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# Settler Colonial Disease and Dis-Ease in *August: Osage County*

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**Abstract:** Tracy Letts’s screenplay, *August: Osage County* (2013), and John Wells’s film adaptation (2013) offer a compelling critique of American racism towards Native Americans which demands that viewers consider their own inculcation into ongoing settler-nation colonialism. The film layers the history of place (Oklahoma) with the Cheyenne character Johnna, whose Indigenous heritage is negotiated throughout by liberal academics, conservative rural matriarchs, and Johnna herself. The role is small but essential to the film’s allegorical analysis of settler-colonialism and racism. The Weston family’s secrets, addictions, and dysfunction starkly contrast with Johnna’s health and stability. Through Johnna, the film questions the toll colonialism takes on the mental and physical health of the American people. This paper analyzes the metanarrative association of the Weston family’s dysfunction and racism with ongoing colonialism that results in disease of the settler-colonial space as it emerges in the screenplay and film.

## 1 Introduction

Barbara: ‘Who’s Johnna?’

Violet: ‘She’s the Indian who lives in my attic.’

(*August: Osage County*)

This seemingly innocuous exchange between Barbara Fordham and her mother Violet Weston is key to a subtext about American racism and ambivalence toward Native Americans and colonialism that permeates all versions and adaptations of Tracey Letts’s *August: Osage County*. The two key terms, “Indian” and “attic,” are far from benign. Attics store, hide, and preserve over decades old and sometimes forgotten remnants from our past; broken, well-used, or out-of-date items; things that hold nostalgic value to our history; and secrets. Indians, as part of a United States’ national metanarrative, are the historical Others in the United State’s belief in the right of conquest, manifest destiny, and American exceptionalism.

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As such, the term and the myriad of Indigenous nations homogenized by the term, stands as a trope that carries the weight of ongoing dispossession and violence, racism and stereotyping.<sup>1</sup> Physically and metaphorically positioning an Indian in the white matriarch Violet's attic situates the national present as continually linked to its colonialist past, as tied to the nation's promises to its white settlers, as inseparable from the history of removal and dispossession of Indigenous peoples from their lands, and as a constant reminder of the nation's violent past. The Indian—the term and the concept—also signals the myths, stories, and lies we tell ourselves to maintain that history. And while the process of adaptation from play, to screenplay, to film entails reworking lines, rearranging scenes, and editing out or adding in material, these two lines appear in every adaptation of the work. They signal an inscribing of colonialism into our national coding that emerges as psychological and physical disease and dis-ease made manifest through the white characters' interactions with Native Americans.

This essay explores the ways in which key references to Indians, Native culture, and ongoing colonialism surface in the film on the periphery of the action, embedded as asides in dialogue, or as visual markers on the landscape. Visual and textual analyses read through the lens of critical race studies reveals how aversive racism and microaggression work in relation to White Fragility and ongoing supremacy. Juxtaposing the film's secondary narrative about Indians that emerges through this process with scenes edited during the screenplay-to-film transition provides insight into contemporary America's ongoing negotiation of Americans as colonialists with a history of violence against Native people. Ultimately, this excavation of our national attic explores the long-term effects of this history and these manifestations on the American psyche as represented by the Weston family.

## 2 Secondary Narrative Focus on Racism and Native Americans

The film (2013), like the screenplay (2013) and the play (2008), is set in contemporary rural Osage County, Oklahoma, a place with a long history of relocation and dislocation of Native peoples. As Roger Hall Lloyd's *Osage County*:

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout the essay, the term "Indian" is used as the characters use it, and in reference to the iconic and homogenizing concept/trope/stereotype continually employed by settler-nation peoples to name the Indigenous peoples of the Americas. In all other contexts I will use the terms Native, Native American, Indigenous or the proper name used by the people themselves, such as Osage or Cheyenne.

