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## “It’s not just a dream. There is a storm coming!”: Financial Crisis, Masculine Anxieties and Vulnerable Homes in American Film

### ABSTRACT

Despite the Gothic’s much-discussed resurgence in mainstream American culture, the role the late 2000s financial crisis played in sustaining this renaissance has garnered insufficient critical attention. This article finds the Gothic tradition deployed in contemporary American narrative film to explore the impact of economic crisis and threat, and especially masculine anxieties about a perceived incapacity of men and fathers to protect vulnerable families and homes. Various invoking the American and Southern Gothics, *Take Shelter* (2011) and *Winter’s Bone* (2010) represent how the domestic-everyday was made unfamiliar, unsettling and threatening in the face of metaphorical and real (socio-)economic crisis and disorder. The films’ explicit engagement with contemporary American economic malaise and instability thus illustrates the Gothic’s continued capacity to lay bare historical and cultural moments of national crisis. Illuminating culturally persistent anxieties about the American male condition, *Take Shelter* and *Winter’s Bone* materially evoke the Gothic tradition’s ability to scrutinize otherwise unspeakable national anxieties about male capacity to protect home and family, including through a focus on economic-cultural “white Otherness.” The article further asserts the significance of prominent female assumption of the protective role, yet finds that, rather than individuating the experience of financial crisis on failed men, both films deftly declare its systemic, whole-of-society basis. In so doing, the Gothic sensibility of pervasive anxiety and dread in *Take Shelter* and *Winter’s Bone* disrupts dominant national discursive tendencies to revivify American institutions of traditional masculinity, family and home in the wakes of 9/11 and the recession.

## INTRODUCTION: THE AMERICAN GOTHIC AND PERIODS OF “CRISIS”

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It is critical commonplace that the Gothic resurges in culture in historical moments of national crisis, turmoil and insecurity, interrogating the haunting weight of past deeds and misdeeds to diagnose the troubled present. More specifically for this article, the American Gothic—perhaps once, but no longer critically deemed oxymoronic—explicitly engages the historical and political horrors of American history, and namely the guilt associated with America’s originary racial traumas of slavery, conflict and dispossession (Soltysik Monnet 6–25; Goddu 63–65). In so doing, the American Gothic speaks the culturally and politically unspeakable to probe contemporary American traumas and anxieties. In the wake of the Civil Rights movement and Vietnam War protests in the 1960s, understandings of the American Gothic were sharpened to communicate its dominant capacity to envision “the American nightmare” (Soltysik Monnet 6). This renewed understanding especially articulates the capacity of the American (and modern) Gothic to equally and forcefully interrogate contemporary horrors as much as historical (and sadly persistent) injustices. Two recent American films that depict the degenerative impacts of financial crisis on the American male, family and home in the wake of the Great Recession of 2008–2009, *Take Shelter* (2011) and *Winter’s Bone* (2010), however, extend this temporal relation. Past traumas and misdeeds haunt emphatically in each, yet the Gothic tradition chiefly represents protagonists’ present struggles for their family’s *fraught future*—the American Dream become nightmare.

The Gothic’s resurgence in mainstream American culture over the last decade is routinely linked with a “gothicization of political discourse” that Blake—in contending the effectiveness of the Gothic mode in American culture remains undiminished irrespective of its ubiquity—observes post-9/11 (37). Championed through the Bush Administration’s pervasive rhetorical deployment of fear, the Gothic arguably erupted in the so-named War on Terror and popular cultural representations equivalently marked by perceived existential threat, consequent torture and the echoes of military traumas and gender anxieties. Yet the role the late-2000s financial crisis played in sustaining the Gothic’s renaissance has garnered insufficient critical attention. Punter argues the modern Gothic transforms the traditional Gothic sense of threat, with dangers largely enshrined as exotic and “over there” now gathering and threatening (from) within as much as without (134). In this sense, the modern Gothic can interrogate contemporary domestic economic horrors as much as foreign political threats or military traumas. Scholarly criticism of the proliferation and perceived misappropriation

of the Gothic tradition in readings of contemporary popular film and television is vociferous (Donnar). Chief among these, Warwick claims scholars and critics overuse the tradition, conveniently and exploitatively deploying a hollow “Gothicky” feeling that disregards the Gothic’s singular capacity to speak the unspeakable. Criticisms, however well placed, can implicitly discount the Gothic’s unceasing capacity to adapt, grow, appropriate and mutate—including across an evolving and enlarging set of understandings, media and cultural texts—even when they invoke it. Rather than prohibitive, criticisms such as Warwick’s act as an important reminder and corrective for (film) scholars to avoid the all-too-convenient deployment of the tradition in schematic analyses or identification of Gothic aesthetic elements or tropes.

