"One log alone won’t hold fire": Nature, Place and Regional Identity in Daniel Woodrell’s *Winter’s Bone* and *The Outlaw Album*
Abstract

The purpose of this essay is to examine descriptions of nature, both in terms of physical setting and as an abstract entity, and their relation to the concepts of place and regional identity in Daniel Woodrell’s *Winter’s Bone* (2006) and *The Outlaw Album* (2011). The main thesis is that when it comes to the characters’ relation to nature there is acceptance instead of resistance, and unification instead of separation. The essay also puts forth the argument that acceptance of nature can be seen as one of the key elements in both *Winter’s Bone* and *The Outlaw Album*. Moreover, the essay contains the idea that nature is a crucial part of the characters’ sense of regional identity in *Winter’s Bone* and *The Outlaw Album*. The theoretical background consists of ecocriticism along with theorizations of regional identity. When it comes to ecocriticism, a wide and multilayered theoretical field, the essay focuses on the works of three different scholars who all address the relationship between man, nature and place, namely Lawrence Buell, Fred Waage and Leonard Lutwack.

The analysis consists of two parts. The first part addresses *Winter’s Bone* and mainly deals with the concept of family, the aspect of rurality and unification with nature within the novel. The second part looks at similar aspects in *The Outlaw Album*, but here, the emphasis is rather on the concept of outsider–insider, i.e. the difference between native Ozarkers and people who originate from outside the region.
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Introduction

Literature does belong in essential ways to place, and always invokes place to speak in its fullest voice.
(Welty 547)

It is one of the hardest things men have to do—to accept nature.
(Broome 134)

The bulk of Daniel Woodrell’s novels are deeply rooted in rural life in the American Ozarks, and many of them depict communities more accustomed to hunting rifles and logging equipment than computers and cell phones. Among weed-whiskered farms and working-class homes in the backwoods, far from “the black plague of commerce, industrialism and urbanism” (Abbey 56), community and family ties matter more than following the law. Here the people and the landscape can be seen as equally untamed, but also as equally vulnerable. Those who do not have the wherewithal to make their own living will not survive for long, and a frail bond exists between the inhabitants of this area and their physical environment.

The harsh wilderness is a place where “environmental conditions are seen as so unalterably fixed that they are beyond meaningful discussion” (Waage, “Exploring the ‘Life Territory’” 148), something which becomes evident in Woodrell’s novels. Judging by the thousand-yard stare of Ree Dolly’s mother and the rage of her uncle, Teardrop, in Winter’s Bone, and the desperation of the families fighting for survival in The Outlaw Album, one could come to the conclusion that life in the Ozarks is by no means easy. However, just many real-life Ozarkers, the people in Woodrell’s novels have in many ways chosen independency. As argued by Fish-Greenlee the strive for an independent lifestyle among Ozarkers has led to “an attachment to
place rooted in strong kinship and community networks, economic self-sufficiency, and the autonomy afforded by geographic isolation” (31). I claim that this “attachment to place” can be found in Woodrell’s works as well.

The fight to remain self-sufficient might also explain why life in the region seems old-fashioned, as well as the fact that the patois of the Ozarks has expressions that all allude back to older skills and older ways of living. The regional identity of the Ozark communities is closely connected to the landscape, making the relationship between human and nature a reciprocal one. This relationship can be seen as a constant matter of human impact upon the land versus nature’s impact upon humans, and an example of Lawrence Buell’s statement which says that “when you are living in a place, you are constructing it, whether you like it or not” (The Environmental Imagination 267). In short, to work and live on a piece of land undoubtedly changes the land, but the land might in turn help the worker establish his or her own identity, deeply rooted in the soil of that particular place.

How people relate to their surroundings depends on each individual, but some common denominators can be distinguished. Eric Ball, for example, writes about three important factors when it comes to the relationship between people and the land they inhabit: nature itself as a physical presence, the inhabitants’ skewed conceptions of their surroundings, and the very changes inflicted upon the land by human activities (Ball 235). Nature can thus be seen as both a physical presence as well as an abstract concept when it comes to shaping a sense of place as well as a sense of identity. In Woodrell’s texts the characters are very much aware of their physical surroundings, but the idea of nature in the sense of a deeper spiritual connection is also a prominent part of daily life. Nature offers self-sufficiency by providing soil suitable for farming and rivers full of fish—the first leading to sometimes significant changes in the landscape—but it also offers refuge and recreation.
Thus, to live in a place where you have to make your own living from what you can scavenge from the wilderness certainly has an impact on your sense of identity. People of the Ozarks—as well as Appalachia—have been called many things throughout the years, the nicknames ranging from derogatory terms such as ‘white trash’, to the more regionally specific ‘hillbilly.’ In Woodrell’s novels people often live in houses no longer deemed salvageable, surrounded by rusted old tractors and abandoned pickup trucks, facing injustice and insults on a daily basis. Their life might be considered primitive or old-fashioned, something that adds to the rift between the region and more modern, urban areas.

This conflict is by no means new. While farming is still a common occupation in the Ozarks things have changed during the last fifty years, and “while most Ozark farmers traditionally made agricultural decisions based on a cultural logic grounded in their kinship networks and self-identification as stewards of their land and animals, such values and actions have become quite rare in the present” (Campbell 1). It might, however, be possible to argue that this “self-identification as stewards of their land and animals” still remains and can be found in Woodrell’s novels. Francaviglia argues that the natural environment in the area is in fact “the foundation of Ozark identity” (72). This can be said to be especially true in “the more remote, rugged areas” which “continue to support the ‘semi-arrested’ frontier” (Campbell 3). People in those areas still have a lot in common with farmers from previous generations who “paid close attention to wild species, their own animals, and other ecological features for signs of stress, blight, or other forebodings, and acted accordingly to prevent overexertion of their land or animals” and who “depended on wild resources, in addition to their domesticated species, to sustain themselves and their animals” (Campbell 3). In Woodrell’s novels many of the characters have been bereaved of their land—either by the government or by agricultural unprofitability—and are now surrounded by fallow farmlands.
inhabited by nothing but memories, something which might explain the deep sense of injustice which holds these characters in a vice-like grip.

When people have to fight against external threats, such as ever-changing weather and a hostile wilderness, and there are no socioeconomic safety nets to rely on, staying together in a closely knit community is important in order to better be able to handle difficult situations. This paves the way for “fixed and immutable identities”, i.e. identities where “the self is formed and develops within the frameworks of understandings and values, allegiances and identifications” (Sayers 148-149). Whether the characters live in the wilderness, facing cold and brumal days in Winter’s Bone, or in small “Podunk towns” in The Outlaw Album, they are still indelibly marked by the surrounding environment. This can be seen as a contributing factor when it comes to shaping the “distinguishing characteristics of native Old Stock Ozarkers,” characteristics which “include their sense of place and suspiciousness of outsiders, ‘furriners,’ whether from another country or any neighboring city or state” (Campbell 2).

Arlene Stein writes about Winter’s Bone that it “gives us a window into this ‘other America’—the America of junk cars and refrigerators in front lawns, of widespread methamphetamine addiction, of family values, and love of the land” (Stein 672), something which might be said about The Outlaw Album as well.

The purpose of this essay is to investigate how nature and landscape, both in terms of pure wilderness and cultivated farmland, is portrayed in Winter’s Bone and The Outlaw Album—a full-length novel and a short story collection—and how the physical setting helps to shape the regional identity, in this case Ozark identity, of the characters as well as their sense of place. As stated before, many of the characters make a living from forestry, and the dense Ozark forests provide them with meat, firewood and a sense of security. Owning a piece of land is also a source of pride, even though the harshness of the wilderness makes life difficult. I will seize upon Waage’s statement that “places help to shape both individual and community
identities” (“Exploring the ‘Life Territory’” 145) and examine how nature influences the regional community that constitutes the Ozarks. Some attention will be given to individual identity, especially in Winter’s Bone, but my main focus will be on the region as a whole. What impact does this “splendid landscape” (Blevins 265) have on the identity of the people living there? How does nature fit into the framework through which regional identity is created?

My main thesis is that in Winter’s Bone as well as in The Outlaw Album there is, when it comes to the characters’ relation to nature, acceptance instead of resistance and unification instead of separation. I will also argue that acceptance of nature can be seen as one of the key elements in both Winter’s Bone and The Outlaw Album. I will stress the importance of place while examining how perception of nature affects the characters throughout the two texts, and by doing this I will also show that there is a strong connection between place and regional identity, and that the natural environment is a key factor when it comes to shaping the characters’ sense of place and identity. An important factor in my discussion about identity will be the distinction between ‘insider’ and ‘outsider,’ or rather, between native Ozarker and ‘furriner,’ especially when it comes to The Outlaw Album. I will also examine and discuss whether nature can be studied objectively and seen as a “thing-in-itself”\(^1\) throughout Winter’s Bone and The Outlaw Album, or whether it is always part of a cultural construction. I also want to find evidence that Woodrell has incorporated the region’s past in his stories, i.e. that his writing has been influenced by historical events in the region, especially those relating to the natural environment, such as the creation of nature reserves.

I will use ecocriticism as a theoretical framework for the essay as a whole, and the first part will thus examine theorizations of environment, place and regional identity where the theoretical background on regional identity focuses on the Ozarks and the concept of

\(^1\) A concept first mentioned by German philosopher Immanuel Kant to describe things that are unknowable to man, i.e. independent of any constructions formed in the human mind.
‘insider’/‘outsider’. The analysis section will then contain an examination of the various descriptions of nature in *Winter’s Bone* and *The Outlaw Album* and how they are used to emphasize the distinctiveness of this particular part of the US and the characters who live in it. Here I will try to answer the question how living in close proximity to the wilderness affects the people living in the Ozarks and their sense of regional identity.

**Ecocriticism, Ozark Regional Identity and the Importance of Place**

This essay relies on the method of close reading where certain features of the two examined texts have been taken into consideration, primarily those relating to cultural references and descriptions of the physical setting, i.e. elements that will support my claims and arguments throughout the essay. The theoretical framework then consists of ecocriticism and theorizations of regional identity.

The first scholar to use the term “ecocriticism” was William Rueckert in his essay “*Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism,*” written in 1978. According to Laurence Coupe ecocriticism can be seen as “the most important branch of green studies, which considers the relationship between human and non-human life as represented in literary texts and which theorises about the place of literature in the struggle against environmental destruction” (302). However, ecocriticism does not only address ecological issues such as environmental destruction; it can also be used to pay attention to all kinds of literature where the natural environment plays an important role in the story-telling. Cheryll Glotfelty states that ecocriticism is simply
the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies (18).

