

## ***Ishi Means Mam:*** **Book Reviews that Critique Society**

By **Monica Weis, SSJ**

“Genocide is a new word. Perhaps the word is new because technology has now got into the game of destroying whole races at once. The destruction of races is not new – just easier.”<sup>1</sup> So begins Thomas Merton’s book review of Theodora Kroeber’s study, *Ishi In Two Worlds: A Biography of the last wild Indian in North America*,<sup>2</sup> published in the March 1967 issue of *The Catholic Worker*. To the casual reader, such a review of the saga of the 1911 surrender and subsequent scholarly study of the last of the Yana Indians reveals Merton’s wide reading interests and in particular his current interest in anthropology.

But book reviews are never simple academic exercises for Merton; rather, they are always set against the context of what he is reading, writing, and thinking about at the time, and Merton uses them as a platform to explore thorny issues preoccupying his intellectual life and to challenge the reader with hard questions about public policy. This book review is no exception. Merton even places the book on our “must read” list because of its moving and disturbing message (*Ishi* 26). It is a book, he says, “to think deeply about and take notes on not only because of its extraordinary factual interest but because of its special quality as a kind of parable” (*Ishi* 31).

And parable it is. Merton wastes no time in spelling out its meaning: the Vietnam War resembles the Indian Wars of one hundred years ago. In both instances, co-existence is rejected. Both the Indian Wars and the Vietnam War are based on the same myths and misunderstandings, namely that the Other is not only inferior, but evil. The presence of both Indians and Viet Cong fosters our obsession with “completely wiping out” an enemy regarded as diabolical. Even the language of both wars manifests a strong residual Puritanism: the backwoods have to be “purified of Indians – as if they were vermin” and the Asian jungles are “infested” with communists (*Ishi* 31-32). Manifest destiny provides us with a moral, but misguided, imperative to tame the wilderness and cleanse it of its ethnically inferior inhabitants. “The language of cleansing,” Merton observes, “appeases and pacifies the conscience” (*Ishi* 31-32). Ironically, however, in our efforts to sanitize the area, we get caught up in “what the moralists call the ‘double effect’” – that is, women and children become collateral damage as our obsession with a goal consumes us. “In the end,” says Merton, “it is the civilians that are killed in the ordinary course of events, and combatants only get killed by accident” (*Ishi* 32). Thus the “new frontier” of the 1960s becomes not the challenge of exploring space, but the continuing effort to destroy those we consider to be inferior.

Strong words for a book review. Appropriate words, consider-



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ing the cultural context that spawned such a critique. The 60s was a decade of disintegrating institutions and cultural unrest. Colleges and universities were hotbeds of resistance not only to the war, but also to traditional discipline, values, and wisdom shrunken to secular platitudes or religious piosities. The Kennedys, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X had been or would soon be assassinated; the Civil Rights Movement was faltering; technology was becoming the new guide to war-making. With no unifying vision, American society was left to improvise.<sup>3</sup>

Intersecting with this larger American context is Merton's context. In early 1967, Merton is reading Loren Eiseley, William Faulkner, and Claude Levi-Strauss; he is writing letters to Ed Rice, Dorothy Day, James Forest, Joan Baez, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Daniel Berrigan, and Dom Jean Leclercq about his many concerns and interests: the dangers of technology, the immorality of the Vietnam War, the importance of civil rights, the value and integrity of monastic life, and preliminary inquiries about a trip to Asia. The Catholic Peace Fellowship is pressing Merton for an anti-war statement; he is approaching the twenty-fifth anniversary of his reception of the habit, emerging from his relationship with M., and anticipating surgery for bursitis in his elbow.

But Merton is also responding to a deeper and deeper call to solitude which underscores for him the urgency of his compassion for the whole world. By learning from Chuang Tzu how to fast with the heart and hear with one's whole spiritual being, Merton is discovering the unity and freedom that transcends western dualities and embraces diversity (Inchausti 118, 130). Now living in the hermitage full time, he is committed to applying his world view – what Robert Inchausti calls Merton's purity of heart – to public policy. Consequently, from his silence, he must speak out. This book review in *The Catholic Worker* in March 1967, written for the "reflective reader," provides not only food for thought for several meals, but also a strong model of how Merton adapts the format of the book review to an impassioned critique of culture.