*A Tribe and American Culture 1600–1934* details, Osage County was traditionally part of Osage territory, which encompassed a wide range of land across what is now Kansas, Missouri, Arkansas, and Oklahoma. The Spanish, the French, the British, and the Americans occupied this area at various points in colonial history; nonetheless, the Osage remained relatively autonomous and free moving within it until the onset of American expansion in the post-revolutionary period. As early as 1808 and through the 1870s, the United States began to claim Osage territory through treaties that would continually push them to relinquish greater and greater amounts of land in what was being designated as Indian Country – a site for relocating tribes (Lloyd 2006, 119–120, 330–331). They were forced to cede the area now known as Osage County (northwest of Tulsa) in 1835 as part of the Treaty of New Echota, which allocated it to the Cherokee (May n.d., n.pag.). The Osage began to purchase the land back in 1870 as part of an Osage Reservation; it became a semi-autonomous district in 1906 and a county in 1907 with the formation of Oklahoma as a state (May n.d., n.pag.). Much Osage land was lost to illegal squatters and settlers and through American expansionist policies, cession, allotment, and murder (Lloyd 2006).

The Weston property sits within this contested territory amid fields and the windswept landscape of Northern Oklahoma, near Pawhuska. As the screenplay describes it, the country is “[f]oreboding. Heat lightning in the distance. Miles of unforgiving, summer-scorched prairie” (Letts 2013, 1). In all versions of the story, Barbara is no less critical: “What were these people thinking [...] the jokers who settled this place. Who was the asshole who saw this flat hot nothing and planted his flag? I mean we fucked the Indians for *this*?” More forgiving, the film’s cinematography presents wide-angle shots of prairie grasses, grazing horses, and bailed hay, quiet country roads, and a lone house surrounded by a chain-link fence. None of these perspectives, however, engage an Osage point-of-view of their homeland; rather, the film retains an invader’s position in which the land and its history are a threat to white settlers that needs to be contained. In the progression of the film narrative, these markers (the western prairie, horses, the verbal references to colonialism in the form of flag, Indians, and sexual violence), additional b-roll of a faded mural of Osage warriors and horses, and road signs naming the Osage, nostalgia on the part of the youngest Weston (Karen) for a fort in the yard where they played “cowboys and Indians”, and the Weston name itself metonymically and metaphorically connects the family narrative to the history of the West (Wells 2013). They bolster the point made by Courtney Elkin Mohler in her analysis of Letts’s play: “Weston sounds like ‘western’ of western expansion and ‘Cowboy and Indian’ western films, and contains the word ‘west,’ the ultimate goal of Manifest Destiny” (Mohler 2010, 138). In taking this symbolism further, the film ponders the degeneration based on violence that emerges as a legacy of settler-colonialism and racism.

Beverly Weston (Sam Shepard), Violet's alcoholic husband, commits suicide during the hottest month, August, and the Weston clan converges on the home, some for the first time in many years. The dysfunction and near disintegration of the Westons that unfold over the course of the film are as harsh as the verbal depictions of the landscape. Their extended family history, already marred by alcoholism, drug addiction, cancer, incest, adultery, and violence, now includes suicide. The three matriarchal figures – Violet (Meryl Streep), her sister Mattie Fae (Margo Martindale), and her daughter Barbara (Julia Roberts) – verbally and sometimes physically abuse their family members. They overshadow, bully, and neglect the two younger daughters Ivy (Julianne Nicholson) and Karen (Juliette Lewis) and, to an extent, the men associated with the family. None, however, are untainted – Beverly and Mattie Fae's ancient affair resulted in Little Charles (Benedict Cumberbatch) whose illegitimacy is unknown to the children and perhaps Mattie Fae's husband Charlie (Chris Cooper); Ivy and her half-brother/cousin Little Charles are lovers; Bill Fordham (Ewan McGregor) is having an affair with his student and has separated from Barbara; and Karen is a self-absorbed and insecure woman whose latest fiancé Steve (Dermot Mulroney) attempts to rape Jean Fordham (Abigail Breslin), Barbara and Bill's fourteen-year old daughter. The older generation has experienced homelessness and violence, were the first in their families to attend college, and have hung on to their gains through sheer tenacity. As Violet notes, “[w]e lived too hard, then rose too high. We sacrificed everything and did it all for you.”<sup>2</sup> Her resuscitation of their hardship, as Mohler's analysis of the play points out, “evokes, with nostalgic power, the hard-working, enduring Americans central to the myth of our national character” (Mohler 2010, 134). The Westons, however, embody the toll upholding this myth takes on the individual psyche and family unit. Their children experience the ravages of this first-hand but also from places of privilege. The girls and their families all want to escape this place, their dysfunctional family, and its violent legacy. The worlds of the Weston clan are not those of the white American dream but of an American dystopia – a place diseased and representational of a national family body in disease with itself and what it represents.

