

Silent Narratives and Post-Recession Anxieties in Debra Granik's *Winter's Bone* (2010)

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Abstract: The article analyzes Debra Granik's portrayal of the rural working-class in the mystery drama *Winter's Bone* in the context of post-recession anxieties, social mobility, and community isolation so as to contest popular conceptions of this demographic. Through a review of Hollywood stereotypes, the impact of the American Dream on the image of the working-class, and an examination of the film's cinematography, the article further studies the influence of liminality and internal transgressions on the image of this community. An additional analysis of the depiction of poverty, sexual politics, and the role of nature allows for the positioning of the rural working-class within the framework of a "forgotten" America.

Keywords: working-class, post-recession, stereotypes, social mobility, rural spatiality

Hollywood's normative depictions of upward mobility have had a profound impact on the way Americans have imagined the working-class. Presented and pre-interpreted through the Hollywood lens, stories of individual struggle have allowed audiences to internalize a spectrum of stereotypical working-class images, which, in turn, have helped define this demographic despite scholars' own inability to capture class boundaries. However, portrayals of the urban working-class have dwarfed those of their rural counterparts to offer highly superficial ideas regarding the latter's socioeconomic condition. Particularly in the face of economic crises, the ideological baggage which assigns individualism and freedom to rural spatiality, coupled with the uncontested superiority of upward mobility, offers a false understanding of both physical and social mobility among rural communities. If the post-recession appraisal of the middle-class's volatility has encouraged a reassessment of the American Dream, it has likewise questioned the notion of class transitions within environments of limited financial prospects. Under the conditions of sudden, erratic shifts in the market, it becomes feasible that social immobility may be redefined as "a relief from the devastating pain of unfinished class transition" for these communities (Berlant 212). This type of defense mechanism can be found at the very core of Debra Granik's *Winter's Bone* (2010).

This article examines *Winter's Bone*'s transgressions of internal boundaries to challenge common conceptions about individuality and freedom within rural working-class communities. For this purpose, it explores the film's representation of the working-class through its narration of poverty, liminality, sexual politics, and depictions of nature. First, it briefly examines Hollywood's depiction of what used to be known as the American Dream and its subsequent impact on the working-class narrative to establish the cultural backdrop against which the film was created. Next, it analyzes the ways in which the story intersects with the country noir, gothic, and the folk horror. With focus on Ozark stereotypes, Southern nostalgia, "white trash" consumer practices, and insecurities of being "Othered," the article

determines the boundary between insiders and outsiders to review the liminality of Ree's character and her consequential ability to circumvent the rigidity of her environment. Using Basil Bernstein's work on linguistic codes, the article further discusses the idea of "restricted code" to examine the implications of silence among *Winter's Bone* community. Next, with regard to the region's insularity, it analyzes the consequences of the community's efforts to preserve an expiring model of sexual politics. Finally, the paper reviews the implications of living on the border of a failed civilization and nature, alongside the significance of animals throughout *Winter's Bone* plot to determine the community's position within the working-class.

The pedagogical impact of film narratives which has continuously shaped the image of the U.S. as a democratic and, what is more, egalitarian society, has been effectively summarized by Robert Kolker in his statement:

The reason that attention must be paid to film is that most of us get our stories—our narratives and myths—from it, or its close cousin, television. In other words, from the late nineteenth century onward, people have turned to film as entertainment, escape, *and* education—as an affirmation of the way they live or think they ought to live their lives. (1)

As a source of normative stories, the big screen seems to have sanctified the idea of equal opportunity as a legitimate, timeless, *American* phenomenon. By championing individualism, the features furthered notions that blame for economic failure could only reside within the individual. Holtzman et al. even summarized the far-reaching effect of meritocracy on common consciousness by stating "many of us feel that if we identify and recognize a class system in the United States, we are challenging and questioning the very fiber of democracy. It may even seem unpatriotic to consider the possibility of the existence of an American class system based on the accident of birth rather than on merit, virtue, and hard work" (149).

At the same time, as the American Dream was rooted in the idea of the accessibility of upward mobility, the middle-class became a dominant point of reference for success stories. As a demographic, they seemed to materialize the myth of equal opportunity in a way that fostered hope in financial improvement unlike the success stories of the uber-rich. Their values became the winning values and so, middle-class families became a template against which all American families would sooner or later be measured.

In light of these efforts to display upward mobility, it becomes evident how the vast majority of working-class narratives appear to be constructed in reference to this idea. The characters are often seen along the lines of a binary structure enabling an easy comparison with their middle-class counterparts. However, this type of depiction was not the case in early American cinema. In his work *Working-Class Hollywood: Silent Film and the Shaping of Class in America*, Steven J. Ross describes the ways in which a wide range of reformers depicted the struggles of the working-class thanks to the wide accessibility of the new inexpensive medium. Ross claims that during the first two decades of the 20th century films and the working-class were connected in three essential ways: "working people were the industry's

main audience; they were the frequent subjects of films; and they were makers of movies—both as employees who labored in studio lots and as independent producers who turned out their own pictures” (6-7).