William Howarth seizes on the more philosophical aspect of nature and argues that ecocriticism “observes in nature and culture the ubiquity of signs, indicators of value that shape form and meaning” and that it might lead us to “recognize that life speaks, communing through encoded streams of information that have direction and purpose, if we learn to translate the messages with fidelity” (163). Waage similarly argues that ecocriticism can be seen “not as ‘a’ system, but as a collection of many interlinked yet different ways of understanding what the signs are signifying” (“Exploring the ‘Life Territory’” 139). Nature thus has its own ways of conveying meaning, a “deeper truth” that an entirely anthropocentric reading might overlook.

In addition to propagating nature as being a conveyor of meaning, ecocriticism can also be used to stress the importance of place and to examine how a particular environment affects and changes various characters in a literary work. Waage defines place as something that is “distinctive and continuous at the same time; places overlap and contain more localized places; they are constructed by individuals as well as communities, just as places help to shape both individual and community identities” (“Exploring the ‘Life Territory’” 145). Buell similarly argues that “the function of place is to define character by confining it, to act as ‘the ground conductor of all the currents of emotion and belief and moral conviction that charge out from the story in its course’” (The Environmental Imagination 255). Place can be seen as particularly important when people live close to the wilderness and are affected by the unpredictable ways of nature on a daily basis. Waage writes:
The illusion that we are exempt from dependency on a particular space and its finite possibilities is easier to sustain in some places than in others. On land laboriously invested, where families and communities are deeply rooted, human culture and physical space are deeply entwined ("Exploring the ‘Life Territory’" 135).

Waage further argues that ecocriticism “examines the reciprocity” between “the entity-in-itself” and “the thing-for-us”, in this case nature as “the entity-in-itself”—or rather the “thing-in-itself”—and nature as a “cultural construction” (“Exploring the ‘Life Territory’” 142). Even though Waage’s research mainly focuses on Appalachia, the Appalachian Mountains and the Ozarks have quite a few common denominators. They are traditionally farming areas, but due to changes in the agricultural industry many farms and previously self-sufficient households have fallen into decline, leading to poverty and other social issues. Moreover, both Appalachia and the Ozarks can be called bioregions—places where nature continues to affect the daily life of people. It is possible to study a particular place as a “bioregion” and examine “the dialogics of human creation and the ‘thing-in-itself’ environment of this definable space” (Waage, “Exploring the ‘Life Territory’” 143). A bioregion is thus created through the interaction between a piece of land and the people living on (and off) it. In short, “bioregional ideas would seek to examine cultural creations with reference to the geographical, biological, and cultural milieux of their creation and content, milieux in the definition of which ecological attributes play a prominent role” (Waage, “Exploring the ‘Life Territory’” 143).

This is where it is possible to add identity to the equation. Even though one must first define identity, ecocriticism can be used to incorporate aspects of nature in the reading of both older and newer literary works and then examine how it affects the characters and their sense of identity.

2 The thing-in-itself can also be referred to as the noumenon, and in ecocriticism it can be used to perceive nature as independent of cultural construction.
However, not all texts dealing with nature and identity are suitable for an ecocritical reading. Lawrence Buell defines an ecocritical text as a place where “the nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history” (*The Environmental Imagination* 7). A place cannot be understood “simply in the light of an imagined descriptive or symbolic structure, not simply as an ecology, but all of these three simultaneously” (Buell, “The ecocritical insurgency” 707). Buell even goes as far as to argue that place and how we perceive it might be one of the most important aspects of ecocriticism: “Judging from the multitudinous testimonials by and on behalf of writers, ancient and modern, as to the importance of the sense of place in their work, it might seem that place ought to be central to anyone’s theory of environmental imagination” (*The Environmental Imagination* 252).

If place can be used to define “both individual and community identities” (Waage, “Exploring the ‘Life Territory’” 145) then one might argue that it is easy to define the identity of a literary character solely by his or her surroundings, but this is obviously not the case since so many literary works focus on family and social context when it comes to creating identity. This is perhaps not very surprising since the concept of place is complicated and not easily defined. It seems that not even authors can properly express the importance of place in a literary work. Anthropocentric readings are still dominant and it could “be said of all genres that place is something authors find easier to name and praise than to present” (Buell, *The Environmental Imagination* 255). It might also have something to do with point-of-view. Meaning is always created by humans whereas nature—in any place—is indifferent. What matters is rather how we perceive nature—not as a “thing-in-itself” but as “the-thing-for-us”—when we create a sense of meaning or identity. Waage writes that

the ‘phenomenon of environmental consciousness’ is different for each perceiver, but since the perception is the perceiver’s reality, the study of perception as embodied in
literature or in other cultural creation, although it may be of a ‘virtual’ reality, is for all meaningful purposes equivalent to perception of some nonsubjective nature ‘out there’” (Waage, “Exploring the ‘Life Territory’” 141).

Consequently, it would be impossible to look objectively at how nature is depicted in literary works since we can never treat man-made structures and human concepts as “autonomous entities, unshaped by human consciousness” (Waage, “Exploring the ‘Life Territory’” 138). However, nature as a “thing-in-itself” and the sense of place it might provoke can seldom be ignored. The physical environment is always there, albeit in the background, and even though it is possible to argue that our perception of it is a man-made structure, shaped by our own consciousness alone, it might be possible to also see it as a “thing-in-itself” through the eyes of a literary protagonist. Leonard Lutwack writes that

> setting in fiction . . . functions as the detailed and continuous environment in which character is formed and to which character reacts over a long period of time. The storyteller may not transform place like the poet, nor lose sight of its concreteness, because place is too necessary in the rendering of action, which must have a specific locale to occur in, and of character, which cannot fully exist without an environment to which it owes its identity through consistent orientation (17).

Thus, to identify with a certain surrounding and to acknowledge nature as a “thing-in-itself” as well as an integrated part of the sense of self might lead to strengthened place awareness.

The concept of place awareness, or simply sense of place, can also be linked to the construction of regional identity, especially in well-defined geographical regions like the Ozarks in which many of Daniel Woodrell’s novels and short stories take place. According to Phyllis Rossiter “there is among Ozarkers, both native and newcomer, and uncommon sense of place—an awareness of regional identity perhaps unsurpassed elsewhere” (14), something which one might expect to find among regional writers born and raised in the region. This is
an idea supported by Lutwack, who argues that “there is little doubt about sub-regional influences” and that “a geographical region with distinguishing features may have an influence on a number of writers” (138). The concept of regional identity in literature that takes place in an existing region can then very well be compared to the sense of identity felt by the non-fictional inhabitants of that region, given the probability that the author has been influenced by real life events and cultural phenomena. As a result non-literary theorizations of regional identity can be applied to literary works and used to fuse together a sense of place and a sense of identity in belonging to that particular place.

However, like all forms of identity, regional identity is not a static construction. It is ever-changing, but it is possible to argue that it is stronger in some places than in others. Kees Terlouw puts forth the idea that regional identity in itself “traditionally focuses on shared past and specific social and cultural characteristics” (452), values that thrive in regions like the Ozarks where there is a long history of conflicts between those calling themselves native Ozarkers and those who have come to the region to either enjoy its beautiful scenery or to confiscate land on the behalf of the government and its conservation policies. However, regional identity is not only rooted in a shared past. According to Antti Paasi, narratives of regional identity lean on miscellaneous elements: ideas on nature, landscape, the built environment, culture/ethnicity, dialects, economic success/recession, periphery/centre relations, marginalization, stereotypic images of a people/community, both of ‘us’ and ‘them’, actual/invented histories, utopias and diverging arguments on the identification of people (477).

When it comes to the Ozarks it is possible to argue that many of elements mentioned above are important, especially those relating to the physical setting, mainly nature in terms of wilderness. This could be seen as a rather traditional view since various approaches to regional identity have often “celebrated the primordial nature of regions, accentuating their
‘personality’ and the harmony/unity between a region and its inhabitants” (Paasi 476). In short, regional identity can be summed up in one single question: “Where do I belong?” (Paasi 479). This question can be seen as closely tied to the concept of place as well as family. The concept of ‘us’ and ‘them’ mentioned by Paasi is a view shared by Fish-Greenlee who argues that when it comes to the Ozarks, identity work in the area is informed by collective memory that can be viewed as a dialogic process occurring among constructions of ‘who we are,’ ‘who the other is,’ and ‘who we are not.’ Insider constructions of ‘who we are’ are centered on the maintenance of ancestral values for autonomy, self-sufficiency and trust supported by the replication of traditional subsistence practices and attachment to the land and the rivers of the Ozarks (57-58).

Fish-Greenlee further argues that to properly understand the concept of ‘who we are’ one must first define the “insider/outsider boundaries” (58), i.e. who has the right to call themselves an Ozarker and who is just an outsider or a foreigner.

The concept of ‘insider/outsider’ can also be applied to works by regional writers in order to find evidence of a sense of regional identity within the works. On the other hand, one cannot always assume that ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ are fixed positions and never subjected to change. The ‘insider’ can easily be viewed as an ‘outsider’ and vice versa since it all depends on perspective. Stephanie Foote writes about the dangers in depicting ‘insiders’ in rural areas: “In creating the folk as specimens marked by their folkways, their accents and their reliance on older notions of community, regional writing also creates the folk as doubles or foreigners, or immigrants” (6). Consequently, when writing about characters in a well-defined geographical region based on a real counterpart a great deal of sensitivity is needed to avoid stereotypical descriptions of provincial life. To look at the history of a specific region and what the landscape and its inhabitants have been subjected to throughout the years might be a
way for regional writers to create a credible depiction of the region. Literature also plays an
important part in protecting the uniqueness of a well-defined geographical and cultural region.
Foote claims that,

an analysis of regional writing’s literary strategies becomes even more important when
we realize how many of our contemporary ideas about the value and status of a
particularized cultural (or local) identity are derived from regional writing’s strategy
of protecting local identities by preserving them in literature (4).

This obviously requires that the method of preservation is based on familiarity with the region
and its sense of regional identity, whatever elements it is influenced by. The Ozark way of
life, as known to its real life inhabitants, can thus be used in studies of Woodrell’s works to
better understand the sense of regional identity felt by his fictional characters. Real life
Ozarkers today are still heavily influenced by the fact that “the historic strength of kinship and
community bonds that facilitated survival have been reinforced by the need to protect the
community from deprivation caused by outsiders” (Fish-Greenlee 59). ‘Outsiders’ are mainly
those who have historically threatened the freedom and self-sufficiency of the region’s native
inhabitants, and ranges from timber companies in the 1880s to government officials in the
1950s who took control of vast forest areas in the region in order to turn them into recreation
venues for people from other states. Government branches, mainly the NPS (National Park
Service) and ONSR (Ozark National Scenic Riverways), are still the epitome of the ‘outsider’
in the eyes of native Ozarkers who often “engage in discourse about outsider representations
to reconstruct and defend their identity” (Fish-Greenlee 90).