Extant film scholarship on the financial crisis has nonetheless largely focused on a resultant tide of male-centric documentaries and melodramas, including *Inside Job* (2010) and *Margin Call* (2011). Negra and Tasker note the “renewal” of the “masculinity in crisis” trope post-recession (2)—seemingly enervating long-standing cultural anxieties often implicitly tied with concerns about American economic decline. Emphasizing tropes of white male injury, these films invariably conclude in a “mode of recuperative failure,” with a measure of personal success derived from professional failure. Yet although positioning men as its primary victims, and typically centralizing the failed financial worker, they observe that discourses of masculinity and male crisis have received insufficient attention in recessionary culture. Negra and Tasker also attest, as in previous periods of economic turmoil, that there has been a concomitant “surge in traditionalist discourses of gender and labour,” including of a female resourcefulness that proclaims a domesticized, traditionalist femininity (6). Negra and Tasker further find that a “coping females” trope, which implicitly contends that female empowerment requires male disempowerment, attends the “failing males” trope (9). Accordingly, they observe a dearth of female-centred experiences or working-class settings in cultural representations of the recession.

The Gothic’s capacity to speak the unspeakable, however, affords real subversive potential. This article asserts the Gothic tradition is provocatively deployed in *Take Shelter* and *Winter’s Bone* to represent the effects of economic crisis on working-class and poor Americans. In each, the American and Southern Gothics are variously invoked to articulate and interrogate widespread contemporary American cultural, economic and political instability. In particular, the Southern Gothic—as much a mood of depravity and loss as a subgenre of the Gothic—“is characterized by an emphasis on the grotesque, the macabre, and, very often, the violent” (Punter

and Byron 116–17). Likewise, it often indulges stereotypical myths about Southern cultures, from blue-collar workers to the abject poverty of rural-mountain populations, projecting and thereby displacing national fears and anxieties onto convenient economic-cultural “white Otherness.” However, as significantly, the Southern Gothic especially privileges the landscape’s symbolic relation to its characters, manifesting inner turmoil, anxiety and violence (Donnar 141). In this final respect particularly, the stoic protagonists in *Take Shelter* and *Winter’s Bone* arguably labour in bizarre, off-kilter worlds and against monstrosity, madness and grotesquery to protect family and home from metaphorical and real, impending and endemic (socio-) economic threat and disorder.

### TAKE SHELTER, MASCULINE INADEQUACY AND SOCIOECONOMIC ANXIETIES

Echoing the Gothic’s traditional concern with inner turmoil made manifest, in *Take Shelter* an envisioned apocalyptic storm reflects a father’s increasing mental tumult and possible madness *and* the powerful forces of impending economic collapse. The father’s pervasive anxiety, growing paranoia and obsessive desire to protect his family ultimately serve to endanger it—and especially its already tenuous financial security—and require his wife to assume economic control. Set in Ohio, America’s Rust Belt, but written with writer-director Jeff Nichols’s, a declared Southern writer, native Arkansas in mind, the film is a displaced Southern Gothic. Wrestling directly with ecological instability and climate change, but written at the beginning of the financial crisis, the film’s storm allegorizes the uncontrollable and unstoppable forces of capitalism. This overarching context of financial weight subliminally structures family life, and marks the first presentation of Curtis’s family and home. Even when Curtis’s employee health insurer confirms that it will fund a costly operation to restore their recently deaf daughter’s hearing, its emphasized dependence on his continued employment defines him as father and husband.

*Take Shelter* continues Nichols’s interest in sympathetic, stoic male psychologies under pressure. As in Nichols’s first film, *Shotgun Stories*, a tale of a family blood feud widely described as Southern Gothic, he engages “at once with a recognizably lived-in blue collar reality and a Southern mythology” (Pinkerton, “Southern Gothic” 49–50). The film opens with Curtis LaForche (Michael Shannon), a crew manager for a sand-mining company, peering worriedly off-screen for ill portents. The film deploys high Gothic sublime and terrifying effects of the natural environment to present the father’s apocalyptic visions and confounding dread, as Curtis

“sees” a huge storm before dirty, oily rain begins to fall. The weather prefigures and mirrors intensifying psychological abnormalities and possible developing madness for the fearful and troubled Curtis, ambiguously reflected, even manifested, by otherworldly natural elements. The off-kilter natural environment violently morphs, shifts and disorients, conjuring the uncanny (or *unheimlich*), an integral feature of the Gothic tradition. The uncanny articulates not only the unsettling tension between the known and the unknown (Soltysik Monnet 23–24), but also how the domestic everyday is made unfamiliar, unsettling and threatening. The gothicized skies swiftly and repeatedly become strange, discomfiting and incongruous, with birds flying in harried patterns, swarming formations and even dropping dead from the sky. The film here introduces distinct and unsettling perspectival uncertainty between the viewer and Curtis. Throughout, Curtis’s visions unclearly distinguish apocalyptic premonitions, inner psychological turmoil or mental illness, the viewer unsure what is real or the projection of a troubled subjectivity, a profound disorientation shared by Curtis.

