6 Home on the Range

Space, Nation, and Mobility in *The Searchers*

> Through the process of domestication, the home contains within itself those wild or foreign elements that must be tamed; domesticity not only monitors the borders between the civilized and the savage but also regulates traces of the savage within itself.
> AMY KAPLAN/"MANIFEST DOMESTICITY"

Focusing on representations of mobility, space, and national identity, this essay reads John Ford's movie *The Searchers* (1956) in terms of its deployment of American "domestic" space, meaning both "home-centered" and in opposition to "foreign." I argue that *The Searchers* represents American national identity using tropes of space and mobility, in both thematic content and cinematic form. Tracing the ways in which this movie represents race and gender within private domestic spaces as well as against sweeping desert landscapes foregrounds the primacy of space in the American national imagination in the 1950s. Ford's movies are often cited among the quintessential Westerns of cinema history and, as Ella Shohat and Robert Stam have written, the Western "played a crucial pedagogical role in forming the historical sensibilities of generations of Americans" (115). Space and mobility in Ford's work bear the burden of representing the nation, not only within the movie's narrative, but also within the wider context of American public culture. In the following essay, I interpret *The Searchers* in terms of how representations of public and private space and geographic mobility operate within the dramatic narrative and the visual

economy of the movie, as well as within its contemporaneous cultural contexts of the Civil Rights Movement and the Cold War.

This chapter presents an interpretation of *The Searchers* centered around the movie's representation of different kinds of space: national and familial, public and private, foreign and domestic, indoor and outdoor. Because the term "space" is frequently employed in wildly divergent interpretive and theoretical strategies, I would like to clarify my use of the term here. As Michael Keith and Steve Pile point out in their groundbreaking essay collection, *Place and the Politics of Identity*:

> In order to articulate an understanding of the multiplicity and flexibility of relations of domination, a whole range of spatial metaphors are being used [in contemporary theory]: position, location, situation, mapping; geometrics of domination, center-margin, open-closed, inside-outside, global-local; liminal space, third space, not-space, impossible space. (1)

Many theorists use such spatial metaphors to describe power relations, such as cognitive mapping, for example, but in the process of importing the terminology from the discipline of geography, they often fail to fully define those terms, using them as if space were "absolute," a kind of "container, a co-ordinate system of discrete and mutually exclusive locations" thus eliding the relationality of social identities within particular spaces (75). According to Neil Smith and Cindi Katz, "spatial metaphors are problematic in so far as they presume that space is not" (75).

In this chapter, I begin with the axiom that space is indeed problematic: within the spaces of the home as well as on the open range, "the social, the political, and the economic do not just take place in 'time' and 'space,' they are in part constituted by temporality and spatiality" (Keith and Pile "Introduction Part 1" 27). Throughout this chapter I will discuss space in terms of material, social, and metaphorical meanings; for example, the domestic space of the family homestead is comprised of the material, the physical house and the land it sits on; the social, the racial and gendered power relations that operate within and around that house; and the metaphorical function that the home takes on as a symbol for the nation. As Keith and Pile forcefully argue, "we may now use the term 'spatiality' to capture the ways in which the social and the spatial are inextricably realized one in the other" ("Introduction Part 1" 6). Drawing on theories from the disciplines of So-

cial and Cultural Geography as well as American Studies and Cinema Studies, this chapter attempts to unravel the meanings and metaphors implicit in the spaces of *The Searchers*.

WESTERNS, SPACE, AND MOBILITY

John Ford was fond of telling the story about how, during his early Hollywood career as an extra, he played a Klansman in D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* and fell off his horse. His fondness for this anecdote provides a useful counter-point to those more familiar with Ford's celebrated status as a director: it links him, on horseback, with the Western genre for which he is famous, but humorously and humbly, while at the same time it places him firmly in the history of cinematic representations of race. Perhaps Ford's anecdote will take on additional resonance for readers of this chapter, which considers Ford's *The Searchers* within its specific cultural contexts and its representations of mobility, public and private space, and national and racial identity.

The trope of mobility suffuses his movies of all genres, and Ford, dubbed "America's cinematic poet laureate" by Andrew Sarris (90), is best remembered for his Westerns, movies in an inherently American genre that often represent conflicts around gender, race, and space. Mobility in Ford's work takes the physical form of horse, stagecoach, buckboard, locomotive, and Model T; figuratively, the movements are between town and country, civilization and wilderness. But the characters do not simply move from one discrete space to another, they also traverse spaces, usually depicted in wide angle landscape shots of deserts, mountains, gorges, and valleys. As Geoffrey O'Brien praises *The Searchers*, he emphasizes the primacy of movement across landscapes:

> Ethan and Martin crossing an icy plain at night, or riding downhill through deep snow, or silhouetted against a red sky as they travel along a ridge; the 7th Cavalry […] crossing a newly thawed stream, the camera moving down a narrow crevasse, the whole VistaVision image given over to a singular moment of rocky abstraction. Not one shot felt like an interpolation or interlude; the visual life of the film was a continuous balancing of immensity and intimacy. Movement through space, whether

of a hand in close-up or of an army in long shot, was always in the center of the drama. (O'Brien 19)

The crossing from one space to another, such as a man on horseback bisecting the frame, dwarfed against a Technicolor blue sky and blazing red mesas, has been called by Ford scholar Tag Gallagher a "Fordian symbol of the parade […] a formalized progression, a *passage*" (384). Gallagher rightly notes the importance of movement across landscapes, but Ford's use of doorways is equally important, signifying not only movement, but liminal spaces, the site of a shift from one kind of space to another. The oppressiveness of Ford's interiors, particularly his shots of ceilings and doorways, conveys the constricted feeling that drives many of his characters out into the desert's open spaces. Ford's classic Western draws a boundary around American domestic space, signifying the permeable borders of both the family home and the nation itself.