Another important aspect of regional identity in the Ozarks is ‘the hillbilly stereotype,’
which can also be linked to the concept of ‘insider/outsider.’ This particular stereotype can be
found in popular culture, especially in horror movies and novels, which offer a rather one-
Francaviglia writes:

Everyone is familiar with the stereotypical ‘hillbilly’ with baggy overalls and a jug of moonshine. This exaggerated image of the backwoodsman has traditionally had negative connotations, and is more attributable to the perceptions of those not from the Ozarks. Regardless of the displeasure this image evokes in many Ozark inhabitants, the hillbilly has become a widely accepted symbol or icon for the region. The stereotypical hillbilly’s exaggerated ignorance reflects the critical attitudes of outsiders (57-58).

However, to be a ‘hillbilly’ is also a form of resistance and a way to distinguish oneself from the ‘other’, namely the NPS and the tourists who threaten traditional ways of life. To an Ozarker the ‘hillbilly’ embodies traits such as “the pioneer spirit, strong kin networks, and rugged individualism” (Fish-Greenlee 86), whereas outsiders tend to speak of the negative characteristics associated with the stereotype. Francaviglia argues that even though “the Ozarks have suffered much criticism in literature and are often overlooked in regional studies, the negative views that outsiders have held of the region have actually helped to strengthen a sense of regional identity” (58), an aspect that might be found in literary works from the region as well.

Moreover, family and kin are also important concepts throughout the Ozarks and the emphasis family ties can in this case be seen as a part of regional identity:

In many rural areas it is common for young people to identify themselves in terms of their relatives who have a better established community identity, but in the Ozarks it is common for young and adults alike to identify themselves as ‘I’m Jim and Mary Matthew’s boy.’ Knowledge of all the family names in the community is expected,
and older traditionalists will sometimes be familiar with most of the family names in
the country (Rafferty 247).

Rossiter has a similar view and argues that in the Ozarks “there is a pervasive sense of family, a
clannish emphasis on kith and kin that time – and distance – cannot diminish” (14). Family
identity can thus be seen as subordinate to (albeit important parts of) a sense of regional
identity since family and place are closely intertwined. It is perhaps even possible to talk
about a ‘regional family’, sharing the same regional identity: “As more evidence of the
extraordinarily strong sense of place throughout the region, Ozarkers more often identify with
each other, even across state lines, than they do with the rest of their states at large—who have
historically treated their Ozarks neighbors as ‘poor relations’ or orphaned children” (Rossiter
25). As a part of this particularly strong emphasis on kin, ancestry and preserving old
traditions are still crucial ingredients of the Ozark culture, contributing to a pervasive sense of
independence based on survival skills and community ties:

‘The Ozarks’ symbolizes the presence of the ancestors, independence from outsiders,
community and family interdependence, hard-work, frugality, reciprocity, land
stewardship, diverse subsistence strategies, and subsistence-level living that have
always been facilitated by and accomplished in this place. In homesteads, former state
parks, on the rivers, in deteriorated hamlets, in cemeteries, and in hunting camps, like
their ancestors, people continue to fish, hunt, gather together, raise families, celebrate,
work and die. These sacred places and life experiences are good things, symbolized by
this landscape that embodies “who we are” as honest, trustworthy and hardworking
people (Fish-Greenlee 144).

The emphasis on the importance of family can thus also be found in the landscape since
farming has often been a family trade. This, in turn, inspires a sense of continuity and pride in
being yet another self-sufficient farmer from a long line of relatives who have chosen the same occupation and bit by bit made their mark on the landscape they inhabit.

Nature can hence be seen as an interconnecting factor, making landscape and a strong sense of place, of belonging to the land, a major part of regional identity. This emphasis on nature is traditionally a part of American literature, which is why the history of the American continent and its regions can be considered important while analyzing literary works. Buell writes that there are a number of writers who “want to represent the essential America as exurban, green, pastoral, even wild” and that “American literature has been considered preoccupied with country and wilderness as setting, theme, and value in contradistinction to society and the urban” (Environmental Imagination 32-33), something which complies with the view held by many inhabitants in scenic regions like the Ozarks.

Winter’s Bone: Family and Place

Survival and the importance of place

In Winter’s Bone a young woman, sixteen-year-old Ree Dolly, is trying to save her family and her home in the Ozarks after her meth-cooking father Jessup has failed to show up for court. Before disappearing he signed over the house and the land belonging to it in order to pay for his bond, and now that he is missing Ree, her two brothers and her clinically depressed mother are facing eviction. Aided by her childhood friend Gail and her violent uncle Teardrop, Ree sets out to prove that her father is dead and that is why he did not show up in time for his court date.

At the age of sixteen Ree already understands the harsh conditions that accompany life in the Ozarks. With their father gone missing she is adamant when it comes to teaching her two younger brothers how to hunt and fend for themselves, knowing it will be crucial to their
survival. Surrounded by nature—or rather, “the ‘natural’ as opposed to the urban or industrial environment . . . the nature of immediate experience” (Soper 125)—Ree, who “ain’t no silly-assed town girl” (*Winter’s Bone* 25), is aware that owning land is an important factor when it comes to managing life in the Ozarks. Ownership of land and self-sufficiency can even be said to be a key factor throughout *Winter’s Bone*. Having to rely on the land for survival is something that strengthens the sense of regional identity and the idea of ‘who we are’ in the community to which Ree and her family belong. To own a piece of land is a way to construct “a place-based cultural identity” (Ball 235), and thus “to threaten territory is to threaten identity” (Fish-Greenlee 150)—something which holds true in Woodrell’s novels. When the house belonging to the Dolly’s is threatened to be sold off when Ree’s father does not show up for trial, Ree notes that:

The boys and her and Mom would be dogs in the fields without this house. They would be dogs in the fields with Beelzebub scratchin’ out tunes and the boys’d have a hard hard shove toward unrelenting meanness and the roasting shed and she’d be stuck alongside them ‘til steel doors clanged shut and the flames rose (*Winter’s Bone* 15).

Even in this quote some identification with the surrounding landscape can be found. To be “dogs in the fields” is to be no more than a common animal; just like the ones many native Ozarkers hunt for their own survival.

Moreover, Ree’s younger brothers are also likely to succumb to a life of crime and outlawry if their small woodland farm is taken away. Lawlessness and illegal activities can be seen as being born out of the loss of property and land. It is also implied that selling one’s land will cast shame upon the entire family:

If sold, the timber could fetch a fair pile of dollars, probably, but it was understood by the first Bromont and passed down to the rest that the true price of such a sale would
be the ruination of home, and despite lean years of hardship no generation yet wanted to be the one who wrought that upon the family land (Winter’s Bone 104).

The “ruination of home” can then be connected to a strong sense of place, as in ‘this is where we belong’, this is ‘who we are’, the Ozarkers being a part of the land and proud stewards of the Ozark wilderness and the home they have created among the woods and the rivers.

Perhaps it can also be considered as not only a ruination of the physical home—the one that provides shelter and offers self-sufficiency—but also a ruination of the spirit. Ball argues that “place-as-environment and place-as-subjective-experience are equally interrelated, inseparable, and interdependent as are organisms and environments themselves”, at least when it comes to “subjective human experiences” (237). Home—which in turn inspires a strong sense of place—is then not only a physical location, but also a mental one. Place is thus constructed in two different ways: as the actual physical environment and as an abstract “constructed category” (Ball 238). In Winter’s Bone it is crucial to respect—and in some cases revere—the idea of home as a part of family history. Moreover, it becomes clear early on that learning how to respond to the physical setting, nature in its most present and concrete form, is also expected from someone growing up in the rural parts of the Ozarks. One example of this is when the Dolly boys have to learn early on how to acquire the needed skills in order to survive in such close proximity to the wilderness. Their uncle, Teardrop, who has already seen the kind of hardship connected to life in the backwoods, looks at Ree’s younger brothers “like he was scouting the boys for the future” (Winter’s Bone 111). This might imply that he is trying to figure out who might survive and who might not.

However, despite their respective abilities the boys might already be predestined to walk a certain path, something which is made evident by Ree’s thoughts about family names: “Some names could rise to walk many paths in many directions, but Jessups, Arthurs, Haslams and Miltons were born to walk only the beaten Dolly path to the shadowed place, live and die in
keeping with those bloodline customs fiercest held” (*Winter’s Bone* 62). Ball claims that identity is an effect of “processes, relations and flows” (238), it is constantly subject to change and evolvement, both as a result of external influences and inner choices. However, the fact that some lives in *Winter’s Bone* seem to be predestined contradicts a sense of having a choice when it comes to constructing a sense of regional identity. This lack of choice could be considered part of a kind of identity which is more fixed, as in ‘you are who you were born to be’ as well as ‘you are who your family is.’ Ancient communal ties and the drive to preserve the family bloodlines are closely connected to nature and to the natural inclination towards survival. However, things seem to have been rather different for a while. Teardrop tells Ree about how life used to be, when people gathered at Jessup’s house, drinking and smoking weed, and how “it was always the happy kind of stoned back then” (*Winter’s Bone* 113). Place had clearly meant something different once, before it became harder to survive on small farms and live off the land.

The forest itself is an important factor when it comes to survival since the timber can be sold and fetch a large sum of money. However, there seems to be an almost spiritual connection to the woods and a strong sense of place when reminded of family history. When Ree goes for a walk through the woods with her mother “where the first Bromont house had been built” (*Winter’s Bone* 116), she remembers the stories her mother used to her when she was a child, all of them deeply connected to the Ozark landscape. She recalls “Mom before she was all the way crazy, lolling with Ree on a blanket between the pines, telling windy tales of whiffle-birds, the galoopus, the bingbuffer, and other Ozark creatures seldom seen in these woods but known for generations to live there” (*Winter’s Bone* 116). The quote implies that the mystery of nature, its shadows and myths, are deeply embedded in Ozark culture. The stories Ree’s mother told her as a child help shape a sense of regional identity and of belonging to a place where the wild side of nature is very much real and present in what Buell
refers to as “spiritual centeredness” since it is closely linked to culture and cultural origin 
(*Environmental Imagination* 20). Buell also states that “environmental connectedness requires 
acts of imagination not at one stage alone but three: in the bonding, in the telling, in the 
understanding” (*Endangered World* 17). A subjective experience of nature where one bonds 
with the surrounding landscape requires a certain amount of imagination—imagination which 
might take the form of local stories and legends, passed on and understood by people 
habiting a certain region. The stories in *Winter’s Bone*, which are closely connected to a 
sense of place, embody all three aspects put forward by Buell and affect native Ozarkers from 
when they are children. Similarly, nature offers a refuge, a place of relaxation, fun and games: 
“The pines could easily be imagined into a castle or a sailing ship or serve merely as an ideal 
picnic spot” (*Winter’s Bone* 117). Nature, then, is not just a material asset, but also a spiritual 
one.