Along with his dread of an approaching tempest, Curtis suffers from intensifying nightmares of shadowy, silent figures that attempt to abduct his daughter and invade the home, often during torrential rain, storms and lightning. Curtis’s fear of Others pathologizes deeply felt anxieties about his capacity to protect home and family as a father. In his waking screams, these nightmares materially infect his life. Sound bridges, such as intense cracks of thunder, reinforce this discomfiting blurring of boundaries between dream and reality, another Gothic staple. The indistinguishability of reality and nightmare, as with Curtis’s visions/hallucinations, equally disorients the viewer, whose assumption of Curtis’s point-of-view proffers his impression of them as real until they are revealed as nightmares. Linked with prevalent fears about the disruption, takeover or loss of the home in recent horror film (Negra and Tasker 18), the home is not only threatened by the envisioned storm, but also besieged by hostile and malevolent forces within and without. Curtis finds Hannah looking out the living room window, presumably watching the rain. To his horror, he discovers she is looking out at a silent, stationary male figure, menacingly looking in. Hurriedly grabbing the girl, all the door handles begin to violently jiggle, as the man presumably seeks entry. However, the home also threatens the family in its vulnerability and instability, as the entire home then begins shaking before all of the furniture lifts and hangs, momentarily suspended. The home, and perhaps Curtis, is literally unmoored. When Curtis wakes, struggling desperately for rasping breaths, the horrifically transformed everyday is again retrospectively revealed as nightmare. These nightmares

even leave physical marks, including one in which he is viciously attacked by his dog, leaving him repeatedly clutching his arm in pain over the coming day, compelling him to start building the dog a fence.

Foreshadowing the symbolic return of repressed trauma and the debilitating dread of mental illness, as Curtis works he looks repeatedly and distractedly at their long-dormant underground backyard storm shelter. Deeply uncertain whether he is experiencing delusion or prophesy, ambivalently intuiting both that he is unwell *and* that his nightmares and visions presage a coming apocalypse, Curtis first borrows a book on mental illness and then buys long-life provisions to revive the storm shelter. He also visits his doctor, the first time his mother, who suffers from paranoid schizophrenia, is mentioned. Subsequently visiting her in her assisted-living facility, Curtis asks how her mental illness started. Signalling his childhood trauma, he later vaguely recalls its onset when he was ten, when his mother abandoned him in the family car and went missing for a week. His mother's seemingly insufficient recollection that it was a stressful time is nonetheless immediately enlivened in a succeeding shot that spotlights the family's financial stresses, the camera—and Curtis's eyes—unerringly fixated on the ever-rising cost of gasoline at the pump. Implying the financial crisis is the "absent cause" of Curtis's possible illness and its traumatic consequences (Boyle 19), *Take Shelter* repeatedly emphasizes, even fetishizes, the exact dollar amounts for purchases and expenses that cumulatively build pressure on Curtis.<sup>1</sup>

In its implacable presence, the weather assumes an almost menacing agency. The increasingly violent weather dually provokes an uncanny memory, an uneasy experience of "something familiar which has been repressed" (Soltysik Monnet 23–24). Recalling something past that remains in some sense denied (Punter 130), his childhood trauma returns to haunt, trigger his fears of hereditary mental illness, and revivify his present (and interdependent) financial and paternal anxieties. The anxiety-inducing peals of thunder and cracks of lightning inspire, unleash *and* manifest Curtis's ever more deranged psychological states and seeming descent into paranoia. Compulsively driven by overwhelming forces, whether external or internal, Curtis takes out a risky personal loan, against the family home and without his wife Samantha's (Jessica Chastain) knowledge, to purchase a shipping storage container. He also "borrows" earthmoving equipment from work to remove earth above the old shelter—further exhuming all that was (symbolically) buried—to install the container and

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<sup>1</sup> These include the cost of the shipping container, the cost of his medicine prescription and the gas masks he buys for the shelter.

extend the re-stocked storm shelter. Coupled with his continuing anxieties about his (in)ability to protect home and family, reading the mental illness book only in the long-locked shelter reinforces its link with buried familial trauma and fears of mental illness. In spending entire nights there, the underground shelter also reflects his growing psychological and emotional alienation. Ambivalently, the vulnerability of home and family thus lie both in the incursions of malevolent persons that populate his nightmares *and* the symbolic return of repressed childhood trauma and feared mental illness.