The Searchers is a 1950s Western that, through its use of space and mobility, speaks to American concerns about domestic and national boundaries. These concerns are not always at the surface of the narrative, but I want to situate the movie within the context of the national mood in which it was produced. At the particular historical moment when this movie was made, the national imagination had two important preoccupations: the Civil Rights Movement and the Cold War. Both these issues relied on one primary trope in articulating a national agenda: mobility. In the Civil Rights Movement, social, economic, and geographic mobility became a question of survival for many African Americans, while during the Cold War mobility was the primary enemy as government policy centered around the containment of Communism. The "domestic" is the center of conflicts located simultaneously in the private sphere, where racial issues take the form of fear of miscegenation and the debate around segregation, and in the public sphere, where mounting international tensions foster the threats of nuclear war and Communist spies. This chapter argues that spatial concerns such as these necessitate a reading of *The Searchers* in terms of mobility and space, whereby we can discern the tenacious discourses of domesticity in twentieth-century American culture as they represent concerns about citizenship and national security.

Reading Westerns in terms of landscape and identity, many critics in American Studies and Cinema Studies have theorized the parameters of

race, gender, and nation. Jane Tompkins's book *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns*, while provocative in its analysis of landscape and gender, brackets the discussion of race in Westerns; this omission implies that race has no significant bearing on her definition of the feminine, private, domestic sphere, which she convincingly argues is central rather than peripheral to the genre. I concur with her argument that gender is pivotal to the ideological foundation of the Western, but not to the point of excluding other crucial factors of identity such as race and nation.[1] Rather, I suggest that the operation of these terms of identity within the power relations in Westerns are just as crucial as, and in many cases difficult to separate from, considerations of gender. Richard Maltby's essay "A Better Sense of History: John Ford and the Indians," on the other hand, focuses on Ford's Native American characters and traces a brief but thorough history of movie Indians and the debate around their authenticity (35). Maltby's primary concern is with the racial dynamics of representation, but rather than completely sidestep gender, he refers to several different women's roles. Linking gender and race, Maltby correctly points out that the "division of heroines into light and dark [and into] schoolmarm and saloon-girl" signifies not only at the level of gender roles within white society, but also that, through association with Indian men, however involuntary, white women can be "degraded out of their skin color into a self-perpetuating Otherness" (43). Gender, then, interacts with race in the cinematic landscape and mythic national home of the Western, which functions as "the primary site in which Hollywood could maintain a racist discourse, in which racism was offered and enacted as a theory of history" (Maltby 37).

1 For example, Tompkins describes the moment, while watching The Searchers, when she realized that representations of Native American women in Westerns complicate her reading of women as icons of domesticity: the character Look "is treated so abominably by the characters—ridiculed, humiliated, and then killed off casually by the plot—that I couldn't believe my eyes." Tompkins realizes that Look and many other stereotyped Indian characters have offended her to the point that her "unbelief at the travesty of native peoples that Western films afford kept me from scrutinizing what was there." Unfortunately, Tompkins maintains the book's focus exclusively on gender because she "couldn't bear to take [Look] seriously; it would have been too painful" (8-10).

In agreement with Maltby, I find the Western a rich text for interrogating representations of the intersecting factors of race and gender in American culture; absent from his article, however, is a prolonged accounting for the spatial dimensions of these crucial social issues in the Western. I suggest that the grids of power implicit in the Western, whether that power is rooted in gender, race, nationality, or most likely a combination, can best be discerned by attending to the representation of space and mobility. Ford's wide angle shots of the desert landscape contrast powerfully with his claustrophobic low angle interior cinematography, separating the spheres of men and women, outdoor and indoor, and quite clearly privileging the former. Ford's vistas draw audiences into such struggles, impelling us to identify with the land, with the heroes who also identify with it, and with the nation itself. Ultimately, *The Searchers* requires a spatial reading that considers the competing interests of the American "domestic" in both senses of the word: civic, national, and military spaces and the private, feminine site of the home.

In cinema, images exert a spatial control over the ideological location of competing interests as well: geographers Stuart Aitken and Leo Zonn argue for the importance of "representations of, and the meanings attached to, places and the environment in terms of their relationship to power and contestation" (6). Audiences of Westerns expect a certain iconography, bearing familiar ideological echoes of heroism and triumph over adversity. As Keith and Pile remind us, "simultaneously present in any landscape are multiple enunciations of distinct forms of space—and these may be reconnected to the process of re-visioning and remembering the spatialities of counter-hegemonic cultural practices" ("Introduction Part 1" 6). The photography of the Western landscape represents the American nation still in its expansion westward, but also as a dangerous, still unconquered space, justifying the need for national defense. In *The Searchers*, a settler homestead is attacked and family decimated: mother Martha and daughter Lucy are raped, murdered, and mutilated, father Aaron is killed, and the youngest daughter Debbie is kidnapped by Scar, a Comanche warrior. Debbie's uncle, Ethan Edwards (John Wayne), and her adopted brother, Martin, were away from the home during the attack; when they discover the ruin in its wake, they set off on a seven-year search to find Debbie. Ethan's role is both conqueror of the enemy and defender of the American family, located

at the frontier where the contestation over land ownership and national sovereignty takes place.