Letts weaves into the history of place and family the Cheyenne character Johnna (Misty Upham), who is hired by Beverly to clean, cook, and take care of Violet. As Mohler notes:

Dramaturgically, Johnna represents what the family is not: she is calm when they are turbulent, strong when they are psychologically and physically weak, and spiritually grounded as they curse and damn one another. In some ways, her role as spiritual-guide-cum-house-

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<sup>2</sup> All quotes without reference citations refer to the film version.

servant renders her as a ‘historical relic’ who lives on the margins of white centrality, appearing to highlight the Westons’ tragic flaws, psychological angst, and to literally clean up their mess. (Mohler 2010, 130)

While Johnna’s spirituality and spiritual guidance are highlighted in Letts’s play and screenplay, Wells omits them from the film. Regardless, Mohler’s assessment of Johnna equally applies to the film as well. In this Western allegory of contemporary America’s dis-ease with its settler-nation colonialist history, Johnna bears witness to the Weston family’s secrets, addictions, and dysfunction, her health and stability standing in contrast. She brings light and nourishing food into the Weston house, saves Jean from rape by beating Steve off with a shovel, and consoles Violet when everyone else abandons her. Yet as Mohler notes, she remains an outsider, a “historical relic” – the Indian in the attic – a “reified American Indian Other” (Mohler 2010, 130).

Johnna is reified as an Indian Other in a classically colonialist fashion through external naming and the Weston family’s general homogenization of Indigenous peoples as one group encompassed under the Euro-American monikers – Indian and Native American. Barbara and Bill Fordham, the family’s liberal academics, and Violet Weston, the conservative rural matriarch, negotiate these terms in three vignettes of importance.

The first moment occurs in an early scene in which Beverly interviews Johnna for the position as housekeeper/nurse for Violet. Wells edits out important information from the play and screenplay regarding how Johnna’s father, whom Beverly knew, died from “a heart attack” that caused him to fall “into a flatbed truck full of wine grapes”; and Letts removes from the screenplay information regarding her name change from an Americanized Youngblood to the Cheyenne translation – Monvana (Letts 2008, 12; Letts 2010, 4). The rest of the scene remains in the film. Violet enters Beverly’s study high on meds and notices Johnna. Beverly reminds Violet that he has told her about Johnna. He does not mention her heritage, but Violet asks: “Are you an Indian?” And then: “What kind?” to which Johnna answers: “Cheyenne.” Violet asks no further questions and leaves. This scene establishes three things: First, even high, Violet has the racial consciousness to ask specifically to what group Johnna belongs. Second, Violet shows no interest in learning more about Johnna. Third, Johnna answers both questions, identifying herself as Native American but with tribal specificity, thus indicating self-determination and sovereignty. The Westons, however, deny this powerful action of self-identification on Johnna’s part.

The second vignette provides a sardonic reflection by liberal academics on colonialism and its results on the settlers who perpetrated the genocide of the Indigenous people. As Bill and Barbara drive across the Plains to the Weston

house, Barbara reflects on these settlers, wondering what would compel them to “fuck the Indians for *this*” place. Bill replies with a reference to genocide and the “creepy character of the Midwest” to which Barbara reminds him that “This is the Plains: a state of mind, right? A spiritual affliction, like the Blues” (*August* 2013; Letts 2013, 18). Their exchange ends in a tender moment and laughter as they easily deflect the history of genocide and the perspective of the Osage whose country and its beauty they disparage.

The third vignette, witnessed by Ivy and Johnna through the kitchen window, occurs between Barbara, Bill, and Violet as they sit on the porch eating pie:

Violet: ‘She’s a stranger in my house. There’s an Indian in my house.’

Bill: ‘You have a problem with Indians, Violet?’

Violet: ‘I don’t know what to say to an Indian.’

Barbara: ‘They’re called Native Americans now, Mom.’

Violet: ‘Who makes that decision?’

Barbara: ‘It’s what they like to be called.’

Violet: ‘They aren’t any more native than me.’

Barbara: ‘In fact, they are.’

Violet: ‘What’s wrong with Indian?’

Barbara: ‘Why’s it so hard to call people—’

Violet: ‘Let’s just call the dinosaurs “Native Americans” while we’re at it.’