The films of the silent era “turned class struggles previously confined to the hidden, private realm of factories, mines, and fields into highly visible parts of public culture” (Ross 7). In their attempt to inspire agency among their audiences, they championed collective action over individualism in the pursuit of better living. The working-class were not depicted in reference to something they “should be,” but through the perils of an environment disabling a dignified existence. Even though the cinema of the Great Depression often aimed at reconciling polarities within mass audiences by giving voice to “moral conservatives and liberal individuals” alike (Bodnar 40), the post-war boom of the Hollywood machine effectively brought an end to such political experiments. Seen as a “new way of doing business,” Hollywood came to pursue narratives which would not divide audiences so, “at the same time that worker filmmakers were trying to heighten class consciousness, Hollywood producers were suggesting class no longer mattered” (Ross 9).

Nevertheless, Robert A. Marcink considers 1960s and 1970s Hollywood productions as the most influential in creating the contemporary image of the (white) working-class. In reference to the economic tensions, Vietnam War, and culture wars of the period which were “moving the country to the right,” he formulates his theory that Hollywood features, in their aim to introduce needed conflict on screen, “privileged the working class [which came to] generally signif[y] ‘real’ American values in contrast to the supposedly distorted and dangerous values of the counterculture” (Marcink 11). Through a “narrow” reading of both these groups, Hollywood is considered to have “helped to draw the lines between the ‘orthodox’ and the ‘progressive’ views of the world, particularly as they relate to class” (3). The focus placed on the differences between these groups is thought to have dwarfed possible explorations of a common ground.

Referencing Kolker, Marcink adds “we choose narratives that tell us who we are, and maybe who we want to be, and we act accordingly” (10). This statement suggests that, aside from creating a certain image of the working-class, this image had also been internalized to an extent by the very group it was supposed to depict. By introducing the victim narrative, as well as the image of “the forgotten,” the blame for working-class grievances was ascribed to privileged minorities. What is more, Hollywood images of the working-class have catered to the superiority of upward mobility by depicting this class as an environment to be escaped from. Referencing the stories of *Saturday Night Fever* (1977) and *Flashdance* (1983), J. Emmett Winn offers his interpretation of the working-class hero as someone who “must transcend the working class, becoming a working-class hero precisely because he or she is no longer working class” (Winn 43).

At the same time, the inability to meet the expectations of the prepackaged American Dream has exposed the need to reconcile poverty with other notions of American exceptionalism. On many an occasion, the struggle to put food on the table has been depicted as an act of heroism, and the juggling of multiple low-wage jobs as a glorified testament to endurance. The efforts to give voice to an

increasingly pauperized demographic seem to be overshadowed by the exaltation of narratives established in reference to stereotypical models of individuality. The combination of Hollywood's susceptibility to the biases of the time, and the need to present normative success stories, has resulted in a romanticization of poverty. An authentic representation would entail a struggle to avoid aesthetic and thematic pitfalls which may either deter audiences or encourage voyeuristic pleasures of poverty porn. Seeing as neither of these options suggest box-office success, the likelihood of authentic Hollywood portrayals of lower-class living may decrease.

The U.S. society appeared to enter the 2010s with a shift in the approach to "class." The Occupy Movement of 2011 seemed to feed this heightened class consciousness in a re-structuring of the American society along the line of "the haves" and "the have nots." The juxtaposition of the owning class with a mass united under the slogan "we are the 99%" appeared to expose the precariousness of the middle-class. Its image maintained the prestige of upward mobility but its actual post-recession position revealed that a reverse mobility is just as likely. Considering these circumstances, subsequent depictions of the working-class on film provided opportunity for the contestation of previous images grounded in stereotypes and simple binary systems. With regard to this period, *Winter's Bone* seems to reflect the sentiments of a society exiting the recession with a new outlook on the state of the economy as well as break out of the confines of audiovisual class mythology.

Set in Missouri's rural Ozarks, the 2010 mystery drama follows the story of Ree Dolly, a poverty-stricken teenager, who sets out to find her missing father in order to prevent her family's eviction. During her mission, she is forced to face the hostilities of neighbors and kin as her persistence threatens to reveal the community's illegal ventures. Directed by Debra Granik, and adapted by Granik and Anne Rosellini from Daniel Woodrell's 2006 novel of the same title, the film grossed over \$16 million internationally compared to its \$2 million budget. Remaining true to the novel's themes and atmosphere of distrust and paranoia, *Winter's Bone* won the Grand Jury Prize: Dramatic Film and the Best Screenplay Award at the 2010 Sundance Film Festival as well as two awards at the 2010 Berlin Film Festival. Furthermore, the film received four nominations at the 83rd Academy Awards, including Best Actress in a Leading Role for Jennifer Lawrence for her performance as Ree. Among critics, one of the film's most commended traits has been its ability to withhold judgement of its characters. Effectively bypassing rural stereotypes and the easily transferable hillbilly narrative, the film reproduces the complexities of the meth underground within the Ozark community to present the effects of economic struggle on conservative values without imposing a particular reading.

Winter's Bone uses the crime narrative as a means of navigating its Ozark community. The film introduces seventeen-year-old Ree by depicting her everyday responsibilities which revolve around taking care of her twelve-year-old brother, six-year-old sister, and mentally ill mother. Aside from assuming the traditional maternal role of cooking, cleaning, and helping the children with schoolwork, Ree also teaches them how to hunt and chop firewood to heat their cabin in her absentee

father's stead. Her father Jessup, a known meth cook, had recently been jailed on account of his illegal activity and Ree is soon informed by the Sheriff that he had put up the family house and adjacent timber woods as part of his bond. Should he fail to show up to court, the Dollys will be evicted from their home in two weeks' time. Determined to find her father, Ree starts asking various community members about his possible location. Everyone she asks reacts antagonistically, refuses to speak and implicitly warns her not to continue her investigation, giving Ree the suspicion that her father is dead.