According to David Harvey, the "conquest of space […] first requires that it be conceived of as something usable, malleable, and therefore capable of domination through human action" (254). Harvey points to the American system of homesteading and land settlement, which figures prominently in *The Searchers*, as an example of the "pulverization and fragmentation of the space of the United States along […] rationalistic lines" meant to allow "maximum liberty to move and settle in a reasonably egalitarian way" (255; 257). This kind of spatial organization of land ownership replaces earlier modes of communal land use; conversion from Indian territory to open range to privately owned land is a feature of most Westerns. White characters in *The Searchers* view this conversion as inevitable and just, in accordance with Manifest Destiny, while the Comanche and other Native Americans share neither their conception of the ownership of space nor their belief in divinely sanctioned white progress. As Harvey points out, conquest necessitates the instrumentalization of space as settlement requires the mapping and fragmenting of space; the ideology of American expansion is predicated upon a spatial model which conflicts with that of the Native Americans but which allows the white settlers to justify their cause. The question of power relations in frontier spaces is more complicated, as the settlement process blurs some class distinctions among whites but neglects the racial and gender inequalities upon which the community, and the nation, is founded. In this movie, the landscape is both the site and the subject of these conflicts and inequalities.

LANDSCAPE AS SYNECDOCHE FOR THE NATION

Ford's movies all employ a marked opposition between interior and exterior space, usually privileging the exterior, often in the vast landscapes of the American West. From the audience's point of view, the overwhelming visual images of sublime outdoor spaces represent power relations in a double dilemma: on the one hand, they "arouse the viewer's desire for, wish to identify with, an object that is overpowering and majestic" (Tompkins 76) The majesty of the West invites the audience to identify with the American desert landscape and all it represents: ruggedness, natural beauty, strength,

eternity, austerity. Tompkins reads the Western's "rejection of language and its emphasis on landscape" as signs of the genre's inherent, assertive masculinity, arguing that the "openness of the space means that domination can take place" (57; 74). On the other hand, the landscapes in Westerns can also be read as contested spaces where Native Americans battle European Americans, with Mexicans and Mexican Americans on either side, over the rights to the land, to the resources, and ultimately for control over the geographic, economic, and political spaces of the nation.

In *The Searchers*, the land signifies not only the nation, but the site of national and international conflict dependent on perspective and point of view: geographer Derek Gregory argues that "the very idea of landscape is shot through with ambivalences, tensions, and grids of power" (99). Certainly the fictional settings of *The Searchers* bear the traces of these ambivalences, as it is set in "Texas 1868." We know that white Americans live in Texas only because they appropriated the land from Native Americans and Mexicans, and in the 1860s much blood is still being shed as the Comanche resist.[2] But the characters in the movie perceive themselves as pioneers in a divinely sanctioned nation-building enterprise. The power relations within the contact zone of "Texas 1868" are by no means stable, as the isolated homesteaders are vulnerable to raids by the embattled Indian tribes; the movie emphasizes this in the constant pans across the apparently empty desert, corresponding to characters in the movie vainly attempting to spot possible Comanche aggressors hiding in the desert. The wide open spaces can hide violent attackers hoping to thwart white progress into the West, as the beauty of the wilderness also suggests danger.

The land itself occupies a prominent role in Ford's work as setting, motivation, and subject, even when realism must be sacrificed for iconicity. *The Searchers* is set in Texas, where the land is flat and grassy prairies alternate with dry sandy plains, but filmed in Monument Valley, Utah, with dramatic, unearthly towering formations of bright red rock: as Gallagher points out, "Perhaps *The Searchers*' 'Texas 1868' looks nothing like the

2 The movie couches the violence in more individualistic and emotional terms, as the Comanche warrior Scar seeks revenge against the whites who murdered his family; Ethan's murderous revenge mission also places him on equal footing with the Native American, while at the same time any legitimate grievance is elided.

real Texas; but it does look the way 'Texas' *ought* to look" (329). But for a thinking audience, the idea of starting small homestead ranches among the mesas and buttes of the southwestern desert seems foolhardy: there is little water, no arable land, and sparse vegetation for grazing herds. Ignoring the material reality of the landscape in order to represent the visual majesty of "the West," the cinematography of *The Searchers* sacrifices geographic accuracy and even credibility for sublime myth-making images. Within the ideological geography of the Western, America is a majestic, exceptional nation, whose appropriate landscape should also be majestic and exceptional; the sublime Monument Valley vistas are the idealized representation of all of America, the best of America.

But as Richard Maltby points out, in the critics' canonization of Ford's Westerns, "Monument Valley came to represent the landscape of the West and to encourage by the extremes of its appearance a view of Westerns as abstracted and allegorical," enabling the further abstractions of interpretation that read Westerns as parables of inevitable white progress" (39). Ford's wide angle shots of the desert signify its emptiness which waits to be filled, occluding the presence of Native Americans except as a threat to American manifest destiny who must be driven out or destroyed. Furthermore, the audience is conflicted by the identification of Ethan Edwards with the geography of Monument Valley, the quintessential American hero moving across the quintessential American landscape. At the same time the landscapes inspire audiences' admiration for the natural beauty of the land itself, the character of Ethan complicates that admiration. This ambivalence resides at the core of my reading of *The Searchers*: we are simultaneously awed and repulsed by the spectacle of the land as we are by the main character Ethan. The empty deserts of the cinematic West always echo with the absence of their previous inhabitants who are being driven out or exterminated by white "pioneers," and we are similarly drawn to reject Ethan at first but later cajoled to accept him again.

