Nostalgia, Irony, and the Re-Emergence of the Reified American Indian Other in August: Osage County

Courtney Elkin Mohler

Abstract

Tracy Letts’s wildly successful play, August: Osage County, dramatizes the ruinous dysfunction of a contemporary Caucasian American family in Oklahoma. This essay argues that Johnna, the young Cheyenne woman hired to cook and clean for the Weston family at the start of the play, functions as a martyr/servant, and as a reified Other in a play about the destruction of the (white) American family. The play’s setting in Oklahoma and inclusion of a Native American housekeeper 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. Through the use of “ironized nostalgia,” August reflects the construction and reproduction of national myths and identities in America.

In the year following its 2007 Chicago premiere, Tracy Letts’s August: Osage County was met with tremendous commercial and critical success, winning not only the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, but also the triumvirate of Theatre Awards: the Drama Desk Award, the Tony Award, and the New York Drama Critics’ Circle Award for Best New Play (Choate 105–6). Like so many of the canonical American plays August recalls, Letts’s work centers on the psychological preoccupations and failed interpersonal relationships of a Caucasian American family on the brink of implosion.

Despite this play’s notable success, little critical attention has been paid to the character Johnna, the young Cheyenne woman who is hired to be the house servant for the ruinously dysfunctional Weston family. Dramatically, 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-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. However, several of the play’s dramatic elements, including the presence of the Indian house servant character, articulate a kind of “ironized nostalgia,” to borrow a term from literary critic Linda Hutcheon (206). *August: Osage County* can be read as a postmodern rumination on American identity and family in the late 2000s. The play at once displays a sincere longing for a mythologized (authentic) time, and partially through its ironies, also presents a rupture with these myths, and knowingness about their reproduction. This essay will closely read Johnna’s function within the play as a Cheyenne woman, and explores possible cultural meanings behind Letts’s representation of “Indian woman” and *August: Osage County*’s enormous popularity and acclaim. Because I argue that the play’s plot, characterization, setting, and tone reference a body of American cultural works, we will examine the historical specter of the Native American in literature, the prevalence of nostalgic and pastoral imagery in the (re)production of hegemonic American identity, and the trope of the myth of the family in American drama.

**Native American Female Representation**

Many contemporary and historical works of American cultural representation construct “Indians” as one of two types of savages: the uncivilized, blood-thirsty, heathen savage, or the noble, tragically doomed savage. Representations of Native American females in modern American popular culture have followed a similar trajectory: depictions include the uncivilized, sexually promiscuous, immoral squaw or conversely, the beautiful, virgin princess, who naively assists European men in the conquest of her own people and tribal lands. These gendered stereotypes construct all Native peoples as binary opposites (savage/uncivilized vs. noble/doomed). The common thread that runs through such depictions of “Indians” is their supposed difference to (white) Americans, and the accompanying paradoxical relationship between this perceived difference and (non–Native) national American identity. Such characterizations work effectively to justify genocide and white superiority and to promote the sexist ideology of female subordination, sexual objectification, and the naturalization of feminized domesticity.

In his careful study of the early twentieth-century youth scouting movement, Philip J. DeLoria describes the symbolic link constructed between female “Indians” and “the true import of womanhood, defined as knowing the value of domestic work ... and healthy natural living” faced with the pressures of modernity (113). In the early 1900s, Caucasian American cultural anxieties over how industrialization would change American gender relations were abated through enacting romanticized tribal living, including grossly misunderstood notions of
Native American gender roles. Organizations such as the Camp Fire Girls required their teenage female campers to learn crafts, sing songs, make and wear “ceremonial Indian costumes,” connecting what were seen as “the universal female activities” with the ahistorical symbol of the Indian squaw (DeLoria 113–114). Letts’s drama, set in August of 2007, dramatizes anxieties specific to contemporary America. This domestic drama, which takes place entirely within a family home in disrepair, nevertheless solely locates the values of domesticity and a kind of spiritualism in its one Cheyenne female character.