Starting with her uncle Teardrop—Jessup's brother—she works her way up to farther family members until she has no choice but to ask for audience with the local crime boss Thump Milton. Turned away by his wife Merab with a gently spoken, yet potent, warning not to show up again, Ree finds herself at an impasse. After Jessup's failure to appear at his court date, she becomes resolute in her efforts to prove her father's death, so as to halt the eviction process. With only seven days to complete her mission, she heads out to meet Milton after failing to catch his attention at a cattle auction. Once on his property, she is met with violence from the hands of the Milton women. Teardrop saves a seriously beaten Ree by vouching for her in front of Thump that she will not cause more trouble. In private, Teardrop confides in Ree that her father had been killed for agreeing to snitch on his associates. Rumors of his betrayal had spread and so, someone anonymously put up the remaining sum to ensure his release and subsequent silence. Teardrop does not know the identity of his brother's murderer and instructs Ree not to tell him should she discovers it herself.

Ree's desperation leads her to an army recruitment center where she discusses the possibility of her enlistment for the \$40,000 entry bonus. However, this idea is hindered by the fact that she not only has to obtain her parents' signatures but also, she would not be able to take her siblings with her to training. Moreover, the bonus itself would not be immediately paid out. With her uncle's backing, Ree returns to her original plan of locating her father's body. After a failed inquiry, their car is stopped by the Sheriff who wants to question Teardrop. The latter refuses to comply and in turn, states he knows of the Sheriff's involvement in Jessup's death by leaking information on his possible cooperation.

A few days later, Ree is visited by the Milton women who offer to take her to Jessup's resting place. Though distrustful of the women's intentions, she agrees. Driven to the edge of a lake, she is then rowed to a spot in which Jessup's body lies submerged in the water. Merab instructs her to reach into the water and grab her father's hands so that they can be cut off and used as proof of his death. With this sudden, macabre climax involving the use of a chainsaw, Ree is able to bring the severed hands to the Sheriff's office claiming someone had thrown them on her porch. After bringing the eviction process to an end, she is visited by the bondsman who came to leave her the remaining part of the bond which no one had showed up to collect. During a brief conversation with her uncle, Teardrop enigmatically states he knows who killed Jessup. The film ends on a bitter-sweet note in which Ree tells her siblings she will never leave them but as they all sit together on the porch, future problems already start imposing on the image of the temporarily content family.

Granik's depiction of the story avoids artistic expressions which could overshadow the plot's core and instead, uses themes which aim to reinforce the sense of uncertainty underlying each character's conversation. Strongly rooted in realism, the production nonetheless manages to exist in the interstices of folk horror, Gothic, and what Woodrell himself called "country noir." In Beth Kattelman's reading of *Winter's Bone*, the film is linked to the folk horror genre through its central plot points. The key themes of the genre such as the "dependence upon landscape [to keep man's secrets]... portrayal of a dangerous, insular group of people, and... narrative centering on an interloper who is trying to unearth the key to a mystery" form the foundations to *Winter's Bone's* story (110). This relation to the genre effectively introduces the atmosphere of anxiety and paranoia without having to revert to the horror's alarming audiovisual tricks.

Upon further inspection, the film also successfully delivers the motifs of the Gothic both through settings and narrative as *Winter's Bone* is exemplary of a present being haunted by the past. The physical reminders of the past, such as the random objects littering every yard and wasting away in the unforgiving weather, demonstrate the deterioration and decay of better times. The Gothic often portrays spaces which are haunted by dark secrets entailing vengeance and murder, which take on various forms of liminal figures "that rise from within the antiquated space, or sometimes invade it from alien realms, to manifest unresolved crimes or conflicts that can no longer be successfully buried from view" (Hogle 2). In the case of *Winter's Bone*, the promise of supernatural monstrosity is fulfilled through the power that meth holds over the region. Its users have become shells of what they once were, bringing to mind ghosts and zombies bordering on life and death. The "unresolved crime" here, extends beyond the case of Jessup's murder to encompass constant reminders of the region's economic failure and abandonment.

On the flip side, the female Gothic is thought to be a politically subversive genre as it often replaced the supernatural with anxieties of "female disability" as the source of horror. As such, it is presently read as an "articulati[on] [of] women's dissatisfactions with patriarchal structures and offer[s] coded expression of their fears of entrapment within the domestic and the female body (Wallace and Smith 2). Ree's inability to sidestep or overpower the patriarchal laws of the community reveal that in the end, it was through the help of women negotiating under their men's radars that she was able to save her home. Moreover, despite their help, the women showcase the constraints of their marriages and how they are bound to their men's rules, including violence.

The country noir introduces the elements of "defiance and defeat" to *Winter Bone's* characters and dwellings. Though Woodrell has discredited his own term, the genre's name has lived on through various interpretations, and has since been flamboyantly defined as "that losing side of the American mythology that walks out of the shining city on a hill spitting and reaching for a flask" (Merrigan). As a blend of different genres, Woodrell is thought to have borrowed "Faulkner's obsession with heredity and degenerating family lines," and in contrast to the urban noir where tensions arise from overpopulated spaces, "country noir is about what happens when there are too few people to fill a place, and the forces binding

them together become unbearably intense" (Rice 2). The boundaries of this genre hybridity are additionally established through the indie film where the narrative "deviate[s] from... classical Hollywood through the 'delay or retardation of the suspenseful, high-stakes plot'" (King 327). Together, all these narrative elements seem to form a realist story at times hinting at the unreal. As David Rice had aptly put it, "you have to believe that you could turn off of any highway in Middle America and find this place, and yet you remain forever on the cusp, unsure whether or not such a place is really on the map" (4).