During the next ten months, Merton writes a series of such book reviews and essays based on books (all but one originally published in *The Catholic Worker* and later collected in *Ishi Means Man*), which continue his reflections on these same themes of ethnocentrism and identity. The June 1967 issue of *The Catholic Worker* carries his review of *The Shoshoneans* by Edward Dorn,<sup>4</sup> in which Merton argues that Eurocentrism diminishes us. By demanding that indigenous people assimilate into the prevailing culture, a demand that is impossible because they look different from us – we commit the ultimate violence: requiring minorities (Indians and Blacks) to *invent* an identity.

In October, Merton writes a review of the autobiography of the Crow warrior Two-Leggings in which he resorts again to the rhetorically powerful language of lament.<sup>5</sup> Although the first part of the book review focuses on the practice of fasting for vision and Two Leggings' ambition to be a chief, we subsequently learn that Two Leggings is deprived of his full identity by being given a coin to buy things. No longer is bartering possible for him. Money and the materialism it represents have broken his world. With rhetorical savvy, Merton concludes his review by noting that Two-Leggings, the failed chief, now deprived of his connection to his spirit world, is able to sum up the next thirty years of his life in two and a half lines of text. Two Leggings writes: "Nothing happened after that. We just lived. There were no more war parties, no capturing of horses from the Piegans and Sioux, no buffalo to hunt. There is nothing more to tell" (*Ishi* 24).

During that same period, Merton writes two formal essays based on his reading that continue his critique of modern western culture. "The Sacred City," an appreciation of a new collection of studies on Mexican archeology and history,<sup>6</sup> focuses on the importance of finding one's place at the intersection of nature and culture and within a network of synchronic relationships – what Merton calls falling "in step with the dance of the universe and the liturgy of the stars" (*Ishi* 59). The second essay, "Cross Fighters: Notes on a Race War" (originally published in *Unicorn Journal*) explores the inter-racial conflicts of nineteenth-century Yucatán to reaffirm the value of resistance and non-violence, the sustaining power of community vision, and the necessity of interdependence.<sup>7</sup>

One might ask: why so many publications in *The Catholic Worker*? One quick answer might be that Merton expects to find in this audience the reflective readers he is writing for, an audience that can potentially appreciate his point and who are themselves a kind of remnant like the Yana Indians, on fire to survive the giant triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism (Martin Luther King, Jr). If nothing else, this series of book reviews and essays shows Merton as the Emersonian “man thinking,”<sup>8</sup> illustrating his own connection-making process and simultaneously prodding us to read and think more critically. Not surprisingly, his mother Ruth notes in Tom’s baby book that making associations is what little Tom does best.<sup>9</sup> Just as the nineteenth-century painter Thomas Moran wielded his brush to capture the awesome majesty of Yellowstone and persuade Congress to establish a national park, Merton, by drawing out the parables of these texts, is hoping to convert our hearts and move us to action.

Perhaps the more provocative question to ask is: what specific lessons can we learn from these book reviews? Let’s look at just one. I would argue that “Ishi: A Meditation” is more than a book review, more than a parable about the evil of the Vietnam War. This text is also a map, pointing to core virtues, or habits of being, that we need in order to discover our true identity and set the direction of our lives. Early in the review, Merton names three characteristics of the Yana – offered only as suggestions by the author Kroeber to explain how these last members of the tribe maintained a sense of stability, psychic strength, endurance, courage, and faith in the face of their long concealment and demise. These three characteristics are: a sense of place; religious wisdom; and innocence – an inner reassurance that one is in the right.