Described in the list of characters under the heading “OTHERS,” “JOHNNA MONEVATA, housekeeper, twenty-six” is an orphan from a poor family, desperate for work (Letts 5). Her domestically defined role as housekeeper/cook/nurse, her unique standing within the household as a cultural outsider, and aspects of her markedly different temperament recall depictions of Indian Princesses/white saviors and anti-modern Indian maidens of American culture past.

National Identity and the Importance of Place:
Osage County, Oklahoma

The play opens with Johnna sitting with Beverly, the patriarch of the Weston family. She listens attentively as he sloppily describes his own alcoholism, and his wife’s addiction to prescription medication and her diagnosis of mouth cancer. We discover that Johnna is Cheyenne, has changed her surname Youngbird to Monevata “back to the original language,” and has been “struggling for work” (Letts 13, 15). When the audience meets Beverly’s wife Violet, the dysfunctional Weston matriarch, she is highly intoxicated, slurring her words incoherently. Throughout the prologue Johnna appears totally nonplussed, politely responding with obedient, concise answers: Yes, sir. Yes, ma’am. No, sir.

Johnna’s role as housekeeper, cook, and caretaker for the Weston family is solidified at the start of Act I, which like many great western dramas, begins just as a major catastrophe has occurred. Since the time of the Prologue set several days earlier, Beverly Weston has been missing. Johnna silently “cooks and cleans in the kitchen” throughout the lengthy first scene of Act I, as the audience is introduced to most of the extended family including Violet’s sister Mattie Fae and brother-in-law Charlie, her eldest daughter Barbara, Barbara’s husband Bill and daughter Jean, and Violet’s second daughter Ivy (Letts 17). This first scene sets the stage for the outrageous dysfunction the audience will witness in the acts to follow: we learn that Violet is verbally abusive and controlling; Ivy is weak and gravitates toward unhealthy relationships; Mattie Fae is critical and obnoxious; Barbara and Bill are having marital problems; and their fourteen-year-old daughter Jean smokes cigarettes. By the end of the scene Johnna has finished her work and has retreated up the stairs to her room, visibly located in the attic of the tri-
level house. When Barbara asks if her daughter Jean can stay in the top room, Violet explains that the room is taken by Johnna. She says, “She’s the Indian who lives in my attic” (34).

This self-consciously ironic wink at American pop culture “Indians” offers insight into how *August: Osage County* negotiates its middle-American brand of Americana, nostalgia, and relationship with Indians. During the course of the play, there are several well-timed one-liners that acknowledge the awkwardness of the arrangement Beverly made with Johnna before disappearing. Violet’s “attic” zinger illustrates her general attitude toward her housekeeper at the start of the play. In the second scene of Act I, she explains to Barbara and Bill that Beverly hired Johnna without consulting her first:

**Violet:** I don’t know what she’s doing here. She’s a stranger in my house. There’s an Indian in my house.

**Bill:** You have some problem with Indians, Violet?

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

**Violet:** Who calls them that? 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 is it so hard to just call people what they want?

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

**Barbara:** She may be an Indian, but she makes the best goddamn apple pie I ever ate in my life [37].

This passage not only indicates Violet’s distrust, perhaps racially motivated, of Johnna as an “Indian in [her] house,” but also reveals the tenuous historical relationship between white Oklahomans and Native Americans. Violet questions native rights to claim indignity to the land and takes issue with identifying Indians as *Native Americans*. Complicating the debate is Barbara’s witty and ironic compliment that Johnna “makes the best goddamn apple pie” that she ever ate in her life (37). Violet may question what it means to be native American, but even by white American cultural standards, Johnna wins Barbara’s approval with her version of the classic American dessert, leaving the debate as open as the Plains. This short debate over who is more American, what constitutes native American identity “now,” connects meaningfully with the play’s setting (37).