The importance of kin can also be said to be strengthened in the face of nature. One 
example of this is Betsy Milton who lost her daughter “her sweetest daughter to a tree limb 
that dropped on a calm blue day” and since then “she could occasionally be heard in the night 
shouting threats from her yard at those shining stars that most troubled her” (*Winter’s Bone* 
144). There was also Aunt Bernadette who was caught by a flash flood which “never even 
gave her body back” (*Winter’s Bone* 43). Nature takes lives on a whim, and to realize this— 
and to accept it—is part of everyday life in the Ozark. When Teardrop tells Ree, “You got to 
be ready to die every day—then you got a chance” (*Winter’s Bone* 140), this could be 
compared to life in the wilderness, far away from modern human civilization. In the wild, the 
animals that are prepared to die every day and who never let their guard down are the ones 
who are most likely to survive. In this sense, nature can be seen as a “destabilizing force” 
(Buell, *Endangered World* 17) in relation to human civilization, and survival requires a 
certain amount of assiduity.
In addition, a part of survival is also to keep by the unspoken laws of the rural parts of Ozarks, where turning snitch is the “biggest ancient no-no of all” (Winter’s Bone 140). Ree’s father Jessup, weakened by his love for his family, tells the law about the meth labs and thus has to die. At one point Ree dreams about his body, a nightmarish vision about what might have happened to it: “Dad’s body hung upside down from a limb to drain blood from his split neck into a black bucket” (Winter’s Bone 147). This could be compared to an event in the beginning of the novel where the Miltons, Ree’s neighbors, hang deer carcasses from trees in order to let decay set in and sweeten the flavor of the meat. Thus, when Ree dreams of her father hanging from a limb it evokes images of the human body being treated like a common forest animal. There is also the mystery of blood and kin when, in her dream, Ree sees “a golden fish in the bucket with a sparkling tail that swished bright words across the blood, bright words splashed past so fast they couldn’t be understood” (Winter’s Bone 147). The passage containing the dream sequence can thus be said to summarize the mystery of nature as well as a sense of belonging and of knowing your blood is deeply connected to a certain place, perhaps forever—an example of one of the “deeper truths” nature is able to convey.

When Teardrop remarks, “We’re old blood, us people, and our ways was set firm long before hotshot baby Jesus ever even burped milk’n shit yellow” (Winter’s Bone 150), it further strengthens the importance of blood. Ree herself seems to agree and have a deep understanding of the concepts of blood and kin when, at the end of the novel, she hugs her uncle and smells “the raw scent of him, the sweat and smoke, the roiling blood and spirit of her own” (Winter’s Bone 192).

Moreover, in relation to sharing the same blood in a way that makes them predestined to follow a certain path, people are described in words that relate to the landscape. Thump Milton, the powerful patriarch of Hawkfall, is “a fabled man, his face a monument of Ozark stone, with juts and angles and cold shaded parts the sun never touched” and his voice raises
“hammers and long shadows” (*Winter’s Bone* 133). He seems to be as unforgiving as the wilderness and well suited to survive in the backwoods. Teardrop’s face, on the other hand, is “a continent with a volcanic history, vast sections of wasteland and rugged brown mountainous zones rained upon eternally by three blue drops” (*Winter’s Bone* 110). Ree is described as having a body “made for loping after needs” (*Winter’s Bone* 3), whereas Sonny, her younger brother, is “seed from a brute, strong, hostile, and direct” (*Winter’s Bone* 7). Those are descriptions of almost animalistic traits, making the native Ozarkers of the area seem even more in tune with landscape. According to Brian Campbell “Ozark inhabitants have historically reflected the key geological characteristic of their landscape: ruggedness” (2), something which generally holds true in Woodrell’s character descriptions. Moreover, when Ree is beaten by Thump Milton’s wife and her sisters after asking too many questions about her father, she hears “the mutters of beasts uncaged from women” (*Winter’s Bone* 130), something which adds to the notion that in order to survive and preserve the ancient codes and rules of rural Ozarks one must be prepared to act in an animalistic manner.

In addition to sometimes displaying brutish manners the Ozarkers in *Winter’s Bone* seem to share a deep and thorough knowledge of how nature deals with carcasses, both human and animal. For instance, in the beginning of the novel the Miltons leave the meat hanging in the trees and “left to the weather for two nights and three days so the early blossoming of decay might round the flavor, sweeten the meat to the bone” (*Winter’s Bone* 3). However, Ree is also very much aware of what happens to a dead body in the wilderness, something which she reflects upon when she comes to the conclusion that her father is dead:

> Maybe he is in a crappy little grave or become piles of shit in a hog pen or has busted to bits tossed down a deep cave hole. Maybe he was left out plain in the open and is rottin’ away in a snow pile nobody has looked under yet, but, wherever, he’s dead, man (*Winter’s Bone* 125).
There is no romantic sheen surrounding the concept of death, and it becomes evident that there is a thin line between being alive and being dead. Moreover, people in the area seem to live their lives on the same premises as the animals in the forest. When Ree teaches her brothers how to hunt she notices that “the needed skill was silence” (*Winter’s Bone* 102). This quote might be considered slightly ambiguous. Silence is needed while hunting, but silence is also needed when it comes to preserving the Ozark way of life. As previously mentioned, to keep one’s silence about lawlessness and criminal activities in the area is a most sacred rule, and if one deviates from it one might end up just like Ree’s father—at the bottom of a pond, tied to an engine block.

The aspect of rurality

The physical setting and the location are undoubtedly one of the most important aspects of the sense of place and of regional identity. When the bus driver who drives the school bus remarks that, “I know damn well how just about everywhere is too far to walk to from out here” (*Winter’s Bone* 47), it offers a perspective as to just how far out in the backwoods Ree and her family live. Woodrell also writes about “the county blacktop that led everywhere” (*Winter’s Bone* 45), implying that when living so far out in the woods a single road can easily make the impression of leading to almost anywhere in the world, since everything compared to the Ozarks is away and everywhere else.

However, even though one might easily get the impression that everyone in *Winter’s Bone* lives similar lives on derelict woodland farms, Woodrell makes clear that this is not the case. When Ree and Gail drive back from visiting the spring where Ree has tried to soothe her wounds after having been beaten by the women of Hawkfall, they are forced to stop on a bridge due to some escaped hogs they have a view of a slightly different landscape:
In the bottoms beside the river lay the best growing dirt in the region. The houses near these unshapely stretching fields were burly and flush, with young trucks in the driveways and paid-off tractors in the barns (Winter’s Bone 99).

Even in those decidedly poor areas there are farms that have flourished, but it is not clear whether this gives rise to envy or whether the strong sense of regional identity, of belonging to the same place, still prevails among farmers who live under different conditions even though they inhabit the same stretch of mountainous wilderness.

There is, however, a startling difference between the town and more rural areas – an example of what Buell calls the “country-city polarity”, even though this refers more to “the clash of economic, political, and class interests” than landscape (Environmental Imagination 13). It is said that the Dollys are being “scornful of town law and town ways” (Winter’s Bone 8), and Teardrop makes a clear statement about the difference between various places within the area when he says that, “Our relations get watered kinda thin between this valley here and Hawkfall. It’s better’n bein’ a foreigner or town people, but it ain’t nowhere near the same as bein’ from Hawkfall” (Winter’s Bone 25). Even among native Ozarkers then, there are dissimilarities, those living close to the wilderness being wary of townsfolk, whereas the people in town, like the ones Ree and Teardrop encounter when they go for a drive, seem less likely to live by the old rules, even though the belong to old families. It is possible to argue that even though that are clear indications of regional identity throughout the novel, the sense of belonging to a certain place, of being a true Ozarker, is stronger when living in rural areas, in close proximity to the wilderness. People here have largely kept their old ways and are not as influenced by the modern world, which makes it easier for them to live by old rules and family traditions. When Mike Satterfield, the bondsman looking for Jessup Dolly, comes to visit Ree at the end of the novel she notices that he “smelled like town” (Winter’s Bone 191). Even the police chief, Baskin, states that there is a difference between himself and Ree’s kind
when he says, “Sometimes I get so fuckin’ sick of you goddam people, know it?” (*Winter’s Bone* 188).

Moreover, modernity seems far away in the life of Ree and her family. They have a television but “this deep in the valley reception was poor and they only received two channels” (*Winter’s Bone* 40). The outside world seems distant, and this might have strengthened the sense of ‘who we are’ in the face of strangers. There is also an emphasis on the importance of private land as opposed to state-owned land, as in the episode when Ree is visiting the spring together with Gail. The spring is situated on land belonging to the government, but before entering government territory, while they are still driving on private roads, Gail remarks on the poor condition of the road surface, something which leads to the mentioning of tourists:

“You-all’s road has got rough to where you about can’t call it a road no more.”

“You’ve been sayin’ that since third grade.”

“Well, it was true in third grade and it’s done nothin’ but get truer since then.”

“We like it this way – it keeps tourists out.”

“That’s the same ol’ joke your dad told me the first time I ever rode in here.”

“I think he meant it, though.” (*Winter’s Bone* 85)

Through “the government trees”, however, the road runs “mostly straight and fairly smooth” (*Winter’s Bone* 156), which adds to the contrast between family-owned land and land that has been annexed by the government, most likely the NPS even though it is never mentioned in the novel.

The families in the area are also very protective of their land, especially when someone tries to steal from them. This is possibly a remnant of the days when the government confiscated large areas in order to establish nature reserves. In Ree’s family it is a well known fact that one must protect one’s land in order to survive:
Grandad Bromont had famously chased timber-snakers away at gunpoint many, many times, and though Dad had never been eager to wave his gun about in defense of trees, he’d loaded up and done it whenever required (Winter’s Bone 104).

Moreover, the rough exterior of the houses in the area is also reminiscent of the surrounding landscape: “The stone faces of the houses had caught snow in their burls and creases and looked like small ideal cliffs in the wild” (Winter’s Bone 52). This implies a merging of nature and civilization, but even though the Ozark houses do not look out of place in the wild they have to put up a good deal of resistance when it comes to withstanding the sometimes harsh weather conditions. Ree notes that “huffing spring wind had tried to knock them loose and send them tumbling but never did” (Winter’s Bone 50), implying that there is both resistance and acceptance. The buildings of Hawkfall can also be seen as an example of how family history and the deep roots created by living for generations in the same place are allowed to manifest themselves in the physical setting. The inhabitants of Hawkfall have altered their surroundings by putting up buildings, but in the same way as their houses have started to merge with the wilderness they too have merged with the place they inhabit, albeit on a psychological level. The interaction between humans and nature when it comes to buildings and settlements, such as the ancient settlement of Hawkfall can thus be considered part of Ozark regional identity. Here place is a combination of nature and man-made structures, making it a solid framework for regional identity.