At this point both Barbara and Bill smirk and Barbara closes the dialogue with: “She may be an Indian, but she makes the best goddamn apple pie I ever ate.” As Mohler points out in relation to the play, this exchange “recalls the turmoil of the American conquest, connecting the historical racial violence and nationalist fervor to achieve the American Dream with the anxiety, cynicism, and melancholy of the postmodern contemporary (white) American experience” (Mohler 2010, 130). Equally important, it exhibits white America’s dis-ease with confronting its own racism and colonialism’s ongoing presence in the form of white privilege. The dialogue reinforces Barbara’s tendency to invalidate her own liberal stance on naming by constantly interchanging “Indian” and “Native American” – the latter being a term she claims is culturally acceptable – and by participating in the derision. Most obviously, the dialogue equates an extinct species with Native Americans, relegating the latter to erasure and historic antiquity. Such rhetorical moves indicate Violet’s discomfort with a racial Other and her recalcitrance in accepting Indigenous title, right to the land, and tribal difference. In a county where the Native American population makes up 14% of the population, Violet’s claims and microaggression suggest a culture of segregation and fear bred of guilt over

stolen land; this is her secret in the attic that Johnna's presence dredges up (*Population 2019*, n.pag.).<sup>3</sup>

Through these three short exchanges, Letts's dialogue subtly illustrates various levels of imbedded aversive racism evolving out of colonialist history and directed at Native Americans in general and through microaggressions to Johnna in particular. According to the *Encyclopedia of Race and Racism*, "Aversive racism is a form of contemporary racism that manifests at the individual level [...] in subtle and indirect ways ("Aversive Racism" n.d., n.pag.). As does Barbara, aversive racists exhibit compassion for those affected by racial injustice: "We fucked the Indians for *this*?"; champion the concept of racial equality: "It's what they like to be called"; and see themselves free of prejudice ("Aversive Racism" n.d., n.pag.). But simultaneously they maintain negative attitudes, ideas, or assumptions about other groups ("Aversive Racism" n.d., n.pag.), as does Violet: "They aren't any more native than me." Aversive racists "possess feelings of uneasiness" that surface in indirect asides, which validate the speaker's own positioning ("Aversive Racism" n.d., n.pag.).

Barbara, Bill, and Violet participate to a degree in progressive attitudes – they know the correct terminology, but amongst themselves they slip in and out of political correctness, lapsing into jokes and dismissing Native peoples. Their uneasiness with a deeper discussion about their own racism and the history of colonialism, which has provided them their privileged place in Osage county and their class distinction from Johnna, surfaces in their inability to confront their own position as white supremacists. As Pendler and Beverly explain it, "white supremacy" is much more than the cultural values held by overtly racist groups; it is an "essential element of all White peoples'[sic] conditioning as they grow up in contemporary American society" (Pender and Beverly 2015, 6). The ease with which Bill, Barbara, and Violet discuss Native Americans and colonialist genocide, as unofficial experts, indicates that privilege and supremacy. Simultaneously, however, they continually flitter around terms, make jokes, and distance themselves from their own dis-ease by focusing on benign topics like the blues or apple pie, suggesting that unconsciously they know their discussions illustrate a degree of racism. Ultimately, however, they have no need to explore this.

These three vignettes highlight various forms of racial microaggressions that indicate the depth to which racism is embedded in the American psyche. According to Derald Wing Sue, "[r]acial microaggressions are the everyday and common

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<sup>3</sup> According to the US Census bureau information, cited by Population Demographics of Osage County statistics for 2018–2019, the overall population was at 47,472 in 2017, with whites making up 31,327 and Native Americans 6,858 of that total (*Population Demographics for Osage County 2019*, n.pag.).

verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities and slights directed toward people of color by well-intentioned Whites who are unaware that they have committed a transgression against a target group” (Sue 2015, 27). He identifies three in particular: microinvalidations, which intentionally “exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings or experiential reality of a person of color” (Sue 2010, 8); microassaults, which use racial slurs and name-calling to intentionally hurt a person of color (Sue 2010, 8–9); and microinsults, which subtly communicate rudeness and demean a person’s racial identity (Sue 2010, 9–10). The three vignettes, read as a sequence, allow us to see how the white characters participate in one or more of these microaggressions.