As the play’s title indicates, place is central to the tone and plot of *August: Osage County*. Letts sets his tragedy in the Weston family home, a “rambling country house outside of Pawhuska, Oklahoma, sixty miles northwest of Tulsa,” firmly within historical Indian Country (9). From the perspectives of the plays’ first audiences in Chicago, New York, London, and Los Angeles, Pawhuska would likely seem remote, a slice of rural America very different from the metropolitan areas in which they live, and perhaps even caught in time. By setting the
play in Oklahoma, Letts’s taps into a coterie of perceptions about the western frontier, and although the action unfolds in 2007, its rural setting seems to collapse time. This placement into the pastoral of the Plains region substantiates Violet’s recollections of “hard times” and evokes, with nostalgic power, the hard-working, enduring Americans central to the myth of our national character (94).

The play’s setting, tone, and inclusion of the character Johnna illustrate a melancholic yet desperate search for geographic, symbolic, and cultural origins. Because of its unique history, Oklahoma is a meaningful setting for a play that dramatizes the destruction of a white American nuclear family. The state is situated near the literal center of the country, surrounded by other American territory. Yet historically, it is a highly contested space, marked by decades of forced Native migrations, intertribal warfare, Indian-white conflicts, and negotiations which can only be touched upon briefly here. Osage County in particular stands out as location wrought by treacherous examples of colonial exploitation. By enforcing a series of treaties from 1818 to 1825, the Committee on Indian Affairs took over Osage lands in Indian Territory in order to relocate Indian tribes from the eastern United States, including those known as the Five Civilized Tribes. The Osage were relocated to Kansas, until federal neglect, disease, and hunger brought them to join forces with their traditional enemies, the Cherokees. In 1870, the Osage purchased some 1.5 million acres on the Cherokee Outlet. This would become the Osage Nation and eventually would be incorporated as Osage County (Jones). In the years leading to its eventual annexation by the United States, white settlers continuously encroached upon Indian hunting and grazing lands, and pressured the government for property that had been allocated to various Indian nations in exchange for their tribal homelands elsewhere. After decades of unethical and arguably illegal alterations were made to territorial boundary agreements and political treaties, Oklahoma and Indian Territories were united and incorporated as the state of Oklahoma in 1907, ending Native American self-government (Wickett 171).

The possibility of freedom and economic independence, which lies at the heart of the “American Dream,” brought Caucasian settlers in droves to claim their stakes in land inhabited by feared “Indians” whose presence and traditions stood in the way of (white) American progress. From the 1870s through the 1930s the United States government attempted to deal with the Indians’ threatening difference first through containment, and then by enacting various “Americanization” and assimilation policies. In an effort to exert total political control over the land, Native American languages, traditions, religious practices, and rituals were forbidden, assuring white political control and cultural supremacy. Historically, culturally, and politically Oklahoma symbolizes the ultimate success of the United States’ colonial and imperial project.

The Plains region also is ideologically central to the development of the American Dream: agricultural development, values of industry, and Christian family living eventually prevail on land once deemed undesirable by the United
States government. Yet, the site contains traces of the struggle felt by generations of Native, African, and Caucasian Americans who fought for survival and success on largely arid and unproductive land. These traces of struggle and “hard times” on the plains establish the tone of *August: Osage County*. Upon arriving home, Barbara comments on the stifling heat of August and the flatness of the land:

**Barbara:** ... What were these people thinking?

**Bill:** What people?

**Barbara:** The jokers who settled this place. The Germans and the Dutch and Irish. Who was the asshole who saw this flat hot nothing and planted his flag? I mean, we fucked the Indians for this?

**Bill:** Well, genocide always seems like such a good idea at the time....

**Barbara:** This is the Plains: a state of mind, right some spiritual affliction, like the Blues.

**Bill:** “Are you okay?” “I’m fine. Just got the Plains” [29–30].

As Bill and Barbara point out, the Weston home is deep in the Plains, literally and symbolically. While this overtly American space of the frontier and the aging “country home,” recalls the myth of self-sufficiency integral to the establishment of the national character, Barbara and Bill include the genocide of the Plains Indians in their memory. This is a key example of the complex way nostalgia operates within *August: Osage County*. Bill and Barbara’s conversation reifies the rugged nature of the Plains and the strength of those who tamed them, but also recognizes the realities of the native experience so often denied by nostalgic narratives. In this way, nostalgia and irony are strange bedfellows as nationalist idealization doubles with an awareness of the myth-making processes.