Unification with nature

Throughout Winter’s Bone Woodrell shows that he is well aware of Ozark traditions built around hunting and self-sufficiency. Fish-Greenlee argues that modern day Ozarkers are still largely “dependent on the forests, springs, rivers and wildlife for economic subsistence. People have also developed an attachment to place in this particular physical geography
because they have developed an ecological niche wherein a symbiosis exists between their cultural practices and the region’s natural resources” (16). This might be inevitable in order to survive, at least in the rural parts, something which is emphasized throughout the novel. In this sense the landscape in Winter’s Bone can certainly be considered a ‘bioregion’ since there is a constant interaction between “human creation and the ‘thing-in-itself’ environment” (Waage, “Exploring the ‘Life Territory’” 143).

However, Ree herself has to struggle to find herself at peace in the wilderness. Even though the physical setting might not offer any immediate comfort she finds it in the nature sounds on a CD originally given to her mother. She needs to “inject herself with pleasant sounds, stab those sounds past the constant screeching, squalling hubbub regular life raised inside her spirit, poke the soothing sounds past that racket and down deep where her jittering soul paced on a stone slab in a gray room” (Winter’s Bone 10), so she listens to the CD whenever she needs comfort and tries to evoke the sounds of faraway beaches and tropical forests when she feels stressed and threatened. These “pleasant sounds” of the unfamiliar forests are merely a phantasm though, a copy of sounds found in the real world, and put forth nature as an entirely abstract creation, possibly aided by images and travel commercials Ree might have seen. Nevertheless, they offer a temporary refuge from daily life.

On the other hand, although the harsh life of the backwoods has brought about the turmoil in Ree’s life, nature in its real non-faux form still offers healing, something which becomes evident when she sits down on a “thinking rock” in the woods: “Pine trees with low limbs spread over fresh snow made a stronger vault for the spirit than pews and pulpits ever could” (Winter’s Bone 38). This is an important quote in relation to both regional identity and sense of place. Ree does not seem to care much for formal education, relying more on the skills she has acquired since she was a child, knowing that being bookish and educated will not help her survive in the remote rural areas of the Ozarks. In her case it is possible to argue that the
landscape does indeed present an “understanding of human experience as formed in
transaction with physical environment” and that the “physical environment” serves “as a
ground of personal and social identity” (Buell, *Endangered World* 18). Even though Ree has
dropped out of school she does not come across as uneducated or uninterested in learning new
things—instead she relies on the landscape to serve as her tutor.

As previously mentioned, it is implied that family history is closely tied to the landscape—a
strong relationship and sense of kin is not only formed between members of different
families who are united by blood, but also between those families and the landscape they
inhabit. Fish-Greenlee the Ozarkers’ view on landscape “essentially summarizes and inscribes
identity constructions of ‘who we are’ based on perceptions of ‘who our ancestors were.’ . . .
In this sense, ‘the Ozarks’ incorporates all that symbolizes collective identity and the
inseparability of identity constructions from this particular landscape” (143). When Ree visits
Hawkfall to talk to Thump Milton, the houses and the stone walls make her remember stories
about the “olden Dollys” and one of the first settlers “who’d found messages from the Fist of
Gods written on the entrails of a sparkling golden fish lured with prayer from a black river”
(*Winter’s Bone* 65). This implies a deep spiritual connection to the land; nature itself has been
seen as containing holy signs leading to a settlement in the Ozark wilderness. It is said that the
first “prophet”, the very first of the Dollys, “followed the map etched tiny on the golden guts”
and led his people “across thousands of testing miles until he hailed these lonely rugged
hollows of tired rocky soil as a perfect garden spot, paradise as ordained by the map of guts
sent to his eyes from the Fist of Gods” (*Winter’s Bone* 65). Even though this imagined
paradise turned out to be no more than a wishful thought—family arguments and accusations
made old ways return “ravenous after the decades of slighting, and the Fist of Gods took seats
in the clouds to sulk and reconsider” (*Winter’s Bone* 66) —it is clear that the descendants of
those first settlers still have a deep connection to the Ozark landscape and that the landscape itself is emblematic of a deep spiritual understanding.

The stories have survived and the history of the Dollys, whether true or not, can thus be seen as an example of how “landscape can operate as a mnemonic that creates energy and motivates and reinforces the construction of cultural memory wherein identity is inscribed” (Fish-Greenlee 66). The importance of family and roots, which in turn is an important part of regional identity, strengthens the sense of ‘who we are’ as well as place awareness throughout the novel. Memories of the past reverberate throughout the landscape like echoes and become a guideline for contemporary life in the region. The fact that “you are who you are by your name” (Fish-Greenlee 59) can be applied to most families in the novel.

However, Ree also blames the tendency to violence among her ancestors for what has happened to her father, thinking “it was those brute ancient ways that broke fresh over her world at every dawn and sent Dollys to let the blood drain from Dad’s heart and dump his flesh somewhere hidden from path and cloud” (Winter’s Bone 66). The “brute ancient ways” themselves might imply that there is something close to animalistic at work among the people of this remote area of the Ozarks, making them retaliate swift and hard whenever someone is about to break the deeply rooted codes within the community.

Ree also remembers her ancestors when she visits a cave on her way from Hawkfall. It was in this very cave that the Dollys spent a winter after having to flee from Hawkfall when violence broke loose. During a long cold winter those ancestors had to learn how to survive in the wilderness “for a mean winter and a late spring . . . refreshing that great snarling tribal anger that Haslam had tried to preach away from their hearts and habits” (Winter’s Bone 67). The expression “tribal anger” itself alludes to more primitive ways of life, of watching over territory and showing a deep hatred towards ‘outsiders.’ By going back to live in the wilderness something of the wildness of heart survives and a closer bond is formed with the
harsh and unforgiving nature. Ree herself shows a deep understanding of how things work in
the wilderness when she pees “near the entrance to let animals know she was visiting”
(Winter’s Bone 67). Even though she is aware that the wilderness also provides the perfect
hiding place for her father’s corpse—his killers might not even have buried him at all—her
night in the cave brings her closer to nature and she feels “oddly comforted, knowing that so
many relatives with names she never knew had hunched here in this very spot to renew
themselves after a sad spinning time had dropped over their lives and whirled them raw”
(Winter’s Bone 68). The wilderness, then, is a source of healing and renewal, and for Ree
there is a sense of being at peace while performing the simplest task like feeding the fire and
letting coyotes sing her to sleep. Even when she wakes up nature offers refreshment: “She
stood in sunlight and stretched, a great long body pale and twisting at the brink of a cave. She
walked to the water dripping from the rock above the cave mouth, cupped her hands to the
trickle and drank and drank deeply of the falling new water” (Winter’s Bone 69). Her
behavior implies that she knows what to expect from the landscape; she knows it by heart and
is familiar with the changing seasons as well as ways of procuring food, shelter and water. To
her nature is no “idealized abstraction”, but rather an “actual physical environment” (Buell,
Environmental Imagination 55) to which she has to adapt in order to survive.

Another example of nature as a source of healing—both physical and spiritual—once
again takes place at the spring to which Gail brings Ree after she has been beaten by women
belonging to Thump Milton’s household. The spring is said to soothe aches and wounds and
seems to be well known among native Ozarkers. Its importance to some of the Ozarkers
becomes evident when Ree notes that there is

a metal ladle on a rope hanging from a sapling by the springhead, a ladle the old ones
still came and dipped and raised to drink from the freshest of water. At school teachers
said don’t do that anymore, stuff has leaked to the heart of the earth and maybe soured
even the deepest deep springs, but plenty of old ones crouched and sipped from the
ladle yet. The pool of water loosed a scent, a blessed flavorful scent that folks couldn’t
often resist, something in the bones and meat made them bend, drink, step out and
drop into the flow (*Winter’s Bone* 158).

This is the only time Woodrell mentions possible pollution and environmental degradation,
something which stands in stark contrast to the seemingly pristine Ozark landscape. It also is
implied that the spring, so important to Ozark elders, has become a tourist attraction since it is
situated on land belonging to the government. Even so there is a sense of eternal nature in its
waters, especially when Ree dives under the surface and hears “the murmur of a living spring
in her ears, the mumbles and plops of water from forever rushing past” (*Winter’s Bone* 160).
Nature—or rather the voice of nature—in this passage comes across as sacred and omnipotent,
but not too keen on revealing its secrets and mysteries. Similar mysteries can be found in the
sky as well, as in the passage where Ree “looked to the stars shining so brightly, so plain and
brilliant, and wondered what they meant, and if they meant the same thing as rocks in
springwater” (*Winter’s Bone* 172). Throughout the novel Ree seems to be looking for a way
to understand nature, and in some ways she is constantly reading it when she pays attention to
changes in the weather as well as different scents and animal tracks.

Furthermore, the ever-present nature and the natural cycle of things can also be found in
the burning of old material belongings. When Ree’s brothers throw the old family heirlooms
on the fire it can be said to symbolize a return to nature when the things “became ash that
matched the sky and disappeared downwind” (*Winter’s Bone* 178). Other forms of remains
are also important, especially the significance of bones. To find a resting place in the Ozarks
does not seem to equal a proper grave of a graveyard. When Thump Milton’s wife and her
sisters come to fetch Ree with the words, “We’ll carry you to your daddy’s bones, child. We
know the place” (*Winter’s Bone* 180), this implicates that his bones, the part of him that will
remain longest, is more important than his flesh. The mentioning of place might also reveal a “symbolic structure” (Buell, “The Ecocritical Insurgency” 707), where place—in this case a pond in the forest—does not only refer to a physical location, but also to a symbol of Ozark identity, a grave for those who have not followed the Ozark way of life but still deserve to become a part of landscape. To be buried in Ozark soil and to once more be part of the landscape in any way possible seems to outmaneuver any Christian claims on the body. Ree only takes her father’s hands back to the police, but lets the rest of him find a grave at the bottom of the pond. Here the bones are allowed to symbolize affinity with the land—the land has formed Ozark identity, and buried bodies continue to function as a breeding ground for new life. This sort of fellowship between landscape and the bodies it has supplied with food and shelter comes across as a very natural part of life and death among, at least in the eyes of Ree. To let one’s body merge with the landscape also seems like a way of giving something back—memories will live on, and out of the dead bodies grows new life. Bones can also be connected to strength and to be able to defend oneself. To be an Ozarker deep down, even to the bone, is important, and to stand tall in the face of danger and death, since “no god craves weakling” (Winter’s Bone 183).