Curtis, profoundly ashamed, only confesses his nightmares about shadowy attackers to Sam after another nightmare ends in a violent seizure: "They always start with a kind of storm . . . Then things, people . . . [the storm] makes them crazy." He also confirms how his dual anxieties, his childhood trauma and hereditary mental health fears, define and motivate his perceived paternal obligations and desire to protect his family: "You know what I came from . . . and I promised myself that I would never leave." Curtis also asks Sam to believe in the reality of his visions and nightmares: "it's not just a dream. It's not just a feeling. I'm afraid something may be coming." This self-perceived cultural expectation is reiterated when his older brother visits and, as Curtis works on the shelter, elliptically invokes an economics of patriarchal protective capacity: "If you don't keep your eye on the ball for one minute in this economy you're screwed . . . Take care of your family. Handle your business."

Ultimately, however, Curtis's obsessive paternal desire to protect family and home endangers it, when he is fired for borrowing equipment without permission. His boss's accusation, "You did this to yourself," places responsibility for economic failure, as Boyle astutely observes, onto working-class individuals (23). Negra and Tasker define the dominant trope of the "experience of recession as feminization," particularly given dominant representations of male joblessness and traditionalist female gender empowerment (15). In this respect, Curtis feels the loss of his job as emasculating. Losing his health insurance and capacity to service the new loan, each precariously hinging on continued employment, jeopardizes Hannah's operation and the family home. In this sense, the horrific blurring of nightmare and reality not only disrupt the home but troublingly blur protective Self and threatening Other. Curtis, as much as the shadowy figures that haunt his nightmares, endangers the family.<sup>2</sup> The use of the

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<sup>2</sup> Far from recognizing his growing monstrosity, Curtis's perception of threats to the home deepens to include Sam who becomes the violent antagonist in his next nightmare—barefoot, soaking and glancing ominously at a kitchen knife, a heightened horror score implying her new status as a domestic threat.



widescreen frame—which effectively showcases his smallness and vulnerability outdoors—heightens this sense, amplifying Curtis’s looming stature in the home to ambivalently signal, as Pinkerton notes, his potential threat (“Trouble in Mind” 47). Curtis’s behaviours also recall Punter’s observation on contemporary Gothic representations of threat, with dangers gathering and threatening (from) within as much as without. Rather than shadowy, monstrous Others, the threat to the American home and family thus resides within the figure of the father.

However, as much as a portrait of contemporary male fears and threat, *Take Shelter* offers one of marriage, its stresses and resilience. With Curtis unemployed and possibly losing his mind, Sam, who sells clothing at flea markets to fund a desired beach vacation, assumes responsibility for the family’s economic decisions, outlining a financial plan that will preserve the home and ensure their daughter’s operation. Her symbolic but agreed replacement of the failed husband-father also seeks the sustenance of the family, appending a social condition that they attend a community event as a “normal” family. However, when Curtis gets into a violent altercation with his estranged colleague and friend, he wildly announces his visions of an oncoming catastrophe and seemingly confirms growing hysteria and madness: “There is a storm coming . . . like nothing you have ever seen! . . . ‘Cause if this thing comes true, there ain’t gonna be any more [*sic*].” His wrathful declamations finally exhausted, Curtis breaks down and weeps upon seeing his daughter’s discernible fear of him. Reiterating the denuding of patriarchal authority manifest in Sam’s assumption of sole economic governance, she must escort the bared *pater familias* out.

After another nightmare bleeds into wailing storm-warning sirens and Sam’s harried exhortations to “wake up!”, it seems Curtis’s premonitions may become reality. However, after spending the night in the storm shelter, the next morning she tells him, “It’s over,” and to remove the gas mask he bought them, and unlock and open the shelter door. Indulging the Gothic fear of being trapped or buried alive, the underground shelter no longer connotes safe haven, but the threat of entrapment. When Curtis tries to have her open it, Sam continues working to recuperate the failed father, insisting he must if he “means to stay with us.” In tentatively opening the shelter, Curtis confirms the overnight storm has passed and that “it’s fine”—a notion equally signalling Curtis’s acceptance he must submit to professional help, albeit this time with Sam. In his first session, his psychiatrist subsequently recommends the previously aborted beach vacation before admitting himself for treatment at a psychiatric facility, with each intended to dislocate him from the apparent cause and symptom of his turmoil, the storm shelter. However, while his nightmares and hallucinations



are now medicalized, the film's ambiguous ending on the family beach holiday seemingly recuperates the troubled father.