In the first, we are provided evidence that Violet knows Johnna is Cheyenne, and yet she refuses to acknowledge Johnna’s preferred identity label in the latter discussion. Instead, in the last scene she illustrates her unease through microassaults and microinsults that effectively eliminate Johnna’s personhood and self-determination, demeans her heritage, reifies her as a signifier of colonial oppression – Indian – and makes extinct her history through an equation of dinosaurs to Indians. In their discussion about the land and genocide in the second scene, and through their off-handed remarks about genocide, rape, and the land itself, Bill and Barbara indirectly use microinvalidation against all Indigenous people that negates Indigenous sovereignty and connection to the land, and their various experiences under ongoing settler-colonialism. The final scene employs all three microaggressions – denial, invalidation, and rudeness. They indiscreetly speak about Johnna and Native people within her earshot, implying that she need not be recognized, included, or treated with respect. They illustrate what Robin DiAngelo terms “White Fragility”: “[A] state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves. These moves include the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation” (DiAngelo 2011, 54). DiAngelo underscores that whiteness and white privilege are “dynamic, relational, and operating at all times and on myriad levels” and through processes and practices that “include basic rights, values, beliefs, perspectives and experiences purported to be commonly shared by all but which are actually only consistently afforded to white people” (DiAngelo 2011, 56). Rather than unpack their racial baggage, the three uncomfortably stow it away in the attic.

Mohler argues that the dysfunctions displayed by the Westons are “symptomatic of [...] the anxiety to maintain, and the pain of losing white American cultural values” and the American dream (Mohler 2010, 138). Violet’s tirade to her daughters about their family’s struggle to acquire what they have certainly points to this, as does the metanarrative thread on Indians. I would add

to Mohler's analysis that the dysfunctions are symptomatic also of the fear of losing white privilege and of the security produced by indulging in racism. The Westons find moments of relief from their toxic secrets (familial violence, incest, infidelity, alcoholism, and drug abuse) and family tensions through nostalgia-laced interjections about Indians. While these moments of shared white privilege and aversive racism work to hold the family together by redirecting their focus away from their own failings and corruptions, the bond is tenuous. The legacy of white supremacy eventually emerges as a symptom of their dysfunction. A clear example of this is embedded in the post-funeral dinner scene when Karen nostalgically recalls the "old fort where they used to play cowboys and Indians." As Ivy informs her that Beverly tore it down because it was infested with rats, Violet interjects: "Don't you know not to say cowboys and Indians? You played cowboys and *Native Americans*, right Barb?" This aggressive referent to their earlier conversation clues Barbara to the fact that her mother has relapsed into drug abuse. Letts illustrates here that the Westons' narrative of the American dream maintained through the juxtaposition of the discourse of cowboys and Indians no longer functions; rather, vermin and self-destructive behavior have infested and degraded the dream.

More deeply, Letts's narrative suggests that the national psychosis born of colonialism and fed by guilt and disillusionment destroys the very fabric of generations of family. He seems to be warning us that by refusing to grapple with the institutional and cultural structures that underpin and support white American values and the American dream, our settler-colonial past and present, and our own White Fragility, we are self-destructing as a nation, as a people. Johnna's presence in the narrative, the discourse on identity, and the inclusion of visual references to the absent Osage people underscore this process of denial. The subtle indicators of the Western and Oklahoma's history of confiscating Native land circumscribe the Westons' home and family drama, indicating the inability of white America to completely erase Indigenous people from their American dream – rendering that dream tainted. The family's dysfunctional behavior and various diseases read allegorically through Johnna and the Western mise-en-scène suggests that these fissures in America's amnesia about racism and colonialism result in a national psychosis fed by guilt. As a result, what resides in the attic, is erased from the backyard, and is fading in the town around them, continues to haunt the Westons, destroying the very fabric of the family.

Wells's eliminated scenes and added Native American mise-en-scène reinforce this. Johnna's edited scenes underscore how White Fragility and microaggression continue as forms of racial exclusion in a film industry that privileges white actors, white narratives, and white viewers. As Letts's story moves from play to screenplay to film, the scenes that he includes to provide context to the