At the pond where Ree’s father is buried it also becomes evident that Ree’s view of nature changes with her own mood. In the beginning of this episode the view is almost pastoral: “A field, a line of trees, a small path with a few paw prints wending deeper into the woods. A plump waxing moon and silvered landscape” (Winter’s Bone 184), but this soon turns into a “wrenching vista” (Winter’s Bone 184) when Ree learns that her father’s body is hidden under the ice, the small pond constituting a “living grave” with its “small nibbling fish” (Winter’s Bone 184). Here she once again recalls the memory of the nature sounds on her mother’s CD and relies on them to take her to “a distant tranquil shore where rainbow-colored birds sang and coconuts dropped bountifully to warm sand” (Winter’s Bone 186). Nature, however, can
also be seen as a merciful force. One example of this is when Ree visits the spring with Gail and finds healing in its water, but nature also supplies Ree with clues in her search for her father. At one time it provides her with the evidence she needs to prove that Blond Milton is lying about her father dying in a burning meth lab when she walks close to the burnt out lab and sees horseweed standing “chin-high in the floorboard holes” (Winter’s Bone 76). Her way of paying attention to the signs offered by nature in combination with her inherent skills unveils the lie. Nature also intervenes in a similar way at the pond where Ree’s father has been buried. The water has preserved his body, which might otherwise have fallen victim to wild animals and extensive decay. So, in a way, Ree and her family have been saved by nature, just as they have been formed by it. In their case “the nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history” (Buell, The Environmental Imagination 7), and even though nature as a “thing-in-itself” is unaware of being a savior of sorts it still poses as a benevolent force.

In the end, the physical setting also provides a frame for the possible fates of the characters. When Teardrop reveals that he knows who killed her father, Ree gets a premonition of what might happen to her uncle: “The shadows had the creek, the valley, the yard, the house. The shadows were over them and she wept, wept against her uncle’s chest” (Winter’s Bone 192 – 193). Here it is once again possible to find the law of the primeval forest. It is implied that there will always be hardship because is nature’s way, and it is practically impossible to get away from bloodlines and heritage. Despite this there is a sense of belonging, of being in tune with the surrounding landscape, of being at peace at last. In the end, after getting the money which an anonymous man paid for her father’s bond, Ree decides to stay at the small farm to look after her brothers and mother even though it is not certain she will stay for a longer period of time. The fact that she tells her younger brothers they will use
some of the money to buy a car might implicate that she still longs to get away—or that she at least wants to have the possibility to leave the Ozarks. It might also be that a car simply makes life easier in an area where public transportation is scarce. However, despite the longing for a car and the prospect of being able to get away, Winter’s Bone differs from previous American literature in which place is emphasized and plays an important part. Lutwack writes that in American literary tradition, “the man who stays on the land is no hero”, and that American authors in the past have tended to celebrate the hero who constantly moves on and accepts change (154). However, the sense of belonging to a certain place might not be lessened even among the heroes who decide to uproot and move somewhere else, especially if they have lived most of their lives in a place where the surrounding nature have had a major impact on their lives and their sense of identity. In The Future of Environmental Criticism Buell asks the question, “does environmental citizenship really hinge on staying put?” (68), a question which can be applied to Winter’s Bone. Even though Ree and her family decide to stay in their house in the Ozarks the very fact that Ree herself has thought about leaving might not diminish her sense of place and of belonging to the rich Ozark landscape. Instead it can be said that her sense of regional identity, of having pushed “down black roots into the dark” (Cesare Pavese, qtd in Woodrell, Winter’s Bone 1) constitutes her very sense of direction in life and makes sense to her own “sky”. In short, she has found an answer to the question that sums up regional identity: “Where do I belong?” (Paasi 479).

The Outlaw Album: Outsiders and Insiders

Sense of place and belonging

Unlike Winter’s Bone, which focuses mainly on family ties and relationships between ‘insiders’, The Outlaw Album, a series of short stories taking place in the Ozarks, has as one
of its major themes the difference between ‘insiders’ (i.e. native Ozarkers) and ‘outsiders’ (people who are born elsewhere). In many of the short stories it is possible to find examples of Paasi’s claim that “belonging to a region may raise a sense of identity that challenges the hegemonic identity narratives” (477), mainly when it comes to the conflicts between ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’, where the ‘outsiders’ seem to represent an identity less based on regional belonging. In “The Echo of Neighborly Bones” a man, Boshell, shoots another man, an “opinionated foreigner from Minnesota” (Outlaw Album 3) and then buries him under a pile of rock. The murdered man had done nothing more than to insinuate that being from the northern parts of the US he was somehow superior to the inhabitants of the Ozarks. By doing so he seems to express a belonging to a more national, “hegemonic identity” (Paasi 477). Boshell quickly makes it clear that the cultivated land of the Ozarks, farmed for at least two centuries by self-sustaining Ozark farmers, is something that is closely linked to his sense of regional identity. He likes to return to a place in the woods where his old family home used to stand (and where he later on hides the body of the outsider) and “feel robbed of all these acres” (Outlaw Album 6). Boshell remembers the lands he once owned, but here memory also serves another purpose in the sense that it can be used to develop “a sense of nostalgia to legitimize a heritage” (Shackel 3). The organization responsible for bereaving Boshell and his family of their land is the National Forest. This shows that Woodrell is very much aware of the region’s historical past, where “forced relocation, the loss of control over traditional environmental resources, the influx of outsider tourists” (Fish-Greenlee 15) have led to a deep sense of animosity among native Ozarkers. There is a constant threat of landscape and place changed beyond recognition that forces some to perform desperate deeds in order to retain their pride and identity. Boshell claims that, “This all was ours, ours up until foreigners like you’n yours got here from up north with fancy notions’n bank money and improved everything for us” (Outlaw Album 6), but due to agricultural improvements and the tourist
industry he has lost his own land and therefore a part of his identity—an identity deeply rooted in the very soil of the region. The loss of authority leads to violence and when Boshell buries the outsider under a pile of rocks it can be seen as a form of resistance—and as nature getting its revenge through a native Ozarker. However, the land where Boshell’s family once lived has now been reclaimed by “trees and weeds and possums” (*Outlaw Album* 6), something which indicates that there is a difference between Woodrell’s characters and how they perceive cultivated land in contrast to the wilderness. This is a view that is not as explicitly expressed in *Winter’s Bone* as it is in *The Outlaw Album* but some similarities can be found between the two works. In both of them farmland is generally closely connected to a sense of regional identity, which in turn is built on a pioneer spirit where native Ozarkers identify themselves as strong people able to make a living under harsh conditions. But whereas the characters in *Winter’s Bone* rely more on what they can gather from the wilderness, especially in terms of hunting and fishing, many of the characters in *The Outlaw Album* instead continue to mourn the loss of cultivated farmland.

Another important aspect when it comes to *The Outlaw Album* is also the difference between how ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ view nature. Whereas outsiders see nature as a source of enjoyment and recreation, insiders depend on it for their survival. Where the modern world expresses a sense of “nostalgia for an idealized countryside and past” (Ball 241)—something that makes the tourists travel to the ‘unspoiled’ Ozarks in large numbers—native Ozarkers want nothing more than to be left alone in order to be able to keep to their old traditions.

In contrast to the visiting tourists, who are not seldom city people, many of the characters in *The Outlaw Album* have traits similar to that of the wilderness in which they once settled: hardy and rugged. In “Twin Forks” Morrow, a city man who has bought a tourist center in the Ozarks, provides an outsiders’ view of native Ozarkers which gives a good view of how the
people in the region are perceived by foreigners, even though the description borders on being that of the archetypal hillbilly:

The locals who came in were often people of a kind he hadn’t truly believed still existed but found rewarding to meet: pioneer-lean old men who poached deer whenever hungry and wouldn’t pay taxes, their wives wearing gray braids and cowboy hats, clasp knives sheathed at their belts; men with the beards of prophets who read the Bible at a certain slant and could build anything, their women smelling of lavender, in gingham and work boots; folks living hidden in the hills and only reluctantly coming into contact with the conventional world for want of baby formula or headache powders (Outlaw Album 27).

Despite being an outsider and someone who only spent occasional summers in the Ozarks, Morrow himself expresses a rather strong sense of place from the beginning, even though he was not born an Ozarker. According to Buell “place knowledge . . . cannot be achieved without long existential immersion” (Endangered World 17), but Morrow is already attached to the Ozarks, even as a newcomer. He notes how “he liked everything about the place—the steep hillsides of forest stripped for winter, the dour gray rock bluffs crouched near the river, the lonesome mumble of the passing wind, and these untamed people who shot at things to so plainly announce their sorrow” (Outlaw Album 25). The use of the word “untamed” adds to the idea of a people in tune with the surrounding landscape, the Ozark wilderness largely consisting of mountains and deep forests. However, Morrow also embodies another aspect present in The Outlaw Album: the clash between the modern and the old-fashioned way of life. Morrow has e-mail, is used to town ways, whereas a man—a local meth head—who threatens to kill him flees into the woods which offers him the perfect escape route. Morrow seems to rely on the law and his first encounter with the wild and violent native Ozarkers destabilizes his trust and his former identity as one brought up in a modern world. The same
thing, although reversed, happens to the former owner of the camp site who, when Morrow first sees him, expresses his sorrow and confusion by shooting at things. The shots are “muted by the forest and the river” (*Outlaw Album* 24), both symbols of the ever-present nature, but the sorrow is evident nonetheless. Where Morrow can be said to be gaining a place, his place awareness seemingly growing throughout the short story, the man losing his property and his livelihood—both important aspects of life in the Ozarks—are also losing a sense of place and belonging which in turn might threaten regional identity. According to Shackel “material culture can be transformed into a sacred object when serving the goals and needs of any group” (12), and here the campsite and the land belonging to it can be seen as a sacred object to its former owner since it manifests his regional identity as a native Ozarker where owning a piece of land is important.

**The mythical landscape**

However, most characters who can be perceived as ‘insiders’ seem to have an uncommonly close bond with the surrounding physical environment—almost to the point of having a spiritual connection with the natural world. This is somewhat similar to how some of the characters in *Winter’s Bone*—particularly Ree Dolly—perceive nature. In “Florianne” a man searching for his kidnapped daughter expresses a finely tuned ability to experience nature and place. When he thinks about his daughter and what might have happened to her he can “hear wind in the trees and limbs tapping limbs and feel rain” (*Outlaw Album* 40), visions that come to him as if in a dream. However, despite the fact that the passage itself has an almost dreamlike quality, those rather poetic descriptions of nature most likely originates in wishful thinking; it might be that the man considers the wilderness to be a grave more worthy of his daughter than “a bachelor’s basement” (*Outlaw Album* 40). Nature, however, is unpredictable
and not eager to reveal the girl if she has indeed been taken and hidden somewhere in the deep Ozark woods:

This is rough country, though, steep hills, rocky bottoms, hard ground to walk on, gloomy from the trees, and she could be ten feet away as three hunters pass and they’d all miss her (*Outlaw Album* 40).