Curtis's apocalyptic visions apparently come to pass when his daughter points out to sea, causing Curtis to also turn and stare in shock. While the viewer cannot yet see what they can, when Sam comes outside from the beach house, the breadth and severity of the approaching tempest is ominously reflected in the windows. Picking up his daughter, Curtis is also symbolically reinstalled as father, and Sam's nod, after Curtis looks to her for assurance, affirms she too sees the coming storm and the need to swiftly return to the shelter he rightly revived. These moments collectively transform the storm metaphor from analogue into (economic) reality; the tempest Curtis foresees all-too-familiarly representing the financial crisis viewers came to know. The apocalyptic/economic crisis thus re-centres white paternal masculinity, first as victim and finally as prophet. Countering the maternal assumption of economic control and the frightening doubling of the protective paternal Self and monstrous Other as threats to the home, anxieties about white male inadequacy are seemingly relieved. However, the restoration of threatened American masculinity is compromised, uncertain and ambivalent. No interpretation of the much-discussed coda is reassuring: the family either now shares Curtis's hallucinations, the feared storm is real, and they must return to a shelter that signifies reopened childhood trauma; or Curtis (and the viewer) end the film hopelessly trapped in another hallucination—and a permanent dislocation from reality in realized mental illness. Either way, in *Take Shelter*, white male anxieties, guilt and paranoia linger, for the unsettling tempest cannot be averted and is about to hit.

### *WINTER'S BONE* AND THE SOUTHERN GOTHIC: LANDSCAPE, HOME AND MALE ABSENCE

Adapted from a 2006 novel of the same name by Daniel Woodrell, *Winter's Bone* depicts an indomitable daughter's nightmarish quest—similarly besieged by hostile and malevolent forces—to safeguard her Ozark family and home after her drug-making father's disappearance.<sup>3</sup> The absence yet spectral presence of the father/s signals both male inadequacy and failure and the collapse of the corrupted Ozark mountain community, located in the southern half of Missouri bordering Arkansas, formed of abject poverty and rampant methamphetamine production and use. Her quest, which

<sup>3</sup> While the film is largely faithful to the novel, its production and release into a post-recession America significantly shapes its cultural reception.

requires her to travel from house to house in her efforts to confirm his whereabouts, also articulates the symbolic relation of the landscape to character particularly evocative of the Southern Gothic. She encounters not only ruptured community and familial bonds in their unwelcoming (extended) relatives and his hostile criminal accomplices, but grotesque situations and a prevailing mood of violence, alienation and futility. In so doing, director Debra Granik evocatively establishes “the strangeness of a place” (Berra), signalled in an uncanny portrait of an off-kilter, broken “America,” through its repressed economic-cultural “white Other.”

Ree Dolly (Jennifer Lawrence), a seventeen-year-old with despairing aspirations of escape via military enlistment, necessarily performs dual roles as *de facto* mother and father, caring for and teaching her young siblings to survive, shoot and cook. The Dolly home is fraught and precarious—their father, Jessup, absent after skipping bail on drug charges and mother, Connie (Valerie Richards), effectively so, medically and psychologically withdrawn, overwhelmed by her husband’s repeat failings: “This is the exact shit she went crazy trying to get away from.” The film repeatedly highlights Ree’s circumscribed life options, particularly given she has dropped out of school to care for her siblings, to signal the realities of endemic poverty—impacts intensified by the Great Recession. In an early scene that marks how embedded these limited alternatives are in the American education system, she first looks bemusedly into a baby-care class using dolls, before looking more longingly at Marine cadets training with wooden guns in the gym. While Ree’s separation from each by a glassed door underlines both her exclusion and the stark difference between her child-rearing, gun-toting reality and the fake performances she witnesses (Sorrento 43), she nonetheless signs up for the cadets, wishing for an avenue of escape. However, her later visit with an army recruiter uneasily signals the socio-economic pressures that drive much enlistment, with the substantial sign-on fee clearly trumping ill-defined dreams of travel.

When Jessup does not appear at his arraignment, Ree must locate him inside seven days in order to save their home and her family (her sister will go into foster care and her brother be adopted by covetous relatives), because he placed it and their virgin woods as bond. Her ancestry is also signified in the land, so even in cutting down and selling the woods before eviction, she would symbolically sell away her history and heritage (Sorrento 42). In spite of its state of disrepair, the home’s cultural centrality remains undiminished. Without it, Ree declares the family would be “in the field like dogs.” Jessup’s disappearance nonetheless establishes a pattern of male absence in the community. The permanent absence of Dolly men from the home is confirmed when Ree’s uncle, Teardrop (John Hawkes),