Native subtext are minimized or removed. Most include Johnna, information about her family, culturally specific information, and/or her interacting in more intimate conversations with the white characters. Wells replaces them with additional scenes with Barbara outside the family home or with visual reminders of the absent Osage, who are supplanted in all versions by the Cheyenne character.<sup>4</sup> In addition to portions of the scene in Beverly's office already noted, two others include Jean Fordham's engagement with Johnna as an exotic ally. In the first, Johnna explains the significance of her beaded pouch, made by her grandmother to hold her umbilical cord. Three things stand out in the scene: 1) Johnna is interested in sharing her cultural heritage; 2) Jean is repelled by the pouch once she knows what it contains; and 3) Jean's interest in Johnna's Cheyenne heritage goes no further than connecting it to *Powwow Highway*, a contemporary film with Cheyenne characters. The second scene occurs in Johnna's attic room where Jean comments on the "costumes" worn by Johnna's parents in their wedding picture. Through these scenes Letts provides some cultural depth to his Native character and highlights more clearly another level of microaggression; the seeming interest in someone racially different from oneself that is superficial at best. By omitting the scenes, Wells erases both evidence of Native culture and of a third generation of the Westons' inculcation into ambivalence toward Native peoples.

These scenes may seem like logical places to cut from a long film; however, in doing so, the filmmaker compromises the key places where the audience might self-reflect on the process of participating in racializing actions. More egregiously, he omits positive, well-rounded, contemporary representations of Native people. In addition, the editing continues a long history of relegating Native women to roles as exotic background to a white story. Letts and Wells register and illustrate Johnna's depth of feeling in shots/scenes depicting her violent reaction to Steve's attempt to rape Jean, her sadness at the news of Beverly's death, and her appreciation of compliments about her cooking. However, overall she is depicted as a quiet cypher that glides through rooms along their edges, quietly cleans and cooks, provides physical aid when needed, and otherwise escapes to her attic room. Ultimately, the film adaptation process succumbs to the same ambivalence and racism that the screenplay attempts to deconstruct.

Pendler and Beverly use the term "root kit" from computer programming as an analogy for the "set of tools automatically employed by White people when

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<sup>4</sup> I wrote to Tracy Letts in 2017 asking about why his primary Native character was Cheyenne and not Osage but have gotten no reply. The Southern Cheyenne were removed to Oklahoma like many other tribes, but they were primarily located in west-central Oklahoma bordering Texas. Their lands were opened to settlement after Allotment in April 19, 1892 (Removal of Tribes to Oklahoma, n.d., n.pag.). They did not reside as a tribe in the Osage area.

confronted by their racism that maintains White supremacist beliefs that work to hinder further dialogue and closeness with racial/ethnic minorities” (Pender and Beverly 2015, 3). This analogy seems appropriate to the complex weaving of settler-colonialist racism throughout *August: Osage County* and the final film version. Like a bad code hidden in the United State’s national operating system, the normalized racism exhibited by the characters and the film structure illustrate a “rooted’ set of behaviors and thoughts that exist solely” to protect white privilege (Pender and Beverly 2015, 8).

### 3 Conclusion

The trajectory from screenplay to film offers a compelling look at American racism towards Native Americans that demands viewers to consider their own inculcation into ongoing settler-nation colonialism and racism. Focusing on the point of view of a white middle-class family with roots in the West does not explore the effects of microaggression and aversive racism on Indigenous peoples. It does, however, call into question the ramifications of embracing a myth that relies on our most destructive and exclusionary instincts to maintain, and it holds white Americans responsible for participating in the maintenance of racializing structures and behaviors. This seems particularly salient in light of the current “Make America Great Again” campaign and the resurgence of racial violence in the last few years.

Letts wrote the Pulitzer Prize winning *August: Osage County* in 2004. The play debuted in 2007 and the film in 2013. However, in 2019, its indictment of systemic racism seems more pertinent than ever. Misty Upham, the actress playing Johnna, died in 2014, her case initially not taken seriously by the local police. Similar cases exist throughout Native America, including the murder of Savanna Greywind for her fetus in Fargo, ND in August 2017. The backlash toward anti-extraction industry and pro-sovereignty activism like NoDAPL (No Dakota Access Pipeline) indicate another example of invalidating Native people’s rights and concerns for the profit or gain of dominant society. The rise of man camps around oil fields and the ongoing trafficking in and violence toward Native women and girls continually remind us that our ongoing ambivalence and racism have real effects on Native peoples. All too often, examples like these are disregarded or diminished in national importance because they bring to the fore the ugly system of oppression and inequality that exist, and because they threaten white security and peace of mind. But as Letts suggests through his portrayal of the dysfunctional and decaying Weston family, the reality and the legacy they represent do take their toll on the health of the national body and psyche.

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