The relationship between man and nature is thus not an equal one. Nature has the upper hand—even more so when the right to farm their own land has been lost to many Ozarkers due to agricultural modernization and annexed property.

The modern world interfering with older ways of life is evident in other parts of *The Outlaw Album*. A changing landscape, characterized by rationalization and modernity rather than tradition and myth, constantly poses a threat to regional identity. One such example is the transition from farmer to soldier which occurs in two of the short stories: “Black Step” and “Night Stand”. Men who were once small-scale farmers are now forced to look for a source of income elsewhere. Being from the Ozarks they often step into a world where they are considered uneducated and backwards, giving them no other opportunity than to find employment in the army. When they return the once revered landscape has lost part of its shine since their own frame of mind has been tainted by modern warfare. In “Night Stand” the protagonist, an older man named Pelham, also offers another view on the modern world and changes to the landscape when it is said that he “lived amidst woods and pastures, but the city limits had recently expanded to make him a West Table resident, so it was town cops in uniform and out clomping about” (*Outlaw Album* 70). Town life is portrayed as unrefined and void of respect for older ways of life and the close ties between the Ozarkers themselves and their surroundings.

However, despite a rather tumultuous and complicated sense of regional identity many of the ‘insiders’ in *The Outlaw Album* still care deeply for the surrounding landscape, perhaps
not as a source of livelihood anymore but as a reservoir for memories and traditions. When Fish-Greenlee writes about modern Ozarkers and how “they remain attached to the land” and “take on a protector role and monitor how it changes” (Fish-Greenlee 67), the same can be said for some of Woodrell’s characters. In “Returning the River” a grown son, recently out of prison, burns down a neighbor’s house—the neighbor being an outsider—so that his dying father will be able to see the river. The two brothers in the story have lost the territory that once belonged to their family, much like Boshell’s family in “The Echo of Neighborly Bones”, but they still seem to have an uncanny connection to the landscape. While running from the police the younger brother notices how his older brother, the one setting the house on fire, seems aided by nature while making his escape as well as chided by the woods for making the wrong decisions in life:

I suspect some stark limbs attempted to point Harky toward escape, others to wag in admonishment, blaming him for palming his pills and drinking whisky again (Outlaw Album 162).

Here nature is portrayed as being a conscious being, well aware of the people inhabiting the vast forests. It might be, however, that Harky’s brother wants to see those signs in the landscape, or sees them out of old habit. The almost mythical aspect of nature pervades throughout the story and the landscape offers a cleansing and a sense of rebirth: “Running these woods Harky is feeling redeemed in his bones, raised in his heart, a much better son now than he was before dawn” (Outlaw Album 164). The strong spiritual connection between the two brothers and the wilderness now reclaiming their old homestead hidden in the woods offer an insight into what constitutes a sense of place for many of Woodrell’s characters and what Woodrell does here is to “remythify the natural environment” (Buell, Environmental Imagination 31) in the sense that the physical setting becomes a mythical force, a “thing-in-itself” containing its own voice and personality.
In the eyes of the younger brother the trees are no longer just dead matter or a material asset, and even though they have lost their land both brothers seem content to let nature take over, referring to the trees as “old acquaintances” (Outlaw Album 164). While the brothers are fruitlessly searching for their great-great-great-grandma’s flowers around the old homestead it becomes evident that the cultivated crops and the wild ones have now merged, forming a single unit, just as the natives of the Ozarks seem able to merge with their surroundings. A similar event takes place in “Black Step” where the male protagonist, recently returned from war to work on the old family farm, ponders over the family graveyard, noting that, “The stone will remain unchanged, no name or date, and someday vines and flowers will cover the stone in tangled green and sweetness” (Outlaw Album 53). Nature is thus not an unwanted neighbor, but rather invited to take part in everyday life.

When a more modern way of life interferes, many of the characters experience those “significant losses in material culture that include changes in revered landscapes” (Fish Greenlee 76), but they are at the same time able to reconcile with the landscape—perhaps because their sense of identity is so deeply rooted in the soil. This sense of history, of a common past and die hard traditions, makes is nigh impossible for ‘outsiders’ to penetrate and become part of the closely knit communities. Shackel argues that “elements of the past remembered in common, as well as elements of the past forgotten in common, are essential for group cohesion” (3), and the native Ozarkers in Woodrell’s text display a rather uniform attitude towards both the past and the present. Not even the law stands a chance against such cohesion, something which becomes evident at the end of “Returning the River” where a police officer tries to find the best way to cut off the escape route of the two brothers:

He was studying the woods, looking for paths he might follow to give chase, but we remembered them all from before we were born and walked on laughing, down the spiraled path to low ground and away through a rough patch of scrub, into a small
stand of pine trees and the knowing shadow they laid over us, our history, our trespassing boots (*Outlaw Album* 167).

This shows that the two brothers are in alliance with the landscape. It hides them from their persecutors and has a deep knowledge of their past. The sense of place is so deeply inscribed in the inhabitants of the region that they are born with knowledge of nature and of the paths their ancestors once walked. This intrinsic understanding is something they will carry with them, even though modern times have made them trespassers on a land that ought to still belong to them.

**The river**

The Ozark rivers and their importance is a common thread that runs through *The Outlaw Album*. It is implied that the rivers were once a source of livelihood, but are now exploited by tourists seeking recreation, and example of the fact that “in an over-civilized time, when the revival of primitive experience seems desirable, contact with wilderness, in sport and leisure, finds more favor than the economic exploitation of land” (Lutwack 166). When the ‘outsiders’ run into native Ozarkers conflicts sometimes arise. In “Uncle” a man snatches young tourist girls from a nearby river and rapes them in his barn. One of his female relatives, who is also the narrator of the story, describes the procedure:

> Uncle culled these girls from down on the river, which they come here for … They come here from where there are crowds of people bunched in tight to loll along our crystal water in college shirt and bikinis, smoking weed and drinking too much, laughing all the way while their canoes spin on the river like bugs twirling in a spider’s web. Mostly they don’t know what they’re doing, but the river is not too raging or anything (*Outlaw Album* 15).
By using expressions such as “our crystal water” the nameless narrator separates herself from the tourists, making it clear that she is an ‘insider,’ chiding the ‘outsiders’ for not being able to handle the river. However, rape is not an acceptable way of treating ‘outsiders’ and the river provides the narrator with a means of revenge—both for herself and the tourist girls—when, at the end of the short story, it is implied she dumps her disabled uncle into the water to let him drown. Thus the Ozark landscape takes care of its own stray renegades. However, like Boshell in “The Echo of Neighborly Bones” who killed an ‘outsider’ because of his condescending attitude, the rape and violence against tourists and ‘outsiders’ might have been a way for Uncle to restore a sense of control after having lost his land to the government.

In contrast to how ‘insiders’ view the rivers, there are also examples of outsiders who use them as an initiation rite of sorts when it comes to adapting oneself to the Ozark landscape. One such example is Morrow in “Twin Forks”. As previously mentioned he does, from the beginning, express a strong sense of place, and the fact the camping business he has bought is situated close to a river affects him from the very start. He seems attuned to landscape from day one, especially its waters, and “by late May he had acquired a routine suited to this new version of himself: wake above the store before dawn, walk to the river, hang his robe on a low limb, plunge in and swim upstream until his arms balked, then float back to his robe as first light began to raise the sky” (Outlaw Album 27). Afterwards, “he’d open the store early, skin numbed by the river and feeling tightened ten years younger, the smell of the outdoors drying into his hair” (Outlaw Album 27). Apart from strengthening Morrow’s connection to the landscape, the swimming routine, of fighting against the current and then floating back down the stream, can be seen as a form of both resistance and acceptance of nature, and of the rivers which are a key element in the Ozark landscape. Morrow, being from the city and not yet used to the Ozark way of life, is also a good example of the outsider, the prototypical tourist who remembers the Ozarks from his own childhood. The camp site itself is a mix of
natives and tourists, which means that Morrow never has to plunge into the Ozark society right away (and it is doubtful if he would be accepted at all).

However, he has to get acquainted with the violent side of the region very soon, and after that he seems to have changed, when instead “at dawn he leaned the shotgun against the tree his robe hung from, and dove into the river to swim upstream” (*Outlaw Album* 35). Now he is no longer swimming downstream, letting the river carry him back to his starting point. Being threatened at his own campsite by violent locals who themselves seem to be in tune with the wild landscape by easily being able to disappear into the forest, requires a new sense of resistance. To resist the landscape can also be seen as resisting the locals and their close-knit community. However, the fact that Morrow, after being threatened, takes to carrying a shotgun with him wherever he goes suggests that he is slowly becoming like natives. There is a loss of innocence that goes with moving to the feral Ozark landscape and Morrow, like the native Ozarkers, now understands the need to protect himself.

The rivers are also used to emphasize the thin between life and death and the ever-flowing, eternal quality of nature. In “Black Step” the river offers the narrator, who has recently returned from military service abroad, the promise of a quick death and of once again belonging to the land. Throughout the story he feels depressed—indifferent even—and seemingly out of place, and the rivers have changed from being a source of recreation and livelihood, to being a possible escape from what his life has now become: “I held and held to the rock and forgot about breathing, sunk into that choice spot between breathing and not ever breathing, between raising up to walk on the bank and picnic or staying under to join that debris already lost to the rushing” (*Outlaw Album* 62). The rushing of the river comes across as a siren song, a call from nature to join forces with the landscape, but it also a reminder of how fragile a human life is. This knowledge is important throughout *The Outlaw Album*, and the way in which native Ozarkers seem in tune with the landscape and the way in which they
rely on it—whether as a way to make the final escape or as a means of livelihood—is deeply embedded in the sense of regional identity.

The rivers also serve as an emphasis of—and as a metaphor for—loss. At one point in “Black Step” the narrator meets up with some childhood friends, trying to relive the happy days of youth: “I left the house with them in McArdle’s truck and we drove to the river, built a jolly campfire on a gravel beach. . . . I recall times together like this, drinking the day away in canoes on the river, chucking dry-ice bombs into blue holes and cheering the boom and spray, and as dark fell driving into town with more cold beer” (Outlaw Album 58). The narrator himself has seen war, an experience which has had a profound impact on him and how he now perceives the landscape. In a way he has not only lost his former, carefree self, but he has also the kind of landscape he grew up in due to the experience of war. His sense of place is no longer the same and the river does no longer symbolize freedom and happiness; instead it only brings sadness. Once again landscape is tied to memory and is changed through subjective experience to mean something completely different than it did in the beginning.