does not enter, even upon safely returning Ree after she is beaten. Teardrop, coiled, mangy and dangerous, is also absent when Ree begins her quest, arriving unannounced at his house. Invoking a persistent theme of women acting as gatekeepers and proxies for absent men, his partner speaks in his name. The indictable withdrawal of patriarchal influence, a consequence of endemic poverty, male neglect, drug use and criminality, enforces a matriarchy, but only superficially. When Ree thereafter visits Thump Milton (Ronnie Hall), a powerful local crime boss whose belated appearance provokes not only genuine fear in Ree, but wariness from his own family, she is first met by another gatekeeper, his wife Merab (Dale Dickey). As Berra observes, those who transgress cultural codes are often cast out or ostracized in the Southern Gothic. In Merab's wry assumption that Ree is in the "wrong place, I expect," the woman signals both Ree's violation of unwritten community codes against trespass and Ree as symbolically out-of-place. Further implying her quest breaches accepted gender boundaries, Merab indicts the absence of males to act for Ree: "Don't you got no men, to do this?"

*Winter's Bone* outwardly indulges the usual cultural myths of exoticized, Othered Southern rural and mountain cultures, designated as insular, corrupt, degenerate, and culturally stagnant. The dysfunctional community, an ill-bred, incestuous network of extended families and criminal relationships, is menacing, and mired in ugly, barbarous violence. However, Granik deftly balances Southern myth and "starkly-realized social reality"—perhaps a virtue of Granik's observational filmmaking style—and adheres to the Southern Gothic literary tradition, rather than its "more overwrought cinematic lineage" (Berra). *Winter's Bone* also presents a complex sense of solidarity and kinship, especially evident when, redolent of other Southern Gothic films (Donnar), the film pleurably lingers on a domestic, multi-generational family gathering, musical performance and sublime singing. In *Winter's Bone*, the charged immanence of male violence is repeatedly used to silence women—a desperate attempt to displace the perceived feminizing characteristics of joblessness and poverty. Teardrop frighteningly embodies this potential, menacingly and elliptically warning his partner not to challenge him: "I said shut up already . . . with my mouth."<sup>4</sup> Reminiscent of many representations, as Granik recognizes, the otherwise prized defiance and individuality that mountain cultures represent in excess becomes alienating and scary (Bell 28). Typically, governmental and institutional authority is also openly refused, tenuous, even

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<sup>4</sup> Teardrop likewise warns Ree against speaking to her father's sometime accomplice: "You'll end up bit by hogs . . . or wishin' you were."

void, in this domestic-but-foreign space. The locals display open disdain and deep suspicion of authorities like Sheriff Baskin (Garret Dillahunt) and a bondsman, each requiring physical confirmation of Jessup's whereabouts or death, and perceived to have a cynical, parasitic presence dependent on the troubles of local men.

The Gothic hangs on the sublime qualities and terrifying effects of the landscape, but the Southern Gothic particularly privileges the landscape's symbolic relation to its characters (Donnar; Savoy). Cementing *Winter's Bone's* place within the tradition, the stark, desolate austerity of the Ozark countryside is by turns beautiful and beguiling, uncivilized and unsympathetic, mirroring the character and economic plight of its blighted inhabitants. Most tellingly, Ree's confident peripatetic navigation from house to house establishes her continued connection with the landscape. Her options for travel are admittedly limited—her father took their truck (later found burned out) and she had to give up her horse—but her purposeful walking cannily inverts the Gothic heroine's typically fraught relationship with the terrifying landscape. In regularly cutting across the harsh, nondescript landscape and emerging out of it, she symbolically (re-)establishes control and mastery over her life. Indeed, her unwillingness to get into men's trucks throughout rests not only on reasoned fears of potential male violence—"You have always scared me," she tells her uncle in a rare moment of quiet intimacy and permitted openness—but the lack of control connoted in having her movement circumscribed. Ree's resourcefulness does not mandate a traditionalist femininity, which Negra and Tasker otherwise identify as pervasive in recessionary culture (7). The disruptive significance of her walking emblemizes her agency and challenge to the *status quo*, reiterated across repeated warnings to "get back home" and, by implication, cease talking, questioning and moving. Ree's determined walking thus not only counters community expectations of female immobility and silence, but complexly reinvigorates *and* threatens the community.

This symbolic connection to the landscape has atrophied across the wider Ozark community, with the locals she encounters symbolically immobile, tied to dilapidated networks of ramshackle housing and broken down, rusted vehicles. The debased community is mirrored in the already fraught home, underscored when Ree's neighbour (also her father's cousin) unpersuasively attempts to convince her Jessup died cooking meth. However, with Ree recognizing that the high weeds suggest the explosion happened long ago, the apocalyptic scene of an exploded, blackened house and burned out vehicles she surveys is rather evidence of the home as destroyed *and* toxic. Moreover, the only surviving cultural code is the

prohibition on talking. Indeed, indicative of the community's breakdown, 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. Crime, corruption and drugs further encourage an environment of paranoia and silence, with Thump especially unwilling to speak with Ree because "talking just causes witnesses. And he don't want none of those." To talk, as Teardrop observes, goes "against our ways" and invites punishment: declaring Jessup was killed because he started talking and provoking an armed stand-off with the sheriff after asking why he told others that Jessup had become an informant. Even Ree declares her shame *for* her father, because he snitched, with Teardrop troublingly blaming it on Jessup's love for his family, described as "his weakness."