Overall, these genres heavily rely on the power play of insiders and outsiders along with the tensions that arise when attempting to overstep the boundary between them. It would appear that most characters of *Winter's Bone* are somehow related. The film's community is similarly bound together by undisclosed ties which are subordinated to a specific understanding of security. This clan, just as the community at large, is conditioned to be silent about meth abuse and its distribution when dealing with the authorities. Regardless of one's involvement in the enterprise, or lack thereof, silence preserves peace among the community.

Since this community's rules are not always obvious to an outsider, *Winter's Bone* challenges common conceptions about rural populations through its complex characters. Not only do they avoid clichés but also, reinforce the film's theme of anxiety through the unpredictability of their morality and behaviors ranging "from cruel to kind, from harsh to loving, from simple-minded to keenly intelligent" (Holtzman et al. 208). This environment demonstrates the aftermath of a "population being cast as waste" in what Lauren Berlant describes as "cinema of precarity" (201). What to an outsider could be considered a cognitive dissonance, is a set of reconcilable traits guaranteeing the survival of this community. These rules become navigable through the centrality of Ree's character who, assuming the role of a detective, "[is] informed by knowledge of [her] surrounding environment and its social networks rather than by professionally trained deduction" (King 330). Moreover, the concise dialogue between characters and unapologetic use of local dialect function as a power play on audiences who must keep up with all the things being said, and by the same token, not said. Language enables another form of "Othering" in which the dialect is a constant reminder of the community's distinctness.

In a reversal of roles, it is not the Ozark inhabitant who is ostracized on account of their lifestyle and assigned stereotypes but instead, it is the outside world that is not welcome. In the antebellum, the Ozarks cultivated subsistence agriculture along with raising cattle for sale which "provided the economic base for a self-sufficient life... characterized by log cabins, home-made furnishings, and home-spun garments" (Otto 325). After the Civil War, the Ozark communities upheld their economic practices to the best of their abilities as well as maintained strong social ties entailing the aid of neighbors. When the term "hillbilly" first appeared on print in 1900, journalists soon started applying it to the "marginal farmers of the Southern mountains" and "knowing little of the[ir] economic history... popular writers attributed the poverty of marginal farmers to laziness and shiftlessness" (Otto 327). Between 1940 and 1960 a mass economic migration from Appalachia

and the Ozarks to the industrial cities of the Northeast and Midwest conflated the two groups in popular consciousness to portray the archetypical hillbilly, and give birth to the Ozark hillbilly.

Despite this easy labeling, it could be argued that the Ozarks are a complex borderland culture fusing the image of the cowboy with poverty-stricken cabins and blue-grass music. The image of *Winter's Bone* community is further complicated as it is falling apart due to the distrust around drug dealing. The people still help each other and socialize but their interactions are veiled with a tension uncommon for many Americans, regardless of class. Given the type of disregard directed towards these rural dwellers, it seems plausible that the aspiration to be understood by outsiders has transformed into an active rejection of that acknowledgement. They have made a living out of being forgotten and now prefer to stay that way.

Contrary to this wish, the local law enforcement figures as a dominant outsider in *Winter's Bone*. The Sheriff is a failed reconciliation of insider and outsider since he is meant to enforce the law established beyond this community while still remaining a *part* of it. His dichotomy ultimately triggers the events leading to Jessup's murder. Ironically, his failure to uphold the law could also be condemned by the local meth world as his unprofessionalism, or even corruption, betrays the romantic image of the Western sheriff. Thump Milton, through his front business of cattle auctioning, tries to exude the air of a full-blooded rancher. While these efforts are evident in his Stetson, he is also seen wearing many military orders from the Vietnam War pinned to his leather vest, including a Purple Heart. It would seem that he proudly displays his dreams of exceptionalism just as his idea of rugged masculinity draws from the image of the cowboy, the soldier, and the biker. The Sheriff's impurity is a potential projection of the fear that America's myths are dead. In line with this idea, Merrigan similarly comments on the Sheriff's activity that "John Wayne is dead and these days a sheriff is far more likely to be found turning an indigent family into the street than hunting down bad guys."

The failure of state laws may also be ascribed to the indifference of the region to the proper execution of these laws. An absentee father and a near-unresponsive mother would normally account for the removal of the children from their home and placement in foster care. Nevertheless, the offer made by Ree's family members and neighbors to take care of her siblings hugely simplifies the foster procedures as though they played no actual role in tending to the children's well-being. This could pose as an example of how the Ozark community may disregard institutions just as they themselves may have felt disregarded by them. The distrust towards authorities is further upheld by the "no-snitching" policy since the neighbors do not interfere by reporting suspicions of child neglect. For this purpose, the community lives by a division of laws—those imposing from the outside are "square law" while those directly regulating the life of its inhabitants have been referred to as "blood-soaked commandments" (González 68).