The opening scene shows Ethan riding up to his brother's family homestead, where his former beloved Martha now lives as his brother's wife. Ethan's figure is framed by the dark outlines of the doorway opening onto the sunny desert landscape; similarly, the concluding shot of the movie returns to a doorway framing the desert, again framing Ethan as he hesitates and turns his back on home. Ford's doorway framing device shows the audience that the domestic environs of the home are the dark antithesis of the

bright, sunny desert landscapes; the indoor spaces of *The Searchers* are constricting and tight in complete contrast to the wide open outdoors. Ford shoots the indoor spaces as physically cramped and claustrophobic, the dimly lit rooms shot at a low angle, with heavy, timbered ceilings that seem to be closing in on people. Most obvious is Ethan's discomfort in the house, which critics ascribe to his love for his brother's wife Martha (Slotkin 464-65; Gallagher 324). This personal motivation is clear from the subtle actions of Ethan and Martha: for example, when she thinks she is unobserved, Martha gingerly caresses Ethan's coat and embraces it as if it were Ethan. But Ethan's awkwardness in the house also stems from his strong sense of belonging in the outdoors, in the masculine public sphere. Borne out not only in cinematography but in dramatic action, Ethan's discomfort in the home amplifies his belief that his life is out on the range and he likes it that way: when he enters the house he seems ill at-ease, jumping at the first opportunity to ride out into the desert. The opening theme song, too, expresses this preference: "What make a man to wander, what makes a man to roam/what makes a man to wander, and turn his back on home?" While Ethan's impossible love for his brother's wife provides one answer to the song's question, I suggest that Ethan's need to be outside rather than inside, to turn his back on home, also stems from his potential for violence, the gun in the hand, which is out of place in the private family home but which *The Searchers* depicts as necessary to the preservation of the national home.

This is the spatial contradiction between the public and private spheres that *The Searchers* presents but doesn't resolve: the necessity for a violent element residing outside the family home to keep the security that dwells within the home. Ethan's paradoxical motivation, the movie suggests, is love for that private home in which he is uncomfortable. But there is another home in *The Searchers* which also represents the national home, where Ethan is profoundly at ease: the desert landscape with a cold wind blowing. The cold wind does blow through several winters during Ethan's search to restore Debbie to the family, but it also suggests the Cold War that is waged to protect the national home from the hostile foreign threat. The simultaneous and contradictory emphases on private domesticity and public militarism in 1950s America are represented in the bunker-like family house that has no place for Ethan, even though its safety depends on his potential for violence.

The Searchers provides the audience with an urge to sympathize with Ethan, even as they must acknowledge his violence, because Americans in the 1950s wanted to see justification for their aggressive foreign policy of nuclear proliferation and massive retaliation. Richard Slotkin makes this point convincingly, although I differ with his strict separation of domestic and international:

> Although the concern with racism suggests that we see the film as addressing the domestic or "civil rights" side of contemporary ideological concern, *The Searchers* is also a "Cold War" Western which addresses issues of war and peace from the perspective of a microcosmic community forced literally to choose between being "Red" and being dead. (464-65; see also Gallagher 324)

The fact that Ethan the Indian-killer is the hero, however ambivalent, makes *The Searchers* indisputably political, and critics for decades have tried to decipher the movie as "racist" or "anti-racist." I suggest here that such a debate is moot: *The Searchers* paints a damning picture of essentialist racism while at the same time it reproduces many appalling stereotypes and privileges the white point of view. Rather than dissect the film in such absolutist terms as "racist" or "anti-racist," this chapter attempts to unpack what the movie says about the contradictions and controversies of the 1950s. I read the spatial politics of *The Searchers* in context of not only civil rights in the domestic, national American home, but also in terms of the bigger picture of American Cold War foreign policy.

CIVIL RIGHTS, WHITENESS, AND *THE SEARCHERS*

Ethan Edwards is a former Confederate soldier who also fought against Juarez in Mexico; he is a virulent Indian-hater, which to an audience in the 1950s bears heavy implications in the national upheavals around Civil Rights. The Supreme Court decision in *Brown* v. *Board of Education* (1954) was a major milestone on paper, but President Eisenhower, like many politicians at the time, didn't personally support the decision and failed to enforce desegregation in the South until forced to do so by the 1957 crisis at Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas (Slotkin 154–55). In March of 1956, *The Searchers* opened in theaters across the country,

in the middle of the 381-day Montgomery bus boycott begun by the civil disobedience of Rosa Parks in 1955. This assertion of the right to a seat, the right to public space, resonates strongly with the issues of race and contested spaces in *The Searchers*, particularly in the scene when Ethan and Martin first meet.

When Ethan meets Martin, the adopted son of Martha and Aaron, the family is seated around the dinner table and Martin walks in and sits down. They are introduced, and Ethan looks suspiciously at him, asking Martin if he is a "half-breed," to which Martin replies that his ancestors are all English and Welsh except for "one eighth Cherokee." Ethan is troubled by this answer but jokes that at least he isn't Comanche, a tribe he perceives (and the movie represents) as more inherently hostile than the Cherokees. Ethan's shock at a suspected half-breed sitting at the family dinner table acts out a racist white's reaction to the Civil Rights Movement's demands for equal rights to public spaces, particularly public sit-ins. Martin's defensive claim that he is seven-eighths white seems to satisfy his adoptive family, while Ethan, who represents unreconstructed American racism, is still suspicious of him. In this respect, the character of Martin in the movie is markedly changed from the character in the 1954 novel, also entitled *The Searchers*, by Alan Le May: the book's Martin is orphaned in childhood by a murder raid, as is the movie's Martin, but never described as having any Indian ancestry. By changing this character to be part Native American, the movie consciously brings the racial other into the security of the family home, a non-white presence within the nation who must be incorporated into the home so that outside enemies can be defeated.

