

## Re-searching my scar: Interrogating otherness in *The Searchers* and in my racial rearing.

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### **Abstract:**

This essay juxtaposes the process of “Othering” in the 1956 John Ford western *The Searchers* with my own indoctrination into White privilege as a child growing up in suburban Atlanta during the mid-to-late 1960s. The film’s stark portrayal of anti-Native American attitudes confronts the problematic construction of the non-White racial “Other” in westerns as a threat to racial and sexual purity. Its relentless pursuit of the implications of racism triggers my own confrontation with the subtle but persistent degradations of African Americans in my upbringing.

**Keywords:** the searchers | John Ford | white privilege | racial purity | cultural studies

### **Article:**

Some of my most nagging childhood memories stream in *Black and White*, just like the two-toned world of suburban Atlanta in the 1960s that served as their setting. I was raised to be a racist. Not the sheet-wearing, cross-burning kind; rather, the more genteel, White-is-right, social status defined by skin color kind. My indoctrination into White privilege consisted less of doctrinaire pronouncements than of fragmented opportunities to get me to internalize the racial hierarchies that infused my world.

These color-full Black-and-White pedagogical moments remained amorphous anecdotes dimly reilluminated in class discussions about tolerance, multiculturalism, identity. Only on encountering *The Searchers* (Cooper & Ford, 1956) when teaching a film course did these inchoate incidents crystallize into a more systematic chronicle of raising a racist. *The Searchers* problematizes the racism that informs both the traditional western hero and the expansion of the western frontier (Pippin, 2010). Although the film conveys its messages through the Red/White dichotomy of “savage Indian” vs. “White settler,” its pursuit of the consequences of racial hatred provides an apt metaphor for any racially dichotomous setting. Its visual homages to the

brehtaking landscape of Monument Valley celebrate America's territorial and economic post-Civil War blossoming while baring its genocide-laced underbelly. My relatively comfortable position amid southern grandeur obscured the pontoon of prejudice that kept racial hierarchies afloat. Director John Ford's westerns revolve around conquest motifs that dominate westerns as a genre; the "conquest of inner nature" (Pippin, 2009, p. 228) resonates most with my own attempt to patch the scars inflicted by a two-toned upbringing. The inner struggle occupies this essay: suppressing, transcending, or coping with passions—in this case, hatred—while realizing the role they play in sustaining a political and social order that often goes unquestioned.

*The Searchers* offers a reflexive take on westerns, stripping the romanticism from the American frontier and prompting a search for vestiges of racism lurking within ourselves. Thorough interpretation requires inclusion of self so that the analysis captures not only an object but also its resonance with the interpreter (Goodall, 2000). The richest appreciation of westerns not only can, but should, include their evocation of personal stories that blur boundaries between screen and self. Jane Tompkins (1992) suggests that the personal reactions evoked by westerns can contribute to their cultural significance. The frontier so central to westerns becomes as much an internal as an external landscape. Following the visual splendor of Monument Valley depicted in *The Searchers* also plunges me into the valley of my own shadow-soaked past that still gouges scars into my memory. In this spirit, I resurrect my earliest memories of racialized identities to refertilize them as fodder for countermemories, confronting my own indoctrination into the can[y]on of Southern White Wannabe-Aristocracy.

Re-searching *The Searchers* produced two unexpected linkages. One was external: the ambiguous relationship between hero and villain that blurs these identities in ways that muddle the clarity of mythic archetypes. The confounding oppositions and connections between Ethan Edwards (played by John Wayne) and the Comanche war chief Scar (played by German-born Henry Brandon, an ironic casting move) display a dialectic between Self and Other, us and them, role model and monster. The standard White/Indian dichotomies of classic westerns acquire subtlety and universality in this film where morality and monstrosity, civility and savagery, partake of each other in dialectical connection rather than diametrical opposition.