Peace becomes paramount in light of the general sense of immobility which shrouds the region and shapes its reality. Rural spatiality coupled with poverty is one of the biggest contributing factors to family immobility and therefore, hindered access to public services aiding parenting efforts (Wallace and Pruitt 99). With so

much importance placed on amiable neighbor relations, inhabitants have no choice but to adjust to the crippling silence, all the while accepting their immobility as part of their reality. In the context of female mobility, the home functions as the chief domain of female activity, limiting their hostesses' agency to this space. Along with the community's expectation that the women adhere to this role, Ree's mobility takes on a new meaning. Glen Donnar argues that "Ree's determined walking... not only counters community expectations of female immobility and silence, but complexly reinvigorates and threatens the community" (170). Her refusal to comply with the gender roles imposed by her environment disrupts the status quo and deflates the repetitive command to "get back home." The fact that the women are also policing each other to maintain this state of affairs is indicative that immobility had transformed from an imposed circumstance to a "norm" not to be disrupted.

In keeping with the Gothic's allure for the white middle-class (Hogle 2), *Winter's Bone* presents an all-white working class to showcase additional fears of "Othering." Sherry Ortner in her discussion on the power of signification of working- and lower-class characters claims:

The (white) working/lower classes have always held a certain fascination for (white) middle-class Americans. For many, the working class is where they came from... then, the working class can never be totally Other, or, at least, it is always part Other and part self. Unlike most other Others, working-class figures thus create very powerful possibilities for identification and dis-identification (190).

Through this understanding, the white middle-class are able to "see themselves" as who or what they could become should their economic success come to an end. *Winter's Bone* gives such an example in the way it depicts a community's sources of pride when poverty or austerity are the new norm. Despite her now non-existent relationship with her father, it seems as though Ree took pride in the fact that Jessup never made low-quality meth or caused a lab explosion. Conversely, snitching is a great source of shame and since Ree is aligned with Jessup she "suffers guilt by association" (Kattelman 121). To receive any kind of help or information she must redeem herself from her father's betrayal and (re)establish her loyalty which is why her silence on the subject of her beating brought her closer to achieving a rapport. Furthermore, openly asking for help is shown as a sacrifice in itself. In a scene where Ree's cousins living across the road are seen tending to a large piece of meat hung in the tree, her brother asks if she thinks they will share some of it, to which Ree responds "never ask for what should be offered." One cannot become used to the generosity of others and this lesson is accentuated when the cousins—who know of the Dollys' food scarcity—share their food only sometime later, possibly as a reminder that their kindness cannot be taken for granted. Nevertheless, the brother's inquiry "has broken an unspoken code that demands that white trash be, above all else, self-sufficient" (Cox 226).

Another demonstration of what constitutes an insider's status is the region's indulgence in "white trash" consumer practices. While John Berra assesses that

the indie crime film established in a rural setting breaches the practice of rural narratives focused on “reflecting a particular way of life” rather than “dramatic plotting” (325), it could be argued that the combination of the two foci in *Winter’s Bone* is assisted by the projection of the characters’ detailed tell-tale signs of economic status. The film manages to capture the abundance of meaningless material possessions surrounding each household in way that reinforces the dramatism of trespassing on their property.

In a noteworthy juxtaposition, Beverley Skeggs provides a fundamental distinction between working-class and middle-class practices suggesting that “the working-class have a long history of being represented by excess whilst the middle-class are represented by their distance from it, usually through associations with restraint, repression, reasonableness, modesty and denial” (99). The lacking of the film’s community is similarly expressed through an excess as they all seem to share the habit of filling their yards with random objects. The objects themselves are familiar but at the same time seem foreign and out of place. A statue of two cherubs going down a slide sitting among the dirt, broken swings, chicken coups, and numerous small objects seems to alienate Milton’s yard rather than normalize it. This use of (un)familiarity allows Granik to create “an uncanny portrait of an off-kilter, broken ‘America’” (Donnar 168). Logically, these mostly broken items are accumulated for future cannibalization. In the event of a needed repair, they can be stripped to parts and reused in another item. What is more, they can be exchanged in a neighborly barter economy in place of a failing monetary economy. Also signaling an inclination towards hoarding, the yards reinforce the stereotypes of white trash as blind, mindless consumers to outsiders, and the sense of understanding among insiders.

Among this clutter of objects, items of great sentimental value are preserved and stored away. It is almost surprising that towards the end of the film Jessup’s banjo is shown as the one item handled with great care. It creates a link with a past less tarnished by meth abuse and a man still hopeful about the future. This Ozark community still holds on to an undefined nostalgia which speaks through the blue-grass music played at social gatherings. As they sing about nature, the local landscape, and all its animals, they communicate vague ideas of freedom, harmony, and independence. These few scenes offer a stark contrast to the film’s otherwise brutalist aesthetic; they are almost glimpses of an alternative reality depicting an idealized past or a future that could have been. The banjo itself is a strong tie to the hillbilly culture, and similarly to the famous “dueling banjo” scene from *Deliverance* (1972), the banjo’s tune functions as a pleasant intermission in *Winter’s Bone*. As a carrier of good memories, it allows a break from the present.