This also separates the narrator from the rest of the native Ozarkers and their collective memory which is developed by “molding, shaping, and agreeing upon what to remember” (Shackel 2). He is slowly becoming and ‘outsider’ himself, and it is not certain if he will ever regain his former attachment to the landscape he remembers from his childhood years.

A similar passage can be found in “Night Stand” where the story’s protagonist, Pelham, has also seen war, this time in Vietnam. Where there was once a sense of peace, of being deeply rooted in a certain place, the Ozark landscape and its rivers now remind him of war: “The weather, that look, a forest in fog, a faint drizzle and no sky, always took him back to his foxhole in a place he couldn’t name. Such weather often lay over the mountain rivers where he and Jill went fishing, and the next time they went the sky spread low and gray over the bottoms and he could smell foreign mud and old fear” (Outlaw Album 75). Once again the
apparent loss of place leads to a loss of identity. Pelham, who in the beginning of the story killed a young man, seemingly in self-defense, learns that this young man had been a soldier too, recently returned from some battleground abroad. At the end of the story Pelham steps naked out into his garden—as naked as the young man was when he died—and growls just like the young man did when he showed up in Pelham’s bedroom one evening. The growling itself, an almost animalistic behavior, could be seen as Pelham’s way of coping with the loss of identity and sense of place he is feeling after having been changed by his experiences in war. The young man’s behavior was thus simply a trigger, making Pelham once again remember repressed memories and realize what he has lost, perhaps forever.

The mystery of nature also resides in the rivers, as in “Black Step”. In the beginning the narrator has to remove a dead cow, scared by lightning, from some trees hanging out over the river. While looking at the flowing water he notes that, “Far below, the river flowed clean and dense in the morning shadow cast by the bluff, the rocks in its bed singing of centuries spent singing in the rushing, the things that wash by, bump going past, leave marks or bones” (Outlaw Album 46). The river seemingly does not care for human predicaments. It is at is has always been: eternal, unchanging, and full of its own mysteries and secrets. Even though the rivers might not originate in the Ozark region they are still very much associated with Ozark identity—even to the point where they are almost humanized. In “Woe to Live On” Roedel, a man of Dutch origin who has been in the American Civil War and who is fond of carvings, looks upon the river as an ally with a will and mind of its own who sometimes leaves him gifts at the riverbank:

The river takes it from almost anywhere, trims branches with floating logs, smooths edges on miles of rocky bottom and sandy bank, distorts the shape of the former tree by sucking it down at a hundred eddies of swirling murk, then spewing it back to the
polishing touches of the everlasting current. Sometimes the river leaves the driftwood on a sandbar’s lip, or jabbed into a dike—a present for me (Outlaw Album 109).

In this quote there is also a sense of everlasting motion as well as of a closed circle. The river produces beauty of its own and Roedel realizes that he sometimes he cannot compete: “Many times the river’s hand carved more truly, and I bring no improvement” (Outlaw Album 110).

There is a deep understanding of the completeness of nature which reverberates through Woodrell’s works, even though the landscape is a constant reminder of loss. Living close to the wilderness brings about the knowledge that sometimes nature performs better than humans and therefore human involvement in changing the landscape is neither needed nor desired. In “Woe to Live On” Roedel also calls the river “an occasional ally”, sharing with him “both muddy history and uncertain age” (Outlaw Album 100). Here it is implied that the nature of Ozarks and the people of Ozarks share a common past. It is practically impossible to know just how long there have been settlers in the region, and the “muddy history” might relate to the turbulent past—to war, conflict and a lack of recorded history and accounts of life in distant rural areas. It is yet again possible to talk about a collective memory that includes the landscape itself. Such collective memories “can be about a moment in time, such as a protest or a riot, or they can be about a longer-term event, such as a war or a social movement”, and they can serve both “individual or collective experiences” (Shackel 1), something which adds to a sense of continuity and thorough knowledge of where one belongs.

The importance of the Ozark waterways as a part of regional identity is perhaps most prominent in “Returning the River”. When Harky, the escaped convict, burns down the neighbor’s house—the neighbor begin an ‘outsider’—he does it just so his father can “die seein’ the river where it’s supposed to be again” (Outlaw Album 166). The neighbors, who probably have no understanding of the connection between the Ozark landscape and its inhabitants, have obstructed the view of one of the most sacred and beloved elements of
Ozark nature—at least in the eyes of native Ozarkers, and to die having been bereaved of that sight is to threaten a sense of regional identity. The neighbor’s house embodies all that is foreign—the annexing of land and the intrusion on soil that has been revered for centuries, so when the house burns, when there is only “one more wall to fall and father could die upstairs with the river back in his eyes” (*Outlaw Album* 167), it can also be seen as a form of resistance against changes in the landscape as well as a way to strengthen regional identity. According to Lutwack “devotion to wilderness is a deeply conservative attitude and is opposed to the alteration of the land, no matter how simple, in the name of civilization of progress” (165), an attitude which at least one brother seems to possess. Even though it becomes clear as the story progresses that Harky and his father do not get along very well there is still, at least in Harky’s mind, a seemingly inherent understanding of the importance of heritage and place, and of keeping things as they were.

**Conclusion**

As stated in the introduction the purpose of this essay was explore man’s relation to nature as well as the importance of place and place awareness when it comes to constructing a sense of regional identity in *Winter’s Bone* and *The Outlaw Album*. According to the main thesis there is unification instead of separation and acceptance instead of resistance when it comes to man’s relation to nature in the two works. To begin with, landscape is unquestionably a prominent part of both *Winter’s Bone* and *The Outlaw Album*. Parts of the plot—especially in *Winter’s Bone*—rely heavily on the surrounding landscape, making the physical setting a key aspect when it comes to the characters’ sense of place. However, even though some of the characters—most notably Ree Dolly’s family—depend on nature there is also a sense of hostility. In *Winter’s Bone* the starkness of the winter landscape and the harsh environment constantly poses a threat. Ree in particular seems to have learned to live with the landscape
instead of constantly fighting against unpredictable and ever-changing nature. She is no stranger to the Ozark landscape and easily finds herself at home, even when she is alone in the wilderness. The same can be said for some of the characters in *The Outlaw Album*, not least the two brothers in “Returning the River” who both display a deep connection to the surrounding landscape, which in turn helps them escape the police.

By constantly mentioning the weather and the landscape, and by making his characters very much aware of place, Woodrell also foregrounds their struggle against injustice, violence and poverty. Nature, in this case, constitutes a frame when it comes to the plot, and everything that takes place within the texts is closely tied to landscape and place. Here I would like to return to Waage’s quote about how on land “laboriously invested, where families and communities are deeply rooted, human culture and physical space are deeply entwined” (“Exploring the ‘Life Territory’” 135). This can be applied to both of Woodrell’s texts, but perhaps to *Winter’s Bone* in particular. The importance of family and kin in the novel as well as the emphasis on self-sufficiency contribute to a sense of a family history that is deeply embedded in the physical setting, not least due to the fact that many of the families have been—or still are—small-scale farmers and woodsmen. Family, and especially the sense of family history, is also a concept that is closely connected to nature. At times it is as if it is almost carved into the very stones and trees of the region, and even though land is often farmed and trees harvested there is a mutual bond between farmland and farmer, harvest and harvester in a way reminiscent of more old-fashioned farming communities where most people lived hand-to-mouth.

Moreover, to let Ozark soil become a final resting place seems crucial. Woodrell often mentions graveyards and gravestones, and how the burial places seem united with the surrounding landscape. Having a close connection to the past also forms a guide for the
future, and a sense of continuity—both when it comes to single families and the community as a whole—pervades both *Winter’s Bone* and *The Outlaw Album.*

Another concept that is abundantly present in primarily *The Outlaw Album* is that of ‘outsider’ and ‘insider’ and how they relate to the surrounding landscape. Whereas the ‘outsider’, typically a tourist, sees nature as a source of enjoyment and recreation, ‘insiders’ depend on it for their survival. In that respect landscape can be seen as represented on different levels. Native Ozarkers in *The Outlaw Album* do have a strong spiritual connection to the landscape but it is also a material asset and a physical force that is very much present due to its sometimes hostile nature. ‘Outsiders’, however, are usually not confronted with the more violent and unforgiving sides of nature; instead it stands as a symbol of all that is pristine and unpolluted, regardless of what the creation of national parks have meant to the native Ozarkers. To them nature is mainly a symbol of freedom and self-sufficiency as well as in integrated part of their sense of regional identity, and in a sense they surpass visitors to the region when it comes to register “actual physical environments as against idealized abstractions of those” (Buell, *Environmental Imagination* 55). Regional identity, in turn, is formed through place, and thus, when the characters look upon the landscape—the landscape many of them have created themselves—they look upon their own identity as manifest in the rivers and the forests.

However, the sometimes rather prominent difference between the actual physical setting and the very idea of nature—the subjective, internal perspective held by the characters—sometimes leads to conflict. One such conflict relates to inevitable changes in the landscape—changes that are exacerbated by the presence of ‘outsiders.’ Among many of the characters in both *Winter’s Bone* and *The Outlaw Album* there is a sense of wanting to retain a status quo and avoid external influence, something which is nearly impossible in today’s society. Here nature creates a backdrop of conflict and dissent among native Ozarkers and foreigners—a
conflict that goes back a long way. In that case, the landscape can also be seen as an embodiment of the region’s history and the historical conflicts it has undergone in the past few centuries.

To sum up one of my main arguments that there is acceptance instead of resistance, and unification instead of separation, in both texts, I would like to emphasize that even though there is acceptance of nature it is not in the sense of giving up. Rather, many of the characters express a sense of unsolicited resignation. Some of the characters, mainly Ree Dolly, are also able to create a deeper understanding of the mechanisms of nature and thus find a balance between rationality and mystery. In addition, the lifestyle of many native Ozarkers is tied to the region and identity is in turn tied to landscape. This creates a sort of syllogism where the sense of identity is in part dependent on the physical setting. In relation to identity as dependent on the environment it is also possible to discuss whether nature can indeed be seen as a “thing-in-itself” throughout Winter’s Bone and The Outlaw Album, and whether place can be studied objectively. Even though nature in both texts does indeed convey a sense of deeper truth to some of the characters it is also an indifferent force and not easily manipulated. This stands in contrast to the characters’ sense of having a deep spiritual connection with the landscape. It is impossible to know whether this perceived connection is reciprocated since meaning is always created by humans. In Woodrell’s works nature then, comes across as a cultural and mental construction, a “thing-for-us”, even though the characters have ideas of the landscape that make them assign to it certain humanized qualities. Since we can never be fully objective it is impossible to study place as independent concept, uninfluenced by human constructs, but ecocriticism and place studies can still be used to draw attention to how nature helps shape these constructs, one such construct being that of identity.
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