The standard White/Black dichotomies of the American South during the late 1960s still attempted to preserve racial boundaries, sometimes more through subtlety than brutality. In my third-grade class, a boy everyone identified as a "slow" reader kept committing the same verbal "error" when reading aloud a passage from our social studies textbook. He continued pronouncing the nation and river of Niger as "nigger." Every instance generated muffled laughter from classmates and a curt correction from the teacher: "Ni-JER!" She never explained what was wrong other than the pronunciation.

The internal linkage to *The Searchers* was to my own childhood indoctrination into racism. I was a passenger on Atlanta's White flight, whereby White families fled into the suburbs and retreated from increasingly integrated neighborhoods and schools. My first day of third grade began in an

utterly alien public school devoid of familiar friends, procedures, grounds. The teacher instructed with imbecilic simplicity. Bored, confused, miserable, I asked my mother why I was there. In her mind, the savages had raided the settlement. My lily-white private suburban school had admitted its first Black student. Like the imminent threat of Comanches who at any moment might pillage the White homestead, the mere proximity of the radical Other unsettled my mother enough to resettle me at a safe distance. Mother, pausing after reminding me she “had nothing against blacks”: “It was the *way* the school let *them* in.” She punctuated “way” with louder volume, then uttered “them” in a coarse, slightly sneered whisper. Was mere admission too genteel? What *way* would buttress the barriers between *us* and *them*? Barricade the doors? Use fire hoses like the ones I remembered seeing on TV while trying to make my vegetables look half-eaten? Distancing from difference: who was hiding from what? Our neighborhood pool closed for disinfection after the first Black kids swam there. Shortly thereafter, construction began on my family’s private pool. I always hated swimming and faked a fatal chlorine allergy to elude swim days in P.E. class.

### **Looks of Scars**

Tompkins looks away in shame when she encounters Look, the sole female Native American character in *The Searchers*. Her demeaning mistreatment, including kicks punctuated with laughter by Ethan and her accidental husband Martin, renders her “as a joke, not as a person” (Tompkins, 1992, p. 8). Look’s very name depersonalizes her as less than an object: not the sexually saturated visual grip of the male gaze, but the awful gawk of repulsion. Both Native American characters—Look and Scar—bear names that call attention to their visual markings not only as a cultural Other, but as inferior within the aesthetic and cultural hierarchy that privileges fair maidens as *pure as the driven snow*. Look is no looker. Her awkward, dark-skinned rotundity contrasts sharply with Martin’s romantic interest, Laurie Jorgensen. But this Swede is no sweetie.

Since Look bears multiple tags of undesirability, she can only be the accidental bride for Martin Pauley, and he repudiates her after unwittingly buying her in a trade deal. This rejection of the false bride fully qualifies Martin as White (despite Ethan’s doubts), which also enables him to become the official fiancé of his longtime unacknowledged girlfriend. She is infuriated by Martin’s clumsy epistle about “how I got myself a wife,” but Look’s death in a cavalry massacre enables beautiful, quintessentially Nordic Laurie Jorgensen to reclaim her man and recertify his contested Whiteness. Laurie articulates the racial contrast early in the film. Martin is about to embark on his quest to “fetch [Debbie] home” after Scar and his Comanche raiders kidnap her. Laurie retorts, “Fetch what home? The leavings a Comanche buck sold time and again to the highest bidder, with savage brats of her own?” Laurie might qualify as the fair, virginal maiden, but she unhesitatingly consigns the racially and sexually tainted Debbie to oblivion (Studlar, 2004).

Color matching in matchmaking was important in my world as well, or so I gathered. Whenever she saw an interracial couple, my mother noted the transgression. “Tsk, tsk, tsk. Lord have mercy.” I still half-hear those clucks of disapproval when I interact with so-called “mixed” couples. Those reverberations infect me with a vague dis-ease that I might have inherited such an imperative to judge. It requires constant vigilance to ward off metastasis, to shed these vestiges of constantly reinforced boundaries. As I shake my head to clear my conscience, I recall my mother silently shaking her head, sighing in resigned disgust as encounters with “mixed” couples became more frequent. More commanding than verbal pedagogy, a cluck of the tongue, a shake of the head, a forced exhalation enforced the color code.

