers of the period. They rejected the

need to “write the Whites off as a total loss (as indeed the Black Muslims are doing) and be done with them forever.” Their message, in Merton’s eyes, rejected the notion of such separation and promoted instead the belief “that there is one *kairos* [opportune moment] for everybody” (*SD* 83).

Richard Wright did not live to see the tumultuous battles over civil rights in the 1960s. How he would have viewed those events and the social, political and economic progress for African Americans in the decade is a matter of conjecture. At the end of his life he remained pessimistic about the prospects for racial unity. Asked two years before his death if he would ever return to America, he replied, “no, I want my children to grow up as human beings.”¹⁷

As far as can be known, Merton and Wright never met or corresponded, nor did Merton ever read Fred Daniels’ revelation on “all of humanity” that was so remarkably similar to his own Louisville epiphany. Had the two men been able to engage in a dialogue they likely would have found common ground and appreciation for each other’s vision for the unity of all human beings. Their shared ideal of “they are me and I am them” is what gave their writings on race authenticity and makes them so relevant for reading in today’s conversation about racial divisions. It is the principal reason their works were inspirational sixty years ago and remain so today. John Lewis, the late civil rights leader and long-time congressman, was asked in 1998 what he read and what he would recommend to read on race. His first recommendation was Wright’s *Native Son*. When asked what books he carried in his backpack on the well-known “Bloody Sunday” march across the Edmund Pettus bridge in Selma, Alabama in March, 1965, he noted one of two was a book by Merton – *The Seven Storey Mountain*.¹⁸

1. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1964) 3-71; subsequent references will be cited as “*SD*” parenthetically in the text.
2. Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence: Christian Teaching and Christian Practice* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968) 130-44; subsequent references will be cited as “*FV*” parenthetically in the text.
3. On the relevance of Merton’s writings on this topic today, see Peter Feuerherd, “Thomas Merton’s Writings on Race Resonate, Gain Renewed Attention in 2020,” *National Catholic Reporter* 57.7 (8-21 Jan. 2021) 5-6; available online at: <https://www.ncronline.org/news/people/thomas-mertons-writings-race-resonate-gain-renewed-attention-2020>.
4. For the discussion of a possible dialogue in *Ramparts*, see Merton’s May 1, 1963 letter to Paul Bourne, OCSO in Thomas Merton, *The School of Charity: Letters on Religious Renewal and Spiritual Direction*, ed. Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1990) 169.
5. Richard Wright, *Uncle Tom’s Children* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1938).
6. Richard Wright, *Native Son* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1940); subsequent references will be cited as “Wright, *Native*” parenthetically in the text.
7. Richard Wright, *Black Boy* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1945); subsequent references will be cited as “Wright, *Black*” parenthetically in the text.
8. Richard Wright, *Black Power: A Record of Reactions in the Land of Pathos* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1954).
9. Background on Wright’s life and his writings can be found in Hazel Rowley, *Richard Wright: The Life and Times* (New York: Henry Holt, 2001); subsequent references will be cited as “Rowley” parenthetically in the text.
10. For background on Wright’s interview see George Lipsitz, “The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: Racialized Social Democracy and the ‘White’ Problem in American Studies,” *American Quarterly* 47.3 (September 1995) 369.
11. Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years. Journals, vol. 4: 1960-1963*, ed. Victor A. Kramer (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 208.
12. 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; subsequent references will be cited as “*SS*” parenthetically in the text.
13. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 140-42; for a detailed discussion of this event, see William H. Shannon, “Fourth and Walnut Experience,” in William H. Shannon, Christine

- M. Bochen and Patrick F. O'Connell, *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002) 158-60.
14. Richard Wright, *The Man Who Lived Underground* (New York: Random House, 2021); subsequent references will be cited as "Wright, *Man*" parenthetically in the text.
 15. Richard Wright, *Eight Men* (Cleveland: World Publishing, 1961).
 16. Richard Wright: "I Curse the Day When for the First Time I Heard the Word Politics," *L'Express* (18 October 1955), in *Conversations with Richard Wright*, ed. Keneth Kinnamon & Michel Fabre (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993) 163.
 17. See Jon Meacham, ed., *Voices in Our Blood: America's Best on the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Random House, 2001) i.
 18. See Robert McNamara, "John Lewis: The Books in His Knapsack"; available at: <https://medium.com/@history1800s/john-lewis-the-books-in-his-knapsack-ceec7077080>.