In 1956, when *The Searchers* was released, the "private" problem of racial difference had already entered the public arena of the courts and the public spaces of city buses. Thus Martin's place at the family table in the movie signifies not only an orphan who is embraced by a white American family, but a racially mixed orphan. His partial whiteness appears to be his justification for his position in the family but their acceptance of him also suggests that their fear of the outside enemy, the hostile Comanche, enables them to be more flexible than the previous generation of white Americans, represented by Ethan the Indian-killer. Even Martin's name suggests that he is part of the white family, closely resembling Martha's, but this resemblance may also trouble Ethan since he loves Martha but sees Martin as a racial other, not quite white. Ethan's obsession with whiteness and racial

purity mark his character from the beginning; his definition of family and nation are very clearly defined as exclusively white.[3]

Throughout the first two-thirds of *The Searchers*, Ethan's character reveals his ruthless hatred of Indians. Ethan's hatred becomes unbearable even for the most sympathetic viewers in the scene where he attempts to slaughter as many buffalo as possible so that Scar's clan will have fewer food sources. The scene is rightly noted by critics as a major turning point in audience identification with Ethan, when it becomes impossible to sympathize with him because of his sadistic racism, and here our identification shifts to Martin, the younger, more rational man (Gallagher 327). The buffalo scene is immediately followed by the searchers' discovery of an Indian camp strewn with the corpses of women and children recently massacred by Custer's 7th Cavalry; in both scenes, our sympathies, and Martin's, lie with the victims, innocent buffalo and innocent Indians, rather than with Ethan and the Cavalry. But the parallel construction of sympathies places the Indians at the same level as buffalo, their deaths clearly presented to the audience to foster sympathy, not identification, suggesting that wholesale slaughter is wrong while at the same time the Indians are animals.

Slotkin's reading of the parallels between the buffalo and the cavalry massacre scenes is instructive:

> Martin is appalled by the mentality the massacre reveals in his own people—they are no better than Comanches. This perception chimes with his growing realization (in the buffalo-killing passage) that Ethan is motivated by the same "spirit of massacre" that drives both Scar and the cavalrymen. (468)

This moment in *The Searchers* marks the audience's simultaneous distancing from Ethan and growing understanding of Scar, whose violence has the same motive as Ethan's: personal revenge. At the same time, Martin is portrayed as the real voice of reason: his rejection of violence and vengeance throughout the movie represents the peace-loving American ideal which

3 For a revealing reading of the character of Ethan in the novel, the script, and the finished movie, see Eckstein. His research shows that not only is the character of Ethan made much more negative (violent, racist) in the transition from novel to script, but also that Ford introduced significant changes during filming to further demonize Ethan's character.

nonetheless needs to be comfortable with violence, embodied by Ethan. Martin recognizes in Ethan's and Scar's personally motivated behaviors, as well the U.S. government's participation in retaliatory murder via the Cavalry massacre, the "cycle of victimization and revenge from which it is possible that no one will escape alive and untainted" (Slotkin 469). Douglas Pye also points out that the juxtaposition of the two massacres "marks eloquently the way in which Ethan's racial hatred is repeated at the institutional level in the genocidal actions of the U.S. cavalry" (229).

Reading the buffalo slaughter and Cavalry massacre scenes, and in particular Ethan's unrepentant white warrior persona (he never surrendered his Confederate saber after the Civil War), in terms of the American Cold War strategy, the simultaneous sympathy for and dehumanization of the Indians makes more sense. The U.S. announced its policy of "massive retaliation" in 1954, which held that any attack, however limited and whether conventional or nuclear, would be answered with a nuclear attack (Hobsbawm 235). If provoked, wholesale slaughter would thus be unavoidable, and the Soviets, like the Indian women and children, would remain at the level of buffalo, whose deaths the U.S. cannot prevent.

Together with the overt comparison between the slaughter of Indians and buffalo, Ethan's blunt questioning of Martin about racial ancestry signifies his obsession with race. His seeming adherence to the "one drop rule"[4] definition of whiteness marks his contemporary significance for the audiences of the 1950s, who can read him as a staunch segregationist. Maltby cites critics' habit of reading Ethan as a scapegoat racist character: "'Our racial prejudice and our guilt for it,' says Brian Henderson, 'are placed on [Ethan's] shoulders, then he is criticized, excluded, or lampooned, mythically purging us of them […] Ethan is excluded for our sins; that is why we find it so moving.'" (qtd. in Maltby 41). But Ethan's gradual acceptance of Martin, and his indifference to Martin's engagement with Laurie, a white woman, prevent us from believing that Ethan sees Martin as "pure Indian" and therefore not white. Ethan's character development, from

4 The legal convention of "hypodescent" in U.S. racial categorization in which a person with "one drop" of African American blood cannot be considered white, even if a majority of the person's ancestors are white. For a thorough examination of the one drop rule including its history and in current debates, see Hickman 1161.

staunch racist into a more flexible variety, prevents him from being merely a scapegoat. Ethan is, after all, played by John Wayne at the peak of his popularity. I suggest that Ethan's role shifts from racist scapegoat to sympathetic loner. That shift itself demonstrates the function of Ethan's character: first, to show that white racists can be rehabilitated to accept non-whites into the domestic spaces of the family home, and second, that even rehabilitated racists have an important role in the nation's defense against foreign enemies.

Allowing the "mostly white" Martin into the private sphere of the home allows Ethan to concentrate on the real enemy outside the home, in the public sphere: he can still hate Comanche and be a good American. The audience's split sympathy, with Ethan and with Martin, is never fully resolved, but the complicated ending of the film gives some clear signals about who really holds the authority over the home: the man who declines to cross its threshold at the end. As a Cold War Western, *The Searchers* must demonstrate the need for Ethan's violent presence on the scene just outside the home: the Red menace, which is more important than "domestic" matters.