Naming can guard familial borders. Looking closer at *Look* recalls how names and titles puzzled me as a child. A [“colored”] maid was obligatory in our household, as her presence offered prima facie evidence of ascension to the upper class. “We treated her just like a member of the family,” my mother intoned forty years later, avowing color blindness. I never heard or knew that Elsie had a last name until I spotted it on her paycheck. I never appended “Mister” or “Miz” before any family member’s first name, as Elsie did when addressing my parents. My earliest childhood memories of meals were set amid my family, while Elsie sat alone at an invisible table at the fringe of the house. That scene replays whenever I see Ethan’s disdainful look at young mixed-Indian Martin when he joins the family at the dinner table. Later, when Martin tries to explain his rationale for joining the search for the missing Debbie, he starts to say, “Well, because she’s my . . .” Before the word “sister” can cross his lips, Ethan verbally severs their relationship, shouting, “She’s your nothin’!” As a hostage of the Indians, she forfeited her membership in the White family only tenuously occupied by mixed-race Martin.

The prolonged pursuit of Debbie traverses an inner frontier as each major character seeks or sheds some aspect of “pure” identity. Martin Pauley begins as illegitimate on several counts. Ethan barely tolerates his presence as a companion on the quest. Aside from his Cherokee-tainted bloodline that makes his allegiances suspect, Martin bumbles his way through life on the trail. He accidentally barter for an Indian wife, and he continually has to be corrected or silenced by Ethan during key interactions that might yield clues to Debbie’s whereabouts. At the key moment when Ethan aims his gun at Debbie, however, Martin intervenes as the civilizing force. He bodily blocks Debbie from Ethan’s aim and pleads for her life. Martin’s masculinity also seems tenuous, as he remains oblivious of Laurie’s blatant affection. Later, however, he reclaims both his heterosexual identity and his undeclared fiancé by brawling with his romantic rival—much to Laurie’s delight. Indeed, it is merciful Martin and not vengeance-riddled Ethan who finally kills Scar. This murder, which occurs off screen, fulfills the demand for retributive justice and ends Martin’s quest. He has slain his White “sister’s” captor, proving his allegiance to his White bloodline so he can join Laurie as part of an authentically White family.

Ethan’s quest moves in a different direction. Although he also seeks vengeance, Ethan’s enactment of justice mismatches punishments with misdeeds. Defilement of the Edwards household—specifically its women—unleashes Ethan’s indiscriminate fury against Comanches,

and arguably against Redness (Eckstein, 1998). He tries to exterminate the buffalo, the lifeblood of the tribes. He shoots Indian corpses. In a shocking act of barbarity, Ethan enters Scar's tent after Martin has executed him and returns with Scar's scalp, one of the few times in film history a White character scalps an Indian (Pippin, 2009). Although he does eventually bring Debbie home, he could not preserve her racial or sexual purity. Both Debbie and Ethan are damaged goods. Ethan must confront the impending "mixed" marriage between Martin and Laurie plus the reintegration of Debbie into a White family (the Jorgensens). Viewers get no indication that Ethan has—or that he could—adapt to these changes that render his racism outmoded and irrelevant. Far from a savior of his race or a protector of his family, Ethan instead facilitates the formation of a deeply integrated multiracial, nontraditional family. The barricades that preserved purity are crumbling, but Ethan cannot position himself within the walls of the new home of the reconstructed family. He remains positioned outside the doorway at the film's end.

What position did Elsie occupy in our family? She made it through the door, but didn't traverse certain thresholds. My invalid great grandmother instructed me when she needed help going to the bathroom: "Go get the Negro." I never understood any members of my family primarily in terms of their paid functions. It was as if everyone had their names indelibly inscribed on place cards at the dinner table. Except Elsie. She bore no name to designate a complete person. She was the hired hand. She occupied a position but no full-fledged place, summoned to visibility so she could perform tasks suited to "her kind." Her anonymity as "the Negro" made every summoning an implicit command, a task awaiting completion. Somehow the White family was defined more by who we were than by what we did and for whom we did it.