Nostalgia is also buried in old family pictures which are neatly laid out throughout their respective album slots, and introduce a counterweight to the overflowing mess of objects inside the Dolly house. When Ree is left to believe she will not save her family from eviction, the Dollys look through their belongings and decide what to keep and what to burn. They dedicate some time to studying the albums and identifying the subjects of the pictures. Aside from high-school photos and the occasional dedication of everlasting love written on its back, there is also a

childhood picture of Jessup and Teardrop dressed as cowboys, posing in front of a photographer's screen. This picture not only immortalized a time in the men's lives when they did not want but also, echoed their romantic dreams of becoming the Western hero. This attachment to the Western is repeatedly found throughout the film, possibly underlining the fact that none of the characters are truly independent or self-sufficient. However, it would seem that this dream is fading out of existence among the community's next generation. It is not certain whether Ree chose to burn the pictures but her strong focus on the present is an indicator of her attitude towards a past that will not return.

Ree's generation is presented with limited options regarding their life trajectory. As she is walking through her school building, she looks into various classrooms and observes their activities through the doors' windows. In one, her siblings are doing arts and crafts, in another, teenagers are taught how to take care of a newborn, and in the final room students are preparing to become young cadets. Their prospects can be mostly summed up as becoming a young parent or escaping that fate through enlisting. Observing other community members, those options can be extended to include employment in a small business, government employment, and involvement in meth production and distribution.

Gregory Frame considers these conditions to be a "critique of the neoliberal idea that individual drive is all that is necessary to deliver prosperity," especially among a community whose "productive capitalism is a distant memory" (353). He further argues that Jennifer Lawrence's career is an example of how a "star within mainstream cinema should function as a figure able to resolve the contradictions of the era of which they are part" (346). Her performance in *Winter's Bone* involves a heavy restraint on facial expressions and body language which Frame interprets as a reinforcement of the film's message that "neoliberalism's crisis cannot be overcome and transcended, because it is permanent. Survival is the best one can hope for" (356). This attitude towards the present undermines nostalgia's ability to offer psychological comfort to younger generations, revealing a shift within this community.

Nonetheless, the community members still attempt to safeguard many of their other dominant values, including a community model from a bygone era. They achieve this through the use of violence. Although there is a great deal of tension resulting from the precariousness of the future, the violence is mostly seen as a disciplinary measure rather than an outlet for frustrations. Implicit verbal aggression is the first reminder of the social boundaries. The second is forceful body language. Then, comes physical violence presumably in the form of beating although, it does not seem to be commonplace. Most of the time, it is more of a promise of violence than its actual execution. Nevertheless, it is the belief that violence allows the survival of this community that leads to Jessup's murder.

The idea of self-interest is conflated with the idea of a greater good, making Jessup's snitching both a betrayal of the Miltons and a disintegration of honorable code under the pressure of outside forces. His death restores order to the community while preserving the Miltons' security. Teardrop's refusal to discover his brother's murderer similarly draws from a code of honor which would demand

he avenge his brother. Ree's refusal to withdraw her inquiry when faced with verbal and physical threats eventually led to her beating. However, Merab's emphasis that it was only women who hurt Ree when asked about it by Teardrop, seems to imply that men cannot discipline women who do not "belong" to them. Conversely, Donnar argues that "the only [truly] surviving cultural code for this community is a prohibition on talking" which is the biggest indicator of the community's breakdown since "Ree's numerous calls on community codes or blood relations no longer hold (their traditional) significance. On numerous occasions, female gatekeepers talk specifically about *not* talking" (170-1).

Considering these attempts at preserving an expiring community model, it could be argued that Ree's transgressions of community law were made possible through the unorthodoxy of her insider status. She is undoubtedly part of this community. The Dollys are known for their stubbornness and the heritage of hundred-year-old timber woods behind the house vouches for the family's presence in the region. Ree's family exhibits familiar consumer practices since the children are surrounded with toys which compensate the unfulfillment of their most basic needs. Ree abides by the "pack" rules of the community just as she sees the figures of a sheriff or bondsman as natural outsiders forecasting trouble. She is also immersed in the Ozark self-sustenance lifestyle which is best shown in her lesson on hunting, skinning, and gutting squirrels.

Nevertheless, this reality of *Winter's Bone* "blood-soaked commandments" is experienced through the eyes of a girl at the brink of legal adulthood—no longer a child but not yet in a position to negotiate with adults. Merab's comment upon seeing Ree on her property that she is "in the wrong place, I expect" "signals both Ree's violation of unwritten community codes against trespass and Ree as symbolically out-of-place" (169). What is more, Ree finds herself on the threshold of womanhood while simultaneously taking on the classic role of the head of the family, making her both subordinate to the community's men and seemingly empowered enough to question them. She does not fit into any particular clique but this seems to work to her advantage. Had she belonged in a clearly defined role, her transgressions could have caused more serious consequences. Since her position is negotiable, then her mission likewise invites compromise on the Miltons' side.

Above all, Ree understands that silence takes precedence over other community expectations and by breaking the "don't talk" policy Jessup sealed his fate. In the end, she does not want the intervention of "square law" into the community's affairs; she merely wants proof of Jessup's death to stop the eviction. Throughout *Winter's Bone*, the main factor enabling peaceful coexistence within the community was the ability to remain silent. It is interesting to note how this condition affects the rural community considering Basil Bernstein's works on linguistic codes among the working-class. In his 1962 and 1964 studies on speech patterns among two groups with leveled IQ he concluded that the middle-class group operated an "elaborated code" characteristic for formal education, while the working-class group used a "restricted code" in which "body language, vocal tone, pace, and variations in volume are used to communicate more than actual word content" (Jensen 205-6). The latter group likewise refrained from using the phrase

"I think" which would normally "separate the speaker from the listener and invite and opposing 'I think'" (206). Furthermore, Bernstein noted the language was used as a binding element among the group through the repetitive use of "sympathetic circularity tags" which "invited agreement [such as] 'wouldn't he', 'you know?' or 'isn't it?'—[to which] others would nod" (206-7). Barbara Jensen further comments how a restricted body language displayed by the middle-class could be read as unnatural by working-class members who are thought to distrust "people who show no expression or emotion" (207).