COLD WAR CONTEXT IN *THE SEARCHERS*

Richard Slotkin points out that the number of feature-length Westerns produced during the years immediately following World War II increased dramatically, "from 14 in 1947 to […] 46 in 1956" (347). Even after the movie Western's peak in the mid-1950s, Westerns became enormously popular with growing American television audiences (Slotkin 348). The continued national interest in the myths of the West demonstrates an enduring sense of pride in that segment of American history. This interest is especially noteworthy when we consider that most Westerns only concern themselves with a relatively narrow window of time in the history of the United States: "Westerns privilege a period of roughly fifty years, and return time and again to particular sites and events" in the latter half of the nineteenth century (Shohat and Stam 115). At this point in history, the nation is busily developing the vast spaces of the west, from the early pioneer towns to the Gold Rush to the consolidation of the country with the railroad.

The historical time and place of the isolated Texas frontier homestead surrounded by murderous Comanche engages a familiar narrative in the Western genre: the terror of a lone outpost encircled by enemies about to attack. This "imagery of encirclement" common in Westerns rests on the notion that the frontier whites are surrounded by hostile savages, and, because the Western's "point-of-view conventions consistently favor the Euro-American protagonists," the sense of encirclement creates an atmosphere of tension as the family nervously awaits attack (Shohat and Stam 120). Portrayed as vulnerable and outnumbered, the family is forced into self-defense and struggles to stay together against the onslaughts of savage attackers. In the tense, silent scene as the family wordlessly prepares for the Comanche attack, the teenage daughter Lucy finally deciphers the unspoken fear of her parents and screams in horror.

Most American audiences in 1956 were familiar with the feeling of being surrounded by hostile enemies waiting to attack: the demonization of the Soviet Union had only escalated since the 1948 Gallup poll in which "76 percent of Americans believed that Russia was out to rule the world, and […] 63 percent expected a full-scale war within the next twenty-five years" (Chafe 109). The certainty of coming nuclear war lasted through the 1950s, and the fear of outside attack pervaded the private domestic sphere that was so much a part of American national identity during that decade. This combination of exalted domesticity and escalating national defense manifested itself in strange ways: Elaine Tyler May begins her book *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War* with a story, originally published in *Life* magazine, of a newlywed couple embarking on their two-week honeymoon in their bomb shelter, which she rightly calls "a powerful image of the nuclear family in the nuclear age" (3-5). *The Searchers* participates in the convergence of these two popular Cold War discourses by evoking the feeling of encirclement and the sense that the family is digging in to protect itself from a coming attack: the Edwards' homestead ranch house resembles a bunker designed for self-defense: it has small shuttered windows, thick adobe walls, low ceilings, and a heavily timbered overhanging roof. The ending of the movie, with the nuclear family reconstructed as the reunited couple Martin and Laurie (his fiancée) walk back into the house with the rescued Debbie while Ethan remains aloof and outside the house, reinforces *The Searchers*'s message about the convergence of domesticity and national defense.

Richard Slotkin interprets *The Searchers* as a Cold War Western, meaning that it can be read as an allegory of U.S. foreign affairs during the postwar period, and my reading shares this premise. However, Slotkin's assessment of the movie's participation in Cold War discourses differs from mine in its specifics, in that his focuses only on American foreign policy, which vacillates between "search and rescue" and "search and destroy" in the escalating conflicts in Vietnam:

> Through Ethan Edwards, Ford metaphorically explores the logic of the "savage war"/Cold War analogy . . . and finds that it produces an overwhelming, and finally malign, pressure to choose "destruction" over "rescue." American policy-makers would explore that same logic in articulating and putting into practice a new doctrine for counterinsurgency in the Third World. (472)

The carving up of the Third World by the Cold War superpowers was certainly worrisome for many Americans in the 1950s, but hardly as much cause for wide public concern as other fears that posed threats closer to home, such as the possibility of Soviet attack or nuclear war.

Slotkin's Vietnam interpretation is convincing insofar as it identifies a similar logic in the movie and in U.S. foreign policy, but I have two problems with it. First, my interest lies more in how *The Searchers* participates in familiar public discourses about foreign policy with which audiences could identify in 1956: not whether to rescue or destroy Indochina, but how to fortify America against the enemies outside and within the national home. Second, and more important, I propose that rather than adopting an exclusively "foreign policy" framework for reading the movie as Slotkin does, we should attend to both foreign and domestic. Only then can we discern how the movie articulates the ways in which foreign policies are inseparable from "domestic" policies, both in the sense of the American national home and private family home.

THE CONVERGENCE OF COLD WAR AND CIVIL RIGHTS DISCOURSES IN *THE SEARCHERS*

Along with the fear of nuclear war with the U.S.S.R., internal problems also worried Americans in the 1950s, as Billy Graham warned of "barbarians

beating at our gates from without and moral termites from within" (Chafe 109). *The Searchers* constructs a complicated picture of the American home: the Indians ("Reds") are indeed poised for attack, but there are also "domestic" threats to unity, including racial others demanding to be seated at the family dinner table. Moreover, the intimate connections between these concerns appear frequently in the reactionary political discourse of the time: Georgia Governor Eugene Talmadge claimed that African American Civil Rights protests were motivated by "Communist doctrines from outside the state" (Chafe 107). I argue that the movie's representations of mobility and domesticity communicate the national concerns about an international threat—Communists attacking America and infiltrating the nation with spies—as well as a "domestic" threat— increasing tensions about civil rights. In this reading, I depart from Slotkin's interpretation of the film because his focus brackets the domestic in order to elaborate American anxieties over international enemies, re-enacting the separation of spheres that I suggest limits our understanding of the text. As Amy Kaplan and Elaine Tyler May argue in the contexts of the American nineteenth century and the 1950s respectively, private and public spheres—domestic and international—are two sides of the same coin. National concerns about international military threats become implicated in "domestic" concerns about allegedly private issues: segregation and racism in American society and institutions. Domestic unity, including racial desegregation, makes a stronger nation that can stand up to the outside threat and better combat the "moral termites from within." I read *The Searchers* as a 1950s Western that expresses American fears of the threat from outside the "home" or nation, as well as the growing anxieties about black demands for the full rights of citizenship, for equal membership in the national "family." The fact that both internal and external threats are portrayed as Native Americans, albeit of different tribes, only underscores the racial and ethnic undertones and the inseparability of these two seemingly "separate" spheres.