**Nostalgia, Irony, and Counter-Nostalgia in August: Osage County and Its Critical Reception**

The play’s tone, like the dialogue discussed above, teeters between desperate and melancholic as the characters grasp for a feeling of interpersonal understanding, familial connection, and a secure sense of self. The daughters return from their own toxic personal lives to their childhood home in the Pawhuska, and are faced with their family of origin in dire straits. The American Dream for which so many fought, and in which so many generations of Americans have placed their faith, has failed the Westons entirely. As the daughters return to their childhood home, the audience returns the symbolic home of the country, and a slice of Americana. Of course, this return can only be imagined for many of the audience members who have never been to Oklahoma, allowing ample room for personal and cultural associations with the Plains to abound. *August’s* structural
and thematic similarities to the canon of American drama may also elicit a strong emotional response of nostalgia from its audience. The play, which has been lauded as “flat-out, no asterisks and without qualifications, the most exciting new American play Broadway has seen in years” by New York Times critic Charles Isherwood, has been compared to works by America’s finest dramatists: Williams, O’Neill, Albee (Isherwood 1). Considering its runaway success, audience and critics alike have not tired of dramas that explore “the myth of the American family” (Choate 105). In fact, they may be nostalgic for such productions. One critic attributed the overwhelmingly positive response to the Broadway production largely to the audience projecting themselves and their own familial experiences onto the characters and situation on stage. She writes, “The audience members’ laughs and gasps, which punctuated the actors’ line delivery, were in recognition of their own lives.... In August, the Weston house is everyone’s home” (Choate 105–106).

The impulse to look back to one’s place of birth for sense of identity connects with the tendency of nationalist cultural works to cultivate the emotional response of nostalgia. Such nostalgic representations often include carefully crafted and reproduced myths about an origin of a nation, polity, and national character. The national myth of origins of the relatively young, and inherently multi-ethnic United States often includes romanticizing America’s geographical vastness and natural bounty, as well as contradictory and troubling re-visioning of Native American–white relations. In his book Playing Indians, DeLoria points out troubling linkages constructed between rural American landscapes, nostalgic notions of folk life, and popular culture’s “Indians.” He writes, “Although its complex meanings had shifted, Indianness remained a crucial tool with which to reimagine and dispute a contradictory American identity” (105). In American popular culture, especially in the mid-nineteenth through the early twentieth century, hundreds of distinct Native American tribes are reduced to homogeneous, stereotyped “Indians.” They are often linked with the natural world and a time before the corrupting forces of modernity and civilization took hold. Even as mythologized Indians are relegated to the past as a simple, natural people, they paradoxically “validate the assimilation of the American landscape to the civilizing project of frontier settlement” (Smulders 191). Frontier narratives in particular promote this schizophrenic view of western expansionism by depicting Indians as the primitive and wild alternative to American progress, as well as the inevitability of their containment.

Although Letts’s Indian is not quite temporally suspended in pre-modern times, within the world of August: Osage County, Johnna’s grounded personality and worldview stands in stark contrast with the Westons’. She is steadfast, even-tempered, spiritual, and brave. When Jean asks, Johnna tells her that the turtle-shaped necklace she wears contains her dried umbilical cord and that she will wear it for the rest of her life. She explains, “Because if we lose it, our souls belong nowhere and after we die our souls will walk the Earth looking for where we
belong” (45). Johnna is distinct from the rest of the characters because she is not lost, and although she is the obvious outsider on multiple levels, her traditions keep her from feeling alone. These traditions also allow her to occupy a position seemingly outside of the isolating, fragmenting contemporary world that makes the Weston family so darn unhappy.

Many scholars of American culture have argued that American identity is constructed and reproduced at the limitations or borders of itself; in other words the “American” identity is largely defined by who is considered not American. Performance theorist Joseph Roach writes in his book, *Cities of the Dead*:

A contradictory push and pull develops as communities construct themselves by expanding their boundaries and working back in from them. They pull back by excluding or subordinating the peoples those larger boundaries ostensibly embrace. Such contradictory intentions remain tolerable because the myth of coherence at the center requires a constantly visible yet constantly receding perimeter of difference [39].