Although Theodora Kroeber does not develop the point that members of this stone-age culture survived for so long because they were on home ground, Merton urges the reader to reflect on the implications of this fact. The Yana are not influenced by national boundaries, but survive by interacting with the rhythm of the land, changing their hunting venue with the seasons. In contrast, most Americans are part of a highly mobile society, perhaps even a rootless one. Therefore, our experience of knowing home, developing a sense of place has to be cultivated. Merton, himself, exemplifies a disturbing rootlessness from his vagabond childhood in France, to Bermuda, England, New York City, Olean, and finally to Gethsemani which he calls the center of America. Add to this geographic wandering, his inner journey to the heart of solitude with its pull to the Carthusians, a foundation in Central America, and the hermitage, and we have a sense of Merton’s respect for the stability and courage of the Yana Indians. Only after enormous personal struggle is Merton able to write in his Journal that March:

My community is here, idiots or not, and who is to say I am any less of an idiot than the others? . . . Yesterday afternoon, walking about in my own field and in the hollow where the deer sleep, and where a big covey of quail started up in front of me, I saw again how perfect a situation this is, how real, how far beyond my need of comment or justification. All the noises of all the programs, or of all the critics, do nothing to alter this (March 22, 1967).<sup>10</sup>

Even nine months earlier at the height of his relationship with M., Merton’s deepening sense of place provides the stable anchor for his recommitment to monastic life. In “A Midsummer Diary for M” (June 1966), he writes:

Why do I live alone? I don’t know. . . . I cannot have enough of the hours of silence when nothing happens. When the clouds go by. When the trees say nothing. When the birds sing. I am completely addicted to the realization that just being there is enough, and to add something else is to mess it all up. . . . Darling, I am telling you: this life in the woods is IT. It is the only way. It is the way everybody has lost. . . . All I say is that it is the life that has chosen itself for me (LL 341-342).

The second reason for the Yana's stability is what Kroeber calls the Indian mystique and which Merton points out is more accurately termed religious wisdom. While the Kroeber book does not go into religious questions very deeply, Merton reports that the text portrays Ishi "as a man sustained by a deep and unassailable spiritual strength" (*Ishi* 30). Merton recognizes this grounding principle because he, too, has developed his own religious wisdom, a *telos* based on William Blake's aphorism that "Every thing that lives is holy" and articulated several years earlier in *Hagia Sophia*:

There is in all things an invisible fecundity, a dimmed light, a meek namelessness, a hidden wholeness. This mysterious Unity and Integrity is Wisdom, the Mother of all, *Natura naturans*. . . . This is at once my own being, my own nature, and the Gift of my Creator's Thought and Art within me, speaking as Hagia Sophia, speaking as my sister, Wisdom.<sup>11</sup>

Such a force is that ever dynamic spark of being that locates Merton within the web of all creation. He has experienced the spark in the frogs who accompany the silence at the hermitage, the birds with whom he is in ecological balance, the deer who gaze at him seemingly to his very soul, and most recently in his love for M. Such a viewpoint sees all creation not as conflicting binaries or hierarchical castes, some of which are inferior and therefore unacceptable, but as "a huge chorus of living beings," each having worth and each contributing to the fabric of the whole (Cunningham 117).

This kind of religious wisdom leads to the third virtue of the Yana: an incontrovertible sense of being in harmony with the right – a true innocence unfiltered by collective guilt. "Contrast this," writes Merton,

with the spectacle of our own country with its incomparable technological power, its unequalled material strength, and its psychic turmoil, its moral confusion and its profound heritage of guilt which neither the righteous declarations of Cardinals nor the moral indifference of "realists" can do anything to change! 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. It does not make the Viet Cong cause just; but by an accumulation of injustice done against innocent people we drive them into the arms of our enemies and make our own ideals look like the most pitiful sham (*Ishi* 30).

Such strong language is Merton's way of once again making a statement about the absurdity of war and rampant technology; by implication, Merton would have us go beyond scientific knowing to heart- or spirit-knowing so that we can tear away the culturally imposed false masks, discover our True Self, and thereby discover God. It is the True Self, the inner "I," met in solitude, Merton wrote earlier in *Disputed Questions*, which meets the "solitude of every other man and the solitude of God."<sup>12</sup> The True Self, the "deep 'I' of the spirit," as Robert Inchausti has eloquently argued, is not a "project to be completed" but a reality to be discovered, affirmed, and claimed (Inchausti 90). Discovering one's True Self, i.e. one's innocence, brings with it a renewed commitment to justice and non-violence. When we see ourselves as united, as already One, there can be no inferior race, no hierarchy of power, no conflict severe enough to justify war, no reason to kill brother or sister.

