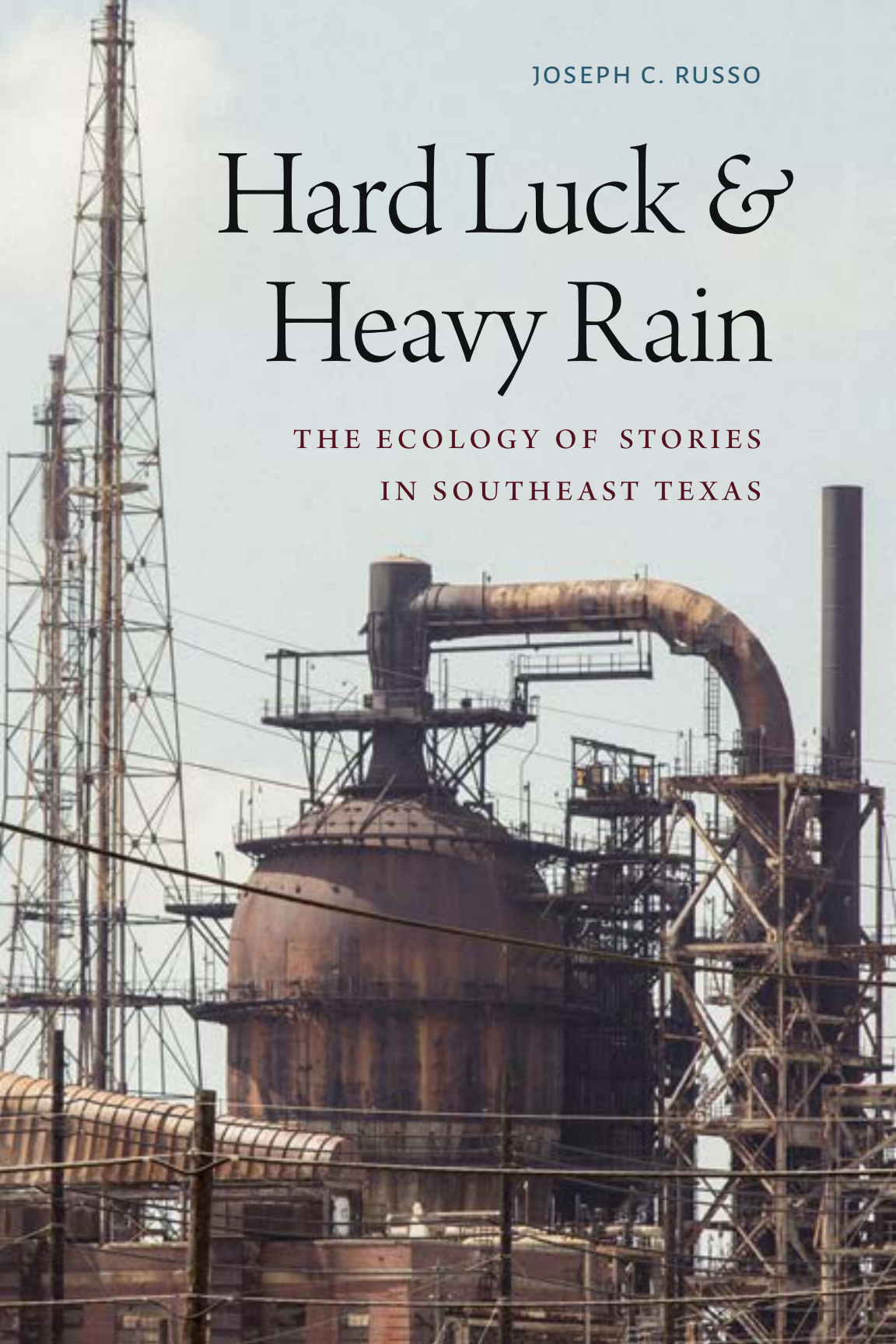
JOSEPH C. RUSSO

Hard Luck & Heavy Rain

THE ECOLOGY OF STORIES IN SOUTHEAST TEXAS



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for Deb

There are parts of Texas where a fly lives ten thousand years and a man can't die soon enough. Time gets strange there from too much sky, too many miles from crack to crease in the flat surface of the land.