Johnna’s presence as an ethnic Other, a cultural outsider and relative stranger within the house, helps present the Westons as “The American Family.” She anchors this white American family in the center of its swirling, violent home, mostly staying on the periphery of the action as she moves from room to room, dusting the surfaces sullied with decades of attempting and ultimately failing to maintain the American Dream. In her important article “Irony, Nostalgia and the Postmodern” Linda Hutcheon writes, “The aesthetics of nostalgia might be less a matter of simple memory than of complex projection; the invocation of a partial, idealized history merges with a dissatisfaction with the present” (195). Through her difference, Johnna’s presence construes an imagined time when the white American family unit was safe, when white identity was secure, and Others remained on the borderline, or in the attic, but visible long enough to reflect white cultural hegemony. Unlike nostalgic works of cultural production that can be easily critiqued as conservative in nature because they offer an “escape to an idealized, simpler era of ‘real’ community values,” *August*’s nostalgia does not sanitize the past effectively (Hutcheon 191). Instead Letts exposes the gross dysfunction of its central family, implicating the problematic relationship between personal (and familial) identity and buying into dominant national narratives and myths.

The play dramatizes a family ripped apart by the promise and impossibility of those very ideals (the myth of the sanctity of the American family, values of domesticity, fidelity, independence, and progress). The Westons’ fall reveals that in the 2000s, the American Dream as it once was sold to us has proven to be a fiction. Letts illustrates the fragility of such cultural myths by ironically positioning a Native woman who never neatly fit into (white) American ideals in the first place, as the one sane and active character in the play. This effect can be read as an example of what Jennifer Ladino calls “counter-nostalgia.” She writes,
“counter-nostalgia envisions the ‘home’ as fractured, fragmented, complicated, and layered; to ‘return’ to this sort of home is to revisit a dynamic past and to invert or exploit official narratives in ways that challenge dominant histories” (Ladino 2). The Weston family can be read as a metaphor for white America eating itself alive under the pressures of modernity and postmodernity. Indeed, the surname Weston itself is ironically appropriate: Weston sounds like “western” of western expansion and “Cowboy and Indian” western films, and contains the word “west,” the ultimate goal of Manifest Destiny. The Weston family’s demons of dysfunction range from alcoholism and drug addiction, to infidelity, molestation, verbal abuse, and unbelievably incest. However, Johnna’s presence and role as caretaker and spiritual anchor suggests that all of these dysfunctional behaviors are symptomatic of a wider-reaching evil: the anxiety to maintain, and the pain of losing white American cultural values. The emphasis on the individual, specifically individual pleasure, escape and desire, has failed Violet whose coldness and addiction to prescription drugs pushes her husband to commit suicide; the myth of the American family has failed Ivy who discovers that the only man she has ever loved is actually her half brother, Karen whose fiancé sexually violates her fourteen year old niece, and Barbara whose husband has left her for a younger woman. Johnna’s resilience, sentience, and ability to survive reflect exactly what the family lacks.

Johnna’s presence as an outsider offers a stark contrast to the others’ phenotype, culture, and ways of relating to the world. Out of Letts’s twelve characters, however, she is certainly the most active, spending much of the play actually cooking and cleaning. The white characters, on the other hand, talk and scream constantly throughout the course of the epic play, but do almost nothing. Johnna’s industry and skill illustrate a central aspect of the crisis of the white American middle class in the 2000s: lack of productivity. In addition to being useful, she bravely acts when it counts the most, stopping Karen’s fiancé Steve in the midst of sexually preying upon young Jean. Johnna can be read as a brave, active, contemporary Native woman whose nuanced dramaturgical presence helps illustrate the disconnect between dominant American narratives and complex American counter-histories. While much of the frontier literature set in middle America promotes the march toward progress and laments the inevitable demise of the Native American, Letts’s play illustrates the dynamic psychological weight of occupying the cultural center. In order to dramatize the real tragedy of contemporary American society, the center represented by the Weston family and home, could not simply tremble, but had to be destabilized totally.