Anti-communism, according to historian Eric Hobsbawm, "was genuinely and viscerally popular in a country built on individualism and private enterprise where the nation itself was defined in exclusively ideological terms ('Americanism') which could be virtually defined as the polar opposite of communism" (235). In my reading of *The Searchers* as a Cold War narrative, nationalistic and xenophobic anti-communism takes the form of nationalistic and racist Indian-hating, which motivates Ethan's character.

Ethan's definition of American is white, defined as the polar opposite of Indian (or black, recall his loyalty to the defeated Southern Confederacy), but we discover that his definition of white is not purely biological in the scene where he and Martin look for Debbie among a group of former captives of the Comanche.

These white women are visibly traumatized and when a soldier remarks, "It's difficult to believe they're white," Ethan replies, "They ain't white anymore—they're Comanche." The scene suggests that the women's insanity derives from their captivity: this representation of their madness creates a problem of perspective that Pye argues is, when read alongside Debbie's seemingly assimilated life with the Comanche witnessed later, a contradiction within the film's racial-ideological narrative:

> At the heart of this troubled and troubling process of negotiation is miscegenation itself, the sexual act which is the focus of Ethan's and Laurie's fear and hatred. […] In the material we have looked at here, two attitudes are present: in one, inter-racial marriage can produce the well-balanced Martin and apparently well-integrated Debbie; in the other, miscegenation can be imagined only as rape and its results as madness, violence and death. (234)

The white captives scene does indeed trouble any reading of the film as "anti-racist," as Pye points out, because the point-of-view shots structurally equate Ethan's reactions to the captives with Martin's and the soldier's even as, portraying the horror of the women's situation, the objective shots of the captives evoke the same reaction from the audience (233). Ethan leaves the scene with his hatred of Comanches and miscegenation justified, even intensified, while Martin is silent and upset. Both men appear to be wondering whether Debbie will be insane when they find her, and if so, whether her insanity will signify a sexual relationship with a Comanche. This fear is verbalized by Martin's fiancée, Laurie, in words that horrify Martin: when he explains to her that he wants to bring Debbie back to live as part of their white community, Laurie replies viciously, "Fetch what home? The leavin's of a Comanche buck sold time and again to the highest bidder with savage brats of her own?" To Martin's dismay, Laurie argues that they should kill Debbie because that is what Martha, Debbie's mother, would have wanted (recall that Martha was raped and murdered by Comanche at the beginning).

Like Laurie's appalling tirade, Ethan's response to the fear of miscegenation is to declare his intention to kill Debbie when they find her, because whether she is insane or happily partnered with a Comanche man, she will no longer be white, as the captives "ain't white anymore— they're Comanche." When the searchers do finally see Debbie, she wears Indian clothing with her hair in braids and doesn't show any signs that she recognizes them; afterwards, Ethan echoes his reaction to the captives when he shouts at Martin, "She ain't Debbie—she's Comanch'!" Reading this response in terms of the Cold War, Slotkin argues that this is Ethan's turn from "search and rescue" to "search and destroy," mirroring American foreign policy in Vietnam and other Third World spheres of influence (471). But here is where a combined reading of foreign policy with domestic civil rights discourse makes the text more coherent than Slotkin's approach: Debbie as the object of the search signifies the problem of the other, both as an ally of the "Reds" and as a racialized other within the "white" nation. The two men's views of her represent the two attitudes available to Americans in the 1950s: Martin's acceptance of racial difference and love for Debbie as a family member even though she is not his blood relation, and his abhorrence of the revenge massacres mark him as a liberal integrationist. Ethan, on the other hand, is a violent Indian-hater who would kill his niece rather than let her live as a "Red," thus combining anti-integrationist with anti-communist sentiment. Given this split into opposite corners, Ethan's subsequent change of heart and Debbie's return to the fold become the keys to the cultural meanings of *The Searchers*'s ending.

Ethan's change of heart—he doesn't kill Debbie when he has the opportunity, but instead swings her in the air like a girl—is tempered by his abrupt and solitary departure at the end of the film. We can read him as less monstrous than he was at the beginning, but he still isn't "domesticated" enough to join the happy family. Instead Ethan walks away, having saved Debbie and returned Martin to his future wife, and the door closes. Ethan is "partially redeemed," in Stowell's words, because he doesn't follow through with killing Debbie (131). But he also still remains outside the family home. Ethan isn't a family man, a ladies' man, or a company man: we are made to believe that he belongs "out there," riding the range, alone with his gun and his horse, ready to fight Indians and rescue white women. His role as security force protecting the home gives him the authority to control membership in the family, and his decision to allow certain racial

others into the fold suggests that they do live up to his standards of whiteness after all.