KATHERINE DUNN, *GEEK LOVE*

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This book has been about five years in the making, gathering around it all sorts of people on its journey to the shelf. Some observed from outside, scratching their heads in bewilderment. Some pored over its every detail and found things that even I didn't see. Some wandered into its composition, a few without even meaning to—I hope that they feel the love that I felt for them when I put their stories down. I hope that whoever finds themselves turning the pages of this book does so forgivingly, remembering I was just another character here.

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Introduction

Falling into the Big Thicket

All hidden kingdoms have their thresholds. Entering Southeast (SE) Texas from Houston, you cross the Old and Lost Rivers. Great egrets, vast white sheets, fly low over the Interstate 10 bridge that spans these tributaries. In long-distance flying, egrets and herons hold their legs straight out behind them, but in their leaps over the bridge, their stilt legs dangle downward in a game of chance with eighteen-wheelers careening past. I have seen the feet of egrets brush the tops of trucks.

It is as if the birds are initiating travelers eastward in the growing proximity to SE Texas and its Big Thicket, the "biological crossroads of North America"[1]—that great tangle of piney woods, swamp, church, and smoke. Past the bridge, the land gets flat and low. You cross the main river from which the Old and Lost diverge: the Trinity River, what many SE Texans identify as the real border between SE Texas and the rest of the state. It references the Catholic Holy Trinity, of course, but I always thought of the trinity of Texan industry: the Golden Triangle of Beaumont, Port Arthur, and Orange.[2] Southern turnoffs lead to the coastal marshes and prairies of Anahuac that give way to Galveston Bay, where ibises and spoonbills, with their carotenoid-pigmented red eyes, preen in the cattails, and brown pelicans fly in a ponderous single file along the coastline in perfect unison, slow to flap or change altitude. There is an ancient time to the procession of these heavy, antediluvian birds, who hurl themselves into the ocean with such force that it seems they have broken their wings upon the waves. A moment later they float to the surface with fish in their throat pouches, harried by gulls.

Slowly, oil refineries begin to mar the vistas east. At night this is a striking vision, a refinery lit and throbbing like a brilliant city—the force of its output casting a haze above it that blurs the stars in the night sky. Fire belching from the flares gives it the appearance of a fort, a gated forge. Near the fence, you can feel the whole complex pulsate. But it is rare to see a person standing in such an interstice, as the highway is a breakneck thoroughfare, loose truck tire treading sloughed off on the road like the skin of giant snakes. A human walking along the shoulder of the interstate is a signal of something askew, and the rare ones in flip flops, or full camping gear, or sometimes bare-chested with nothing but basketball shorts and a can of something in a paper bag, seem to be on long walks to nowhere.

The road's shoulder is a repository of detritus; the roadkill of the American interstate is particularly distressed, unrecognizable clumps of meat, entrails dramatically strewn about by the omniscient vultures that maintain an air of absolute apathy amid dangerous speed and fiery sky. Or deer contorted beyond possibility: you can see the face of that icon, the trucker, reflected in his dashboard screen, thrown into a frenzy of paranoia from weak truck stop coffee and an overload of CB slang, bearing down upon the unfortunate beasts whose last moment was entrapment between a median wall and a tire. It is difficult to imagine some pleasure wasn't taken in creating such elaborate carnage. Or maybe in the deep routine of his path along the interstate, nothing that stands in the way registers for him, the speed fixation takes over. Just a zooming canister of goods; at night they whoosh past you in a rhythm. The flatness of the road takes you in. Finally the trance is broken by Big Beau, a gargantuan alligator made of metal siding and rubber and painted in a garish green,[3] welcoming you with jaws agape into Beaumont. You have reached Gator Country Adventure Park, home of Big Tex, the largest live-captured "nuisance alligator" in the United States at thirteen feet, eight inches. The scene of the road east is replete with such visions.