Barbara remains with Violet in the dark, lonely house after the majority of the play’s plot has unfolded: the funeral is over, Karen has left with her perverted fiancé, and Ivy has left for New York with her lover/first cousin/half-brother. We here learn that Beverly had left Violet a note with a phone number to reach him at the Country Squire Hotel, the last place he was seen before he was discovered drowned. Violet tells Barbara that she waited until Monday to
call the hotel, because she needed to get to the safety deposit box in the bank first, and the bank didn’t open until Monday (Letts 135). Barbara, shaken from this revelation, points out that if Violet had stopped Beverly from killing himself, she wouldn’t have needed the money. Violet’s response is as cold as ice: “Well, hindsight’s twenty-twenty, isn’t it” (136). Violet then explodes into her final venomous rant, revealing the values upon which she has lived her life, and exposing their deleterious irony:

VIOLET: You had better understand this, you smug little ingrate, there is at least one reason Beverly killed himself and that’s you. Think there’s anyway he would’ve done what he did if you were still here? No, just him and me, here in this house, in the dark, left to just ourselves, abandoned, wasted life-times devoted to your care and comfort.... He did this though; this was his doing, not ours. Can you imagine anything more cruel, to make me responsible? And why, just to weaken me, just to make me prove my character? So no, I waited, I waited so I could get my hands on that safety deposit box, but I would have waited anyway. You want to show who’s stronger Bev? Nobody’s stronger than me, goddamn it. When nothing is left, when everything is gone and disappeared, I’ll be here. Who’s stronger now, you son-of-a-bitch?!

BARBARA: No, you’re right, Mom. You’re the strong one [136–37].

Violet’s speech espouses the grand “American” values of fierce strength, financial independence, and calculated self-preservation. These are the values often associated with the “Greatest Generation” of Americans who survived the Great Depression and prospered through diligence and hard work. But these ideals have cost her dearly: her relationships with her daughters, on whose “comfort and care” she “wasted” her life, are in utter disrepair; the fidelity of her marriage and family unit was a lie; in order to prove the strength of her own “character” she forsook her husband when she could have saved his life; with her husband dead and her house in another woman’s care, her identity as a housewife is shaken. Violet’s strong-headed tenacity has left her with some financial security, and “nothing” and “nobody” (Letts 136–37).

At the end of the play’s last scene, Barbara leaves. Violet finds herself fearful, “disoriented, panicked” (Letts 138). She paces through the house, calling out in desperation for her daughters, “Barbara? ... Ivy? Ivy, you here? Barb?’...” and then calls for her late husband, “Bev” (137–138). In classic Aristotelian terms, her moment of recognition happens at the moment she realizes that she has pushed away everyone that matters to her. In these last few moments of this epic play, our anti-heroine breaks down because she sees that in her lifelong battle to be “the strong one,” she has managed to destroy her family (137).

Significantly, she is not alone, however, in the literal sense of the word. Johnna remains in the house, and is awaiting Violet’s pathetic ascent to her bed-
room in the attic. The stage directions describe these final moments as Violet calls out for Johnna and then:

(She reels to the stairway, crawls up the stairs on all fours.)

Johnna, Johnna, Johnna...

(She arrives on the second floor. Johnna puts her plate of food aside and turns toward the stairs. Violet, on all fours, continues up the stairs to the attic. She arrives in Johnna’s room. She scrabbles into Johnna’s lap. Johnna holds Violet’s head, smooths her hair, rocks her.) [Letts 138]

Dramatizing a postmodern crisis of sorts, Violet feels the weight of her separation from not only her husband and daughters but from her sense of self, her life, which now seems meaningless, her home gaping with emptiness. In the final moments of the play Violet allows herself to crumble. And she is forced to display her weakness in front of Johnna, someone whose presence (let alone culture and personal history) she has virtually ignored throughout the play.