The younger generation in the character of Laurie is just as racist as Ethan though in the end she too is willing to allow Debbie back into the family, as Ethan eventually relented in his vow to kill her. But the "white" family at the end of the movie depends on Ethan's power to protect their home. As the nation in the 1950s began to make concessions to Civil Rights, accepting African Americans into the white national family, American militarism continued to escalate the arms race using the Red threat as justification. In this light, domestic stability depends on the military muscle that keeps outside threats at bay, embodied in the public imagination as John Wayne[5] and in the movie as his character Ethan Edwards, whose dogged pursuit of Debbie he sees as his nature. He describes himself to Martin as "a critter who just keeps coming on" regardless of hardship or passing time. Ethan's perseverance and determination has sinister overtones, because his determination to persist in his search, his revenge, and ultimately his defense of the white family, is represented as a justification for genocide.

Critics have debated the ending of *The Searchers* for decades, and I find Pye's argument, along with Slotkin's, most compelling.[6] I concur with Pye's premise that "*The Searchers* allows no comfortable identification with or disengagement from its hero (who is both monstrous *and* John Wayne)" (229). Slotkin's interpretation is also convincing in his recognition of the unresolved audience identification. Rather than argue for an absolutist ideological reading of "racist" or "anti-racist," making Ethan fully sympathetic or unsympathetic, he points out the ambivalence of the ending:

5 For an excellent analysis of the cinematic meanings associated with Wayne, see Thomas.

6 Gallagher reads Ethan's change of heart as evidence that Ethan's character is a symbol of the racist society, citing other characters including Laurie who endorse his plan to kill Debbie (333). Thus he can interpret Ethan's reversal of that decision as evidence that white racist society can also change. This doesn't account for Ethan's departure at the end; in fact, according to this logic, Ethan would be welcomed into the home by the family that he has restored.

> The moral confusion of the ending is responsible for two recurrent misreadings of the film. A "left" misreading sees it as an exemplar of the very racism it decries. A "right" misreading sees Ethan Edwards as an entirely heroic figure whose harsh manner and personal isolation are the consequences of his devotion to his mission and his unique understanding of the red menace. (472)

Slotkin aptly points out that a left misreading would focus on race and the film's relevance in the debates over civil rights, whereas a right misreading would take Ethan as a valiant defender of America against the Soviet threat. I suggest that each of these two (mis)interpretations on its own is indeed a misreading, but that if we allow for both readings at once, we may find what shred of resolution the film will allow. Because of the movie's insistent contrasts between indoor and outdoor, private and public, family and nation, we are drawn to interpret these spaces in terms of one another. The play on the meaning of domestic throughout this essay is an attempt to weave together these seemingly discrete spaces by emphasizing the social relations that connect them.

Ethan's violent presence outside the home makes possible the domestic scene at the end of the film, just as the renewed fervor for domesticity in the 1950s also depended on the military-industrial complex, including nuclear arms. In other words, audiences in 1956 could read the movie as a parable showing how the restoration of the private sphere and its continued security is only feasible if the public sphere is secured by force. As Amy Kaplan points out, "The idea of foreign policy depends on the sense of the nation as a domestic space imbued with a sense of athomeness, in contrast to an external world perceived as alien and threatening" (582). The emphasis on the external threat gives even racist whites a reason to accept racial difference: knowing that the home must be strong and secure allows the racist Laurie to accept Debbie and Martin although she knows Debbie has been living with an Indian husband for years and may have mixed-race children and Martin is one-eighth Cherokee. This domestic scene has obvious integrationist and assimilationist overtones, but the presence of the warrior patrolling the periphery makes the happy reunion seem somehow ominous, like the honeymooners in the bomb shelter. Ethan turns away and disappears in-

to the landscape as the door closes and the final frame fades to black.[7] Ethan's location outside the home doesn't prevent him from exercising authority over the family: he identifies its limits, deciding who lives, who dies, and who remains in the family.

CONCLUSION

In *The Searchers*, Ethan is always in motion: riding up to the house, across the western states, into the desert. The landscapes that frame his obsessive search for Debbie and his self-identification as a "critter who just keeps coming on" suggest that he is a natural stalker and conqueror, even though we know he has been on the losing side of at least two wars. Ethan's nature is to kill, and the movie suggests that he is as "savage" as he claims the Indians are: he is a classic Indian-hater "whose knowledge of Indians engenders profound and undying hatred rather than sympathetic understanding" (Slotkin 462). The movie portrays Ethan as a nomadic killing machine, set against the backdrop of Monument Valley landscapes that Ford made into visual icons of the American West, signifying the open spaces of the growing nation and the western territories waiting to be conquered. *The Searchers* portrays a Western landscape within whose time and space we can read signs of an ongoing struggle for a renegotiation of national identity along racial lines, taking place in a context of an ongoing, albeit cold, war.

Beginning with his part as extra in *The Birth of a Nation*, John Ford has played a role in American cinematic representations of race and nation. This chapter has argued that Ford's representations of American national identity during the 1950s are intimately bound up in questions of space, mobility, and domesticity. In its movements between foreign and home, public and private, *The Searchers* articulates the ideological complexities of the 1950s. His attention to the mobility trope in American history offers a geographic and social narrative of the power relations that reside in the landscapes of the movie as well as the "domestic" and foreign policy issues

7 Gallagher reads the doorway shot that begins *The Searchers* as a sign of sex: the darkness of the womb, Ethan's ambivalent feelings for Martha, who opens the door, but that doesn't explain the final doorway shot as Ethan turns away (334–45).

plaguing the country at the time of its production. As John Wayne makes his way through the landscapes of Monument Valley, audiences have access to the contested spaces that have always made up the United States, both within its borders and in its relations with other countries. The desert setting in Monument Valley memorializes the American landscape, and Ethan in the middle distance completes the vision: the lone ranch house, occupied by the family and protected by the abrasive but loyal warrior.

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