The Ecology of Stories

This book traces what I call an ecology, inhabited by stories, characters, and places.[4] The stories fall under the loose umbrella of hard-luck stories, though not all of them relate experiences of hardship. I see stories as narrative events that do more than tell: they experiment, they play, and they perform the world that they are in.[5] The stories convey feelings that position

the teller as having been through something that stays with them: *this is how I got here, and this is how it stuck to me*. In this sense, stories are what Derek P. McCormack calls "shaped forms that proposition us as discrete presences while also drawing attention to the clouds of affective and material relations in which they are generatively immersed."[6] The hard-luck stories of the folks whom I dwelt among in SE Texas's Golden Triangle are a reminder of what many Americans, Texans among them, see the whole region as a repository for: *the accrual of bad feeling*.

The hard-luck form is a genre of story told through a mode of framing that I identify within the regional form of Texan storytelling. To trace hard luck is to follow the tension that is created when new stories come from an "old" place. It is to hear the great impasse that this region finds itself at with the "outside" and to hear the stories that are generated that make sense of this profound impingement. The scene of the impasse, what Lauren Berlant has defined as "a space of time lived without a narrative genre," foregrounds the comportment of hard-luck stories, making them at times frustratingly textured objects.[7] Hard-luck stories trace the movement and resonance in the void left by life without a genre—the persisting of time and voice in the space of stuckness. At once presenting a set of qualities, a style of speech, recurrent themes—belonging to a default void genre or genre of stultification—these stories function to ring out in the impasse, to untether the speaker and the listener from a direction that might make sense for them to travel toward. So they are of a genre composed of vibrant qualities within a place that I thought of as the waiting room of what to do next while listening to the accounts of the people I met in the cities and towns of SE Texas. They express a stuckness, a suspension of action. Story after story is prefaced with how nothing is happening here, but told with the vibrant repertoire of feelings and utterances of this place as a locus of action. The impasse manifests ethnographically through this theme; there is a conceptual arrest at play, the great mythological stagnancy of the American South and its inhabitants that is deployed as a rhetorical device lamenting the backward, the ignorant, and the archaic remnants of American feeling. The hard-luck stories zoom in to focus on being stuck in one's life as a mode.

A story's texture crafts a way out of the banal fantasy of the bad place, exceeding the dyad of good or bad. This type of story is not peculiar to SE Texas, but it is produced here with a persistent intensity. I was never without stories in SE Texas, whether I wanted them or not, and whether

they made sense to me or not. The SE Texan public depicted here, who by no means constitute an ideologically unified group, are not presupposed as occupying a rung on a social hierarchy. Their position is not beholden to power structures alone: here, they are "not only" the rural whites of the liberal imaginary.[8] They are not only the pitiable, marginalized, and ideologically brainwashed of this imaginary, a fulcrum for liberal forms of political fantasy. In an exploratory spirit, this ethnographic practice seeks to exceed the limit of what such a public has come to signify by attuning to stories that take us into the space of excess itself.[9]

The question of character is taken up as a heuristic within the discipline of anthropology and elsewhere. Walter Benjamin, in his 1931 manifesto "The Destructive Character," speaks of a critical object at once personified and abstracted that seems to lie somewhere between specificity and generality. He tries to wrest the meaning of character away from its modern context within psychoanalysis and morality by using it to describe a somewhat mythological typology: figures in an atmosphere, recognizable to all, yet unquantifiable by any reasonable method. Anthropology, and its notorious post–World War II "national character studies" conducted by luminaries like Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead, drew ire in the following years for their base generalizations about common personality traits of whole cultures and their flattened images of those cultures in the form of ethnic stereotypes.[10] More recently, anthropologists have explored the question of character in its relation to religion and ethics.[11] The way I speak of character in this book explores some of these paths, but it is primarily taken from the very ordinary way character is used in the conversations I had both in SE Texas and throughout my lifetime, just hearing people tell stories and speak about characters. Over and over again, folks I spoke to in SE Texas would discover that I was "collecting stories" and refer me to people by saying, "You should speak to X. They're a real character."