From a postmodern perspective, August: Osage County displays the poignant coupling of irony and nostalgia, recalling American theatrical tropes and expansionist mythologies (including a native woman as housekeeper). The play seduces the audience members to remember the past (their childhood, the idealized family units of 1950s sitcoms, American family dramas, the settling of the west). But the nostalgic elements are fully ironized, allowing the “distance necessary for reflective thought about the present as well as the past” (Hutcheon 207). One by one the most nostalgic elements of August: Osage County prove to be unobtainable: the myth of the sanctity of marriage is destroyed as we discover that Beverly had an affair with Violet’s sister Mattie Fae and that Violet knew for decades that her nephew Little Charles was really her husband’s son; “the American Dream” that parental sacrifice and hard work will yield successful, grateful children is fruitless, as each Weston daughter is more miserable and thankless than the next. Johnna’s role as household caretaker unravels the Caucasian American myths of progress and white supremacy, including the “inevitability of the vanished Indian” and the imperative of total assimilation for non-white cultural survival.

These myths show themselves as constructed master narratives, which must be examined with distance and critical reflection as the United States continues to fight domestically, abroad and at its borders for political and cultural dominance. Considering the critical prognosis that August: Osage County “has now joined the (American) canon,” one may wonder: what does it mean to have Violet and the Weston home left in Johnna’s care (Choate 106)? Perhaps the ultimate postmodern tragedy for white America is history’s Others collapsing the borders, the destruction of dominant national myths and confirmation of something we have suspected for some time: identities are unstable and national histories are incomplete.

SANTA CLARA UNIVERSITY
Notes

1. Donald L. Kaufmann argues that one result of the ubiquitous image of the vanishing Indian is that Native Americans have been given a “permanent timeout” in American cultural representation, making the Indian “the one racial minority with a deprived present.... Unlike Blacks, whose stereotyped roles evolved with the times, the Indian found himself typecast as a historical relic” (114).

2. *August: Osage County* does not specifically deal with the ongoing American military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. However, one may connect the cultural anxieties of past American western expansion (symbolized by Manifest Destiny) to contemporary anxieties about the United States continuing efforts to expand its influence and primacy. America continues to extend its borders outward in ways that strain the myth of coherence at the nation’s center.

3. In his article, Wilmeth gives a thorough analysis of many of the most influential American plays that have helped to popularize Indian stereotypes (127–156).

4. Lyytinen points out that “the ‘Indian Princess’ type is ‘the female version of the ‘noble savage,’ who risks her own life for the advancement of the colonists’” (79).

5. Casting may also contribute to my reading of the role. Successful Native American actress Kimberley Guerrero originated the role of Johnna and continued with the cast throughout its Chicago premiere, Broadway and London runs. The currently touring company includes the extremely talented Delanna Studi. I mention both of these actresses because while I hold them in esteem, objectively, they both meet the expectations of the exotic Indian Princess phenotype: both Guerrero and Studi are thin, have clear golden tan skin, and wear their straight curtain of black-brown hair to their waists.

6. It should be noted that the playwright spent a great deal of his youth in Oklahoma, and has stated that many aspects of the work are semi-autobiographical. I read significant meaning behind the choice of this setting that extend Letts’s personal roots in Oklahoma, however.

7. Murray R. Wickett offers a detailed analysis of the political, cultural and social history of Oklahoma in his book *Contested Territory: Whites, Native Americans, and African Americans in Oklahoma 1865–1907*. He describes the tumultuous race relations between black freedmen, whites, and different Native American tribes through the political history of Indian Territory, Oklahoma Territory, and, eventually, the state of Oklahoma. See Wickett 8–13, 52, 61–66, 78–82, 109, 171–172.

8. Wickett explains that by the 1830s the Cherokees, Choctaws, Creeks, Seminoles, and Chickasaws owned vast tracts of attractive land and “had gone the furthest in adopting Anglo-American technology and culture,” which later earned them the name the Five Civilized Tribes (2). Nevertheless, these tribes were coerced to cede their traditional homelands and relocate to Indian Territory. The treacherous journey westward claimed thousands of lives and as now remembered as the “Trail of Tears” (4).

9. She hits Steve three times with a cast-iron skillet because he “was kissing her (Jean) and grabbing her” (Lette 118). This too can be read as an ironic turn in power, as the maid wields her domestic tools to forcibly subdue a male sexual predator.

References Cited