In light of these studies, the silence in *Winter's Bone* takes on an additional meaning. The deliberate restraint on body language, facial expressions, and vocal tones in the face of potential danger is reminiscent of the same type of caution when dealing with wild animals. Similarly, the only way to gain the other party's trust is to withhold impulsive reactions. The community takes a step back from Bernstein's idea of working-class communication and aligns itself with nature's traditional markers of non-threatening intentions. Silence appears to have become a valid form of communication. What is more, the inclusivity demonstrated in the sympathetic circularity tags seems to have disintegrated under the pressures of illegal activity, and what was once an indicator of a person's need to belong, could be suspiciously read as fishing for information. Nevertheless, in the context of the working-class it is possible that the state of communication of one if its sum parts could be an indicator of future community breakdowns should illegal ventures become the only shield against crippling poverty. From the perspective of the outside world, this silence could also signal that this community is more in control of their own narrative since it cannot be imposed by a stranger mostly giving voice to stereotypes.

Winter's Bone likewise projects an image of what can happen to a community which does not have the natural conditions to sustain its previous model of sexual politics but is adamant about its survival. Unlike the urban working-class, this rural community's ideas of masculinity are not challenged through a constant exposure to popular ideologies but rather, morph under the pressures of internal collapse. Throughout the film, marriage is presented as some form of constraint for the women. In a scene where Ree asks her friend if she could borrow her truck to drive around asking about Jessup, the friend first warns Ree that she has to ask her baby daddy for permission, then informs Ree about his adamant refusal. To help get the car, the friend had to defy her partner and by doing so, she proved to Ree that she is "who [Ree] always thought she was." This would suggest that stubbornness or defiance are championed traits among young women, as well as imply the younger generation's attempt at redefining expectations regarding their position.

Conversely, the Milton women exude an older attitude in which they seem willing to help Ree but are halted by their men's authority. Kattelman observes that "it is only the men who take the active part in dealings and negotiations" and upon Ree's release into Teardrop's custody "Ree cannot speak for herself; Teardrop must speak for her. Milton will not put any stock in Ree's word because she is female" (123). Under these circumstances, the women's efforts to "police each other on gender codes" (122) can be read through their fears of being rendered powerless.

Ree projects the women's ultimate fear of finding themselves without a patriarch—someone who would defend them and vouch for them.

Furthermore, their dependence is best demonstrated by the fact that Jessup could put up the house and lands for his bond despite having been absent from his family's life. Kimberly Cox comments on this gender dynamic by stating "in this scenario, the patriarch and the house are of equal worth and the family that actually lives in the house, made up of women and children, are worth nothing" (221). The men's absence is noticeable on a larger scale since some of the men have withdrawn from social encounters to hide their connection to the drug underworld. In this case, the "women act as gatekeepers and proxies for absent men" and as a consequence, "enforce a superficial matriarchy" (Donnar 168-9). The Milton women's help comes unexpectedly therefore, it is unclear whether they obtained full permission to show up at Ree's doorstep. Nevertheless, women had demonstrated more than once that they felt indebted to Ree through family ties so, small offers of water or a doobie in place of information on Jessup's whereabouts "reveal the women's knowledge that they owe Ree something more than they are able to give her" (Cox 225). They cannot openly challenge their men's decisions but can presumably negotiate them in private. For this reason, it could be said that the women figure not only as gatekeepers but also, mediators.

The men on the other hand, suffer from anxieties "about a perceived incapacity... to protect vulnerable families and homes" (Donnar 159). In an observed "renewal of the 'masculinity in crisis' trope post-recession," women's perceived empowerment stems from male disempowerment or the "failing male trope" (Donnar 161) while violence is exercised to battle the "perceived feminizing characteristics of joblessness and poverty" (Donnar 169). Jessup's inability to stay faithful to his wife, provide for his family, or remain silent when expected to, stripped him of his remaining dignity in the eyes of the community's men who, despite their own shortcomings, are expected to prioritize their family's security. With fewer economic opportunities this ability to perform the role of a patriarch has doubled-down in significance.

As an image of downward mobility, *Winter's Bone* explores this preservation of status to mirror the anxieties of the white middle-class. In an oversimplification, the inability to maintain the status of the primary bread-winner means that the men's worth must be found and demonstrated elsewhere. An environment of charged tension provides the opportunity to display such agency and rank. Furthermore, owing to the racial homogeneity of *Winter's Bone*, Ortner argues that the film particularly plays on the fears of white middle-class women. Since many middle-class families require two incomes to retain their social status, alongside the fact that this demographic is affected by growing divorce rates, then the "post-feminist mindset of *Sex and the City* (1998-2004)" suggests that "the loss of the ability to shop and consume is seen as one of the worst imaginable fates for a middle-class woman" (Ortner 194-5). This conclusion exposes the precariousness of middle-class families and how they may be one recession away from financial ruin. The film offers a threatening reminder of the proximity of the two classes; despite this community's rejection of the outside world, they are not the "Other."