"The Texan" has become an emergent character, more than just a person who can be found dwelling in the world. The Texan character is close to a figuration, something like a catalog of archetypes.[12] I sometimes think of the playing out of the closed story of America as an automated mimetic process of anthropomorphizing a place, in the sense of picturing cartoon human avatars when we think of the qualities of a locale.[13] We envision a map with figures standing within the borders of each state, each nation, like the mascots of sports teams. I see character as a concept that sits uncomfortably between the underlying tensions of the ethnographic

method: the fruitful impossibility in the pull between comparativist and particularist approaches to analysis.[14] These characters shift, they are subject to the temporal, the local, the racialized—they persist despite being temporary, of their time, things that pass.

The threshold into the kingdom of SE Texas, across the Old and Lost Rivers, marks the entrance to an "old and lost" place in American social imaginaries. Old and lost speak as much to the remoteness of the region as they do to a catalog of feelings, the feelings of a place of old and lost ways. Once you're deep in the undergrowth, what locals call the "tight-eye," where the thicket is so dense that SE Texans say a rattlesnake has to back out of it, the accrual of these feelings can be claustrophobic. This threshold is more than the moment you enter the obscured zone of SE Texas. Despite the fact that the look of the land changes from hilly to flat and piney as you enter it from the west, and that the voting map goes from blue to red as you leave Houston for the country, this is not just the ecological or political gateway to the Deep South. It is a gateway into a circulation of feeling, where the hard-luck stories ring out from its spaces.

The ecologies of SE Texas can be observed in dazzling variation, owing to the disparate array of ecosystems that occur across a relatively concentrated region. The place that later became Texas, inhabited and hazardously traversed by the Panther Band of the Western Atakapa, was a wondrously varied catalog of ecosystems.[15] Later, French and Spanish explorers and Appalachian settlers, as well as escaped slaves, convicts, and deserting soldiers, arrived to carve out paths that became roads and make hideouts that became hidden villages. As the rise of the great Texan industries, lumber and oil, transformed the land, these ecosystems encountered new entanglements with other impingements: piney woods razed of longleaf pine and infested with pine beetles, and Gulf Coast beaches blackened with oil.[16] The historical account is that place gave way to the dream of an "America out there," what Alexis de Tocqueville saw as an almost mystical migration West that brought Americans into a wanderlust tethered to promise, "mystics of materialism, caught up in a contagious mass movement, a *völkerwanderung* fueled by the romantic prose that gushed forth from the pens of the Western propagandizers."[17] This is the SE Texan ecology that you encounter today; it is the ongoing composition of place where the materialist-speculative boom-or-bust economy festers, and the intensity of these fluctuating conditions produce severe forms of life. The place where the promises of the gushing prose of speculation manifested on January 10, 1901, straight from the bowels of the earth: oil.

The swamps and baygall are not only filled with fascinating flora and fauna—they are also filled with the hauntings of stories. Like the campfire tales of the Dog People, who hid whiskey stills in the thicket and roved the land with their packs of curs, carving out a living in the Neches River Bottom.[18] The ethnic and racial histories of the region are entangled, too, in an often-tense blend of Cajun-Louisiana and Anglo-Texan cultures, of vivid Black American and Creole diasporas and rigidly anti-Black, white supremacist hotbeds.[19] SE Texas is a meeting-place of debauchery and conservatism, of the queer body and its assailants—often occurring in the same subjects, in the same stories. It is the crossroads of deep fundamentalism and profound sins. There is something extra in its regionality—what one Texas travel website cheekily calls a *lagniappe*, from the Louisiana French term (adopted from Quechua) for a bonus thrown into a transaction by a merchant.[20]

Whiteness, Badness, Stuckness

I write this in 2021 with some ambivalence. The past four years of Donald Trump's America seem to have redefined the lines of politics along fairly clear identity boundaries; once again, people are speaking, without any hesitation, of "us and them." This happens everywhere, in all the places that I have known, during moments when categories are thrown into crisis, as I feel they have been in the United States. I see these reestablished boundaries as a kind of projection, especially with regard to whiteness. There is an anxiety to align or disidentify with the various strands of whiteness that emerge, to absolve oneself of the responsibility of being associated with the "source of the trouble," whatever that is. So it is that the nature of these ambiguous and evasive boundaries, how they are constituted and what they are composed of, take different forms.