Naming can inflict and inflame injury. In *The Searchers*, the Comanche Chief Scar is aptly named—not simply for his visible blemish but for the festering injury of racism that, as in his pursuer Ethan Edwards, never quite disappears. Scar personifies the invasion of Otherness, its penetration—both spatial and sexual—into consciousness, into family—that mirrors our own savagery. Scar's very name embodies disfigurement, and his murderous rupture of Ethan's family opens wide the gash of flimsily concealed racial hatred. Scar has scarred Ethan's family by murdering the woman he loves (his brother's wife, Martha), desecrating the body of one niece, and kidnapping and marrying the other niece—thereby committing the capital crime of blood defilement.

The cycle of violence persists via continual retaliative dehumanization. Ethan shoots the eyes out of a Comanche corpse so it "has to wander forever between the winds" and never reach the spirit land. The violent cycle of racism never ceases, as both Ethan and his alter ego Scar perpetuate it beyond logical bounds. Slotkin (1992) notes that the Comanche raid on Aaron and Martha Edwards' homestead early in the film resembles a horror movie, especially with the scream of young Lucy as the screen darkens and the figure of Chief Scar who looms over Debbie as she tries to hide in the family cemetery. "The horror" combines the unmentionable twin fears of racial and sexual contamination inflicted by Indians (Slotkin, 1992). The horrors of rape and miscegenation are so taboo they are literally unspeakable. Scar and his raiders kill Lucy,

Debbie's sister, and desecrate her body, implicitly by rape and battery. Her defilement is so vile that even blunt Ethan refuses to describe it to her fiancé Brad when he asks.

Ethan: I found Lucy back in the canyon. Wrapped her in my coat, buried her with my own hands. I thought it best to keep it from ya.

Brad: Did they . . .? Was she . . .?

Ethan: [exploding in anger] What do you want me to do? Draw you a picture? Spell it out? Don't ever ask me! Long as you live, don't ever ask me more.

More broadly, perhaps the entire film should be read as a horror of the perpetual cycle of fear and violence that can arise from strictly enforced, mutually exclusive identities of Self and Other.

My childhood horrors were minor but cumulative. Fear in my world was instilled preemptively as an attitude of automatic defensiveness against presumed savagery. When the family rode through "colored" neighborhoods, my mother—always in the driver's seat—would call out to me in the back seat whenever a Black man walked within a few car lengths. Her command disguised itself as a question: "Is your door locked?" The mere appearance of an African American male triggered an immediate lockdown. Dark skin presented an existential security threat, unless it was domesticated. Then it bore a first name with no surname, a fragment detached from family, dehistoricized. Our maid was "safe." She was, after all, "ours."

Ethan greets his adopted, part-Cherokee nephew Martin Pauley at the dinner table, a place reserved in my homestead only for bona fide family members (indicating the particularity of Whiteness). After an absence of several years, Ethan's first words immediately check his racial credentials: "A fella could mistake you for a half-breed." Martin's legitimacy in the family and in the "civilized" race depends on which half defines his identity in White society. Breeding still matters. One of the central players in the American eugenics movement for racial purity/purging was the American Breeders Association (founded 1903), whose name changed in 1914 to the American Genetic Association when it smoothly transitioned from thoroughbred cattle to purebred Nordic humans (Black, 2003).

### **Healing Scars?**

Matheson (2011) observes, "Every character in *The Searchers* is psychologically scarred by his or her involvement in some sort of war" (p. 52); however, a central battleground involves the struggle of coming to grips with contested racial identity. Internally, Debbie and her adopted brother Martin struggle with legitimizing their Whiteness. Debbie eventually reclaims her White identity when her would-be executioner Ethan delivers her home instead of, as Laurie Jorgensen says, "put[ting] a bullet in her brain." She then gains permanent certification as White when at the film's conclusion she is incorporated into the Swedish immigrant Jorgensen family.