One might argue that these three virtues – a sense of place, religious wisdom, and a deep sense of being in harmony with the right – are culture-specific to the Yana and only wishful thinking for twentieth-century cosmopolitan men and women. But Merton ends his book review with a pithy self-indictment of white culture: "Ishi simply means man" (*Ishi* 32). Ishi, that famous last of the Californian Indians, never revealed his private Indian name to his captors and white friends. He chose to be known generically, thus retaining his power of identity and sense of dignity. Without

belaboring the point, Merton sketches this lone survivor, who made his living in the white world as a museum custodian, as a stone-age “Everyman” modeling virtues that, if emulated, could save our society from its precarious balancing act on the edge of a precipice.

The story of Ishi, man of two worlds, is a story that offers us two routes: one Merton hopes we will take, and one we are already on. The route Merton would have us consider is expressed in those three virtues: a sense of being at home and in harmony with nature, religious wisdom grounded in a *telos* that acknowledges our true place in the cosmos, and an inner sense of being in the right which can come only from meeting God and Self at the ground of our being.

We know only too well in our own decade how the Protestants and Catholics of Northern Ireland, the Israelis and Palestinians, the Bosnians and Serbs, and now ethnic Albanians, struggle for identity and, indeed, for survival. The ethnocentric myth once concentrated in the European attitude toward indigenous people of North and South America has metastasized like so many smaller cancers attacking the human community. Consequently, it is no surprise that North America is often referred to as the “culture of death,” especially when we realize that the US military spending, in real terms, is as much as it was at the height of the Cold War. It is no wonder we are a culture of death when, as Oscar Arias, the former President of Costa Rica, has recently said, the nations of the world in 1997 spent \$780 billion on weapons and soldiers. If just \$80 billion of that (little more than 10% of all military spending) had been annually diverted into anti-poverty programs, in ten years all the world’s population would enjoy basic services – education, health care, nutrition, potable water, sanitation – and provide Everyman – that is, each man and woman – with an income level above the poverty line for their country.<sup>13</sup>

Ironically Ishi and his people, by taking “the road less traveled” – as Merton would have us do – died out. Just as ironically, the road contemporary civilization (or should we say contemporary barbarism) is on is also a road to certain destruction. By means of this series of book reviews and essays, Merton is issuing a wake-up call or warning buzzer to resist falling asleep at the wheel, to resist the magnetism of contemporary culture, to consult again the points of place, wisdom, and innocence on our spiritual compasses, and proceed without delay toward our true north.

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1. Thomas Merton, *Ishi Means Man* (Greensboro: Unicorn, 1976) 25; subsequent references to this edition will be cited parenthetically as “Ishi” in the text.
  2. Theodora Kroeber, *Ishi In Two Worlds: A Biography of the last wild Indian in North America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1964).
  3. Robert Inchausti, *Thomas Merton’s American Prophecy* (Albany: SUNY, 1998) 127; subsequent references to this edition will be cited parenthetically as “Inchausti” in the text.
  4. Edward Dorn, *The Shoshoneans* (New York: William Morrow, 1964).
  5. Peter Nabokov, *Two Leggings: The Making of a Crow Warrior* (New York: Crowell, 1967).
  6. John Paddock, ed. *Ancient Oaxaca* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1966).
  7. See Nelson Reed, *The Caste War of Yucatán* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1967).
  8. Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The American Scholar,” in *Selected Essays, Lectures, and Poems*, ed. Robert D. Richardson, Jr. (New York: Bantam Classic, 1990) 83.
  9. Ruth Jenkins Merton, *Tom’s Book* (1916) unpublished ms. in Thomas Merton Studies Center Collection, Bellarmine College, Louisville: 7.
  10. Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom: The Journals of Thomas Merton, Volume Six 1966-1967*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997) 207; subsequent references to this edition will be cited parenthetically as “LL” in the text.
  11. Lawrence S. Cunningham, ed., *Thomas Merton: Spiritual Master* (New York: Paulist, 1992) 258; subsequent references to this edition will be cited parenthetically as “Cunningham” in the text..
  12. Thomas Merton, *Disputed Questions* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1960) 160.
  13. Oscar Arias, Commencement Address, Nazareth College, 9 May 1999: 4.