Whenever I have shared my work at an academic conference or even in more casual situations among friends, I am often met with the question, "Why would you want to do research there, on such people?" The implication is that I am wasting time by spending time among "them," that whatever situations I find myself in "there" are somehow not worth the trouble of being among them. "Them," in this instance, refers to "bad whites"—a composite category that includes a wide swath of qualities. The most recent shorthand for bad whites is "Trump supporters." What is being presupposed is twofold. First, the coherence of a "them" category is

assumed, a population of millions, a hivemind of terrible beliefs inhabiting a defined geographical zone of pollution. Second, the coherence of an "us" category assumes the unmarked space of the rational speaker. This rationality takes many forms: secular, liberal, humanist—but also educated, kind, future-oriented. This has always been something that gives me pause in my thinking around SE Texas as a fieldsite, and SE Texans as figures who complicate the ethnographic encounter. Anthropology, and the way anthropologists speak about the value of what we do, is based in part around the exploration and writing of difference as a benign and valuable framework. But I found in these discussions with colleagues and friends that white SE Texans are bad whites: people for whom benign difference is disallowed by virtue of their uncomfortable proximity to white rational liberalism in the United States. They are not the didactic ethnographic object of anthropology; anything to be learned from them is presupposed as a bad idea, soiled knowledge, closure.

There seems to be no established route into comfortably relativizing the ways of those who stand as the roadblock to good liberalism. Bad whites are not distanced Others, but *near-Others*, figures whose resistance to the gestures of dismissal trouble the unmarked category of rationality.[21] These are Others whose existence abrades against "our" attachments to whiteness, nationality, and regionalism. They expose the limits of this distancing of the unmarked category by creating a discomfort in the ethnographer-informant relation. Having already upended the distance of the Other by focusing on those who are not only "at home with us" but also not enshrouded in the academic use of the category of indigeneity because of their position as the descendants of the settlers, disenfranchised and antagonistic, the usual approaches to the Other are short-circuited.[22] There is no way we can familiarize otherness without admitting the Other into our space—which of course they already inhabit.

The feeling of SE Texas acted on me, undoubtedly, and I couldn't help but allow the intensity of this feeling to shape the way that I listened and the way that I wrote. The hard-luck stories shared here are not followed by decoding processes in which I tell the reader what the storyteller means in relation to the bigger picture. Sometimes to sit in the story is to be wrapped into its telling. The feeling of this kingdom can be forbidding: it is the exhaustive (and exhausted) list of industry's excesses, of anti-Black terror, of remote and feral rurality. A composition of America's shadowy scenes, the kinds that even Texans from other places raise their eyebrows upon hearing. Whenever the SE Texan town of Vidor is mentioned, something

instantly comes to mind. People remember a Confederate flag flying from a local high school, stories of people dying of cancers beneath the plumes of refinery smoke, stories about Black mothers warning their kids not to stop for gas in the "sundown towns," where, according to many, a sign on the highway that threatened Black people to stay out of Vidor after dark was on display until the early 1980s.[23] The threshold is not a definitive line over which the place or the people comprise some otherness—but to think of it as a crossing-over is to give space to difference, and to the feeling of difference. To give space to the perspicacity of a region in knowing and performing the repertoire of its notorieties that complicate assumed simplicity, and sometimes throw those simplicities back into your face amplified, as if to say: "What you heard about me is true—and that isn't even the half of it."[24]

A deep frame of this work addresses the lamentation of "what is to be done" given that the contemporary political atmosphere of the United States has reached an unprecedented impasse. This impasse should not altogether be thought of as new. Benjamin's historical theses conceived of history as an accumulation of ruins.[25] Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus*, Benjamin's "angel of history," seems to be caught now in a precipice between reaching toward messianic time and the truism, uttered with a shrug and a long drag on a cigarette, that "history repeats itself." The political atmosphere is simultaneously new and old, and ways of attuning to this paradox run the gamut from lamentation to cynicism. History is not over, and people are roaming around in the pleasure and pain of its