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Ree's unwelcome return to Thump's property abruptly announces a Gothic horror aesthetic that persists until film's end. Merab and her sisters, brutally enacting the threat of violence associated with Thump, scald Ree with coffee, beat and drag her by the hair to the barn in his name: "I told you to leave him alone." Recovering from unconsciousness, Ree's blurred vision slowly refocuses on a room filled with iron implements horrifically connoting her possible torture. As well as gatekeepers, women act as surrogates of male violence, *as* Merab assures Teardrop when he arrives and asks if any man hit Ree: "I put the hurt on her." Reiterating the community prohibition on talking, Teardrop vouches "to stand for" his bloodied, though defiant niece in order to return her safely home: "This is a girl that won't tell nobody nothing." Yet in agreeing to "answer for" her, Teardrop assumes responsibility not only for what she may do, but her recent actions and perceived transgressions. Teardrop's capacity for violence is vital to rescuing Ree *and* thereby securing her quest, but recalls the fatalistic sense of violence and death that shadows him and will likely culminate in his demise. In an act of self-sacrifice that symbolically returns him to the family, Teardrop too now stands condemned, whether to exile or death. Safely returned home, the injured Ree endures vivid fever dreams induced by strong painkillers. The Gothic horror aesthetic extends into these dreams, filled with vultures and chainsaws, as the frame transmutes from a colour 1.85:1 aspect ratio to a black and white Academy 1.33:1 ratio. The chilling looped sound of chainsaws cutting down trees both articulates her fear of losing the woods and serves as a macabre harbinger of a cutting *off* that rescues the family's precarious position.

Ree's undaunted efforts to find her father, now presumed dead, across a series of in-between spaces distressingly signify her marking for death. As if recognizing this shared fate, she searches the local cemetery (without

luck) with Teardrop for her father's body in "any humps that ain't yet settled." Thump's wife thereafter knocks at the Dolly door and, wishing to silence community gossip about her family, finally offers to assist Ree: "We'll take you to your daddy's bones. We know the place." Ree's journey is disorienting from the outset, including by virtue of the landscape. A disinclined and distrustful Ree is first obligated to put a sack on her head to mask their route. A subsequent small boat trip also swiftly becomes strange, unsettling and incongruous. Suggestive of a fable, the gothicized waterway assumes an almost menacing agency, *filled* with haunting silence, horrifically enclosed and enveloped in darkness. Invoking the mythic relation of waterways as liminal spaces between life and death, as Sorrento (48) recognizes, when the Thump women finally halt the boat, Merab instructs Ree to "reach down and tug [Jessup] up" from the waters that harbour and conceal her disappeared father. Plunging her hand into the ice-cold water, Ree finds his hand. She cannot saw it off with the chainsaw Merab proffers, yet macabrely holds it while Merab performs the grisly task. John R. Clark (qtd. in Leeuwen), noting the historical function of grotesques *as and for* cultural critique, asserts that contemporary grotesques dramatize the corruption and perversion of entire societies. Accordingly, Ree must retrieve her father's body again for the second hand after she involuntarily allows it to slip back under the water: "they know that trick." The deed done, she again drops his body in horror, as the camera stays on the body of water that will serve as his grave. In *Winter's Bone*, the recently buried trauma haunts too close to the surface, shallow and raw. Further allegorizing the grotesquery of her economic plight—and that poor Americans confront to secure their home—Ree takes her father's severed hands to the sheriff in a plastic shopping bag labelled, "Thank You. Have a Nice Day." Yet the violent return and survival of the repressed (economic) Other in the Gothic tradition holds subversive, socially critical potential.

The South in American film is culturally romanticized and idealized, but more often serves—particularly in the cinematic Southern Gothic—to externalize and project American fears and prejudices on to "a convenient Other" (Pinkerton, "Southern Gothic" 44–45). This displacement seeks to affirm America's civilization and dominance—and insulate it. In this sense, *Winter's Bone* seemingly displaces anxieties about the perceived failures of American males onto monstrous domestic "white Otherness." However, rather than displace its anxieties and failings, the "white Other" becomes "mainstream" America's troubling double, again echoing the Gothic's traditional concern with inner turmoil made manifest. Invariably, however, this exposes prejudice and anxiety alike. While the "cinematic South" is often evocative of an imagined and derided (national) past, it

is also a symbolic and meaningful “repository for the nation’s unresolved problems and contradictions” (Barker and McKee 5). American flags conspicuously connect Ozark community and male dysfunction, violence and abandonment with the nation state. Flags in particular signal wider concerns over American masculinity and also the nation’s moral culpability for abandoning its economic Others. A flag reflected over the passenger side truck window in which Ree sits awaiting Teardrop’s return foreshadows male violence and neglect when Teardrop takes an axe to a Thump family vehicle, and the flag on the Dolly porch is miserably tattered.