Brian Henderson (2004) suggests that *The Searchers* depicts the challenges of “the adoption and integration of Indians in white society” (p. 64). This racial ambiguity strikes me as much broader and deeper. In *The Searchers*, all “Whites” who “go native” by choice, origin, or abduction carry the indelible taint of Otherness. The cavalry retrieves two young women kidnapped by the Comanches, but they return as shells of themselves, obviously insane. From a White perspective, proximity to Indians rendered them undesirable as women and as racial cohorts. They lost both their sexual and racial purity at the hands of savages. Stripped of feminine innocence, the women’s animalistic babbling brands them as utterly alien to White civilization. Doubly despoiled, they cannot reclaim their whiteness any more than they can recover their virginity. Ethan pronounces their death sentence—eviction from Whiteness and thus from humanity: “They ain’t white—not any more. They’re Comanch’.”

Fanatically vengeful, racist, unrepentant rebel Ethan Edwards is depicted as anachronistic, even in the 1868 setting. He refuses to swear an oath by stating defiantly, “Figure a man’s only good for one oath at a time; I took mine to the Confederate States of America.” Ethan is not reintegrated into the blended family that accepts part-Cherokee Martin and former Comanche captive Debbie. When finally found, she tells Ethan that the Comanches “are my people” and Ethan aims his rifle at her while proclaiming, “She’s been living with a buck!” That accusation in effect extinguishes her Whiteness. Still, both Debbie and Martin are welcomed into the Jorgensen household that literally shuts its door on Ethan as the closing shot. Although Ethan’s final words on rescuing his niece are “Let’s go home, Debbie,” only she crosses the threshold. Have we closed the door on America’s racist past and thereby achieved closure?

The door to my presumed past was opened for me. My forced reentry into the Confederacy occurred when I was around eleven years old. My mother decided it was time to inculcate me with my proud Southern heritage that I never knew I had. Anthologies of Southern anthems replaced my Beatles albums on the turntable. “Dixie,” “The Old Folks at Home (Swanee River),” and a cavalcade of Confederate classics assaulted my ears. This soundtrack for a Southerner was supposed to brand me as a budding Southern Aristocrat. The lyrics instead seared my reconstructed identity into a festering memory. “Son, you need to know where you come from.” I just wanted to know what I would hear if I played “Revolution 9” backwards.

Probing this inner scar of racial indoctrination risks inflaming old wounds, reminding me that the frontier of the self requires traversing rough terrain. Instructively, the title of *The Searchers* designates the process of probing. Ethan’s search for his kidnapped niece Debbie cannot restore her loss, as her sexual and racial defilement are irreversible. Because she is beyond restoration, the original search and recovery objective devolves into a search and destroy mission (Slotkin, 1992). Debbie’s return to her (White) home defies the simplistic closure and restoration of cosmic justice so essential to the mythos of American westerns. Even after the Comanche chief Scar has been killed, Ethan resorts to the same tactic that earmarks the Indians as savages: he scalps Scar’s dead body. Ethan has twice defiled Comanche corpses, attacking his enemies beyond their death. In the famous final scene when Ethan stands in the doorway after returning

Debbie, the door seems to shut magically on him. The black screen captures the blankness of resolution. There is no indication that Ethan has transcended his visceral hatred, and the closed door implies no rapprochement with his family (Eckstein, 1998). At most, Ethan might have searched his soul, but what has he found?

What have I found? Forty-plus years after my indoctrination into racism, I confronted my mother. She wondered where I ever got the idea she might be rearing a racist. I wonder whether the scars can be erased or only concealed. These wounds are my dark scars of Confederacy, the throbbing of complicit racism by remaining silent so long. *The Searchers* leaves me searching, hoping I can shove my foot forward quickly enough to keep the door from slamming in my face.

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