Nevertheless, within the working-class itself, the community could be seen as bordering on the class's fringes. It seems to function in a place where civilization has been lost, attempted and failed. The characters' use of silence and animalistic body language also distances them from traditionally suburban white trash practices, indicating a gradation in the community's ability to remove itself from mainstream expectations. Living in a geo-political blind spot, they have retained their forefathers' connection to the land. The only institution to truly reach the region is the army recruitment office which creates a general sense of disregard for the inhabitants' well-being. Given these circumstances, dependence on the land for survival becomes obvious, mirroring the struggles of early settlers. The inability to effectively battle the adversities of nature creates a dichotomy in which the characters are simultaneously rooted in the region through their ancestors as well as easy to displace as though they were merely squatters. Their presence in the region is not sanctified because of their failure to transform nature into a booming civilization.

The community is further aligned with nature through the dominating presence of animals throughout the film. They orbit the central character, fill the cluttered spaces, and generally appear to infuse the Dolly home with affection. Their calming presence balances out aggressive human encounters. In the final scenes, Teardrop is seen gifting the Dolly children baby chicks. The birds both symbolize a new beginning and exhibit pragmatism since they will presumably lay eggs for consumption. However, what truly introduces the sense of animalism into *Winter's Bone* is that the way the animals are treated is a projection of how the Dolly children would like to be taken care of. In an understated scene, Ree's younger brother brings home a dog he found in the woods. Ree's charged question about where the dog came from seems to be her only form of protest. However, the dog deserves help, food, and shelter which Ree will provide despite not being able to sufficiently feed her siblings.

The Dollys approach to animals can be found among other low-income families. An article in *The New York Times* exemplifies the case of the Swetman family living in Southern Appalachia who, with limited resources, fed over 13 previously abandoned dogs. Their empathy is best demonstrated by Ms. Swetman's statement that "I'd do without food myself before they do" (Eckholm). The Dollys' selflessness towards animals also stems from the possibility that the animals mirror their own anxieties of vulnerability. Due to the news of the family's impending eviction, Ree's neighbors offer to take in and raise her brother while she contemplates asking Teardrop if he would take in her younger sister. A couple days prior, Ree asked her neighbors if they would take in her horse whom she had not fed in three days. The children and animals are expected to share a similar fate without adequate care.

Additionally, by taking care of the animals the Dollys demonstrate that they are still in a position to be providers. This could be read as a desperate attempt at restoring some agency in their lives when they must often rely on the charity of others. Strong attachment to companion animals is also "the strongest predictor of psychological distress" (Thodberg et al. 43). By creating an experience of connectedness with the animals (44), the children could further compensate the

alienation caused by their parents' absence. They emulate the adults' behavior of counterbalancing a meaningful lack with a meaningless excess; they are instinctively drawn to the simple comforts of nature in their attempt to mask a lack in their emotional needs, making them hoarders of pet affection.

Their situation is further exacerbated by the possibility of eviction. They find themselves in a volatile position because they may soon *become* like animals. Ree has a dream in which the timber woods are being cut down while the main focus is placed on fleeing squirrels surrounded by the sounds of chainsaws. Evicting the Dolly family would not be so different from cutting down the woods in which animals had taken residence. Without the home, Ree even states that the family would be "out in the fields like dogs." Just as the middle-class may be threatened by the image of the working-class, the working-class is presented an appalling prospect of regressing into an animal-like state, scraping for food and shelter. *Winter's Bone* proposes determination as the best defense against such a scenario without championing notions of meritocracy as it is only through a combination of perseverance and luck that Ree is able to save her home.

Liminal positions often pose the threat of falling from one state into another, which is why the characters of *Winter's Bone* safeguard the clear distinction between insiders and outsiders in their environment. By adhering to a strict set of community rules, they battle the unpredictable socioeconomic and political shifts governing the outside world. By aligning themselves with nature they are more likely to ensure their independence while their hostile silence discourages intervention. The community's insularity has led to a cannibalization of old values similar to the cannibalization of old items in their yards. The values are constantly given life and revived, the bits and pieces are removed and substituted but not fully replaced. The idea of self-sufficiency imposes vague notions of freedom but in order to survive, every character has forfeited their freedom. They are tied down by responsibilities that were forced onto them, such as acting as parent to one's own siblings or becoming your husband's "gatekeeper." It is easy to be physically rendered immobile due to the vast spaces, there are many rules which regulate even one's ability to speak, and the men are trapped because of a lack of economic prospects while the women are trapped with them.

The film avoids glorification of poverty-stricken figures. Ree's determination to save her family is the closest any character had come to demonstrating an act of heroism. The film is more of a lament for what becomes of the people who have been ignored and forgotten, and whose sense of importance can only be reinvigorated through stifling sexual politics or military service. This representation of the working-class speaks to post-recession anxieties, distrust, and paranoia. The Gothic is aptly considered to filter the image of the American Dream to reveal the prospect of economic failure as the American nightmare. Its motif of a present haunted by the past functions as a reality check that 21st century America is still haunted by former glory just as current generations are held up to mid-century definitions of success. Upon the collapse of a volatile economic system, *Winter's Bone* offers an organic shift in community expectations thanks to which an individual's worth is not literally established through their income but through

their ability to remain loyal. Since nostalgia is failing to help younger generations cope, a realistic assessment of the “now” seems to foreshadow an almost nihilist attitude regarding the future in which, as Gregory Frame had put it, “survival is the best they can hope for.”

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