Nevertheless, the Ozark community, as embodied by Ree, is not simply representative of doomed white Otherness and masculinity, but female resilience and forbearance that redeems absent father and secures the home. Called “child” repeatedly throughout the boat ride, the grotesque ordeal marks a transitional moment for Ree. Ree dually asserts the honour of her father’s name throughout—declaring early on he is dead and “not a runner”—and that she will find him, telling the bondsman: “You know what Dollys are.” When the bondsman later confirms the family home is secured, Ree’s ability to find Jessup’s body restores the Ozark family (name) she sustains: “Bread and butter, I told you.” More than this, she compels both Jessup and Teardrop’s redemptive acts, however partial or ambivalent. Teardrop’s admission he now knows who killed Jessup foreshadows an act of revenge and, playing the banjo, a likely shared fate. In thereafter refusing to take the instrument when he leaves, Teardrop ensures it will become a spectral reminder of the men who played it. In taking on Ree’s “sins,” Teardrop becomes an unlikely and ambivalent Christ-figure, sacrificing himself to take her place among the dead. Teardrop remains unpredictable, even unreadable to the end (Berra), yet Ree’s dogged quest compels his return to the family. More significantly, in recovering her father—retrieving his hands and bringing out his old banjo—the tireless Ree not only redeems fallen paternity, but also replaces it. After Teardrop leaves, Ree assures her siblings—the three depicted as a tight unit—she will not do the same, with permanent male absence demanding her conclusive ascension to family head: “I’d be lost without the weight of you on my back.” Unlike Teardrop, Ree’s self-sacrifice subordinates her own needs (and pleasures and future) to sustain the family. Berra correctly notes that in Ree’s “unwavering courage in the face of adversity,” she takes her position among the canon of Gothic heroines. However, most tellingly, Ree’s “triumph,” much like Curtis’s, is constrained, compromised and ambivalent. She can accept but not escape her circumstances, the film subversively admitting the limits of individual empowerment absent systemic change.



## CONCLUSION

*Winter's Bone* and *Take Shelter* showcase bizarre, off-kilter and ugly worlds, monstrosity, madness and grotesquery to interrogate American cultural, economic and political instability in the wakes of 9/11 and the recession. Each film echoes the Gothic's traditional concern with inner turmoil made manifest, and articulates the symbolic relation of the natural environment landscape to character redolent of the American and Southern Gothics, to articulate how the domestic-everyday becomes unfamiliar, unsettling and threatening. In so doing, *Take Shelter* and *Winter's Bone* materially evoke the Gothic's continued subversive capacity to lay bare contemporary moments of national crisis and unease, illuminating unresolved and unrelieved American cultural anxieties about male protective capacity. Specifically, the films represent the cumulative deleterious impacts of the recessionary economic climate to give voice to reinvigorated anxieties about the perceived incapacity of beleaguered (white) American men and fathers to protect vulnerable family, home and nation alike. Most significantly, rather than individuating the experience of financial crisis on "failing males" and the besieged American home in recessionary culture, both *Winter's Bone* and *Take Shelter* deftly declare its systemic basis, unerringly depicting the everyday impacts of wide-scale economic licentiousness and exploitation on working-class and poor Americans. Complicating Negra and Tasker's findings (13), familial traumas are thus located not in individual responsibility and failure, but whole-of-society causes that preclude too-easy narrative triumphs. In speaking these *unspeakables*, both films demonstrate the continuing vital qualities of the Gothic tradition: presenting male crisis and failure absent uncomplicated recuperation and presenting financial hardship and poverty absent comforting fantasies of escape. Nor are male anxieties and failure linked disapprovingly to female empowerment, but rather male inadequacy and absence in *Take Shelter* and *Winter's Bone* compel increased female control to navigate financial crisis and rescue the besieged home. In these respects, both films contest and complicate dominant discourses on the cultural restoration of American males and the home along traditional gender lines. Rather than displacing and erasing cultural fears, in the prominent and unapologetic female assumption of the protective role, the Gothic sensibility of pervasive anxiety, dread and paranoia in *Take Shelter* and *Winter's Bone* unsettles national cultural narratives about revived American institutions of traditional masculinity, family and home—the American Dream as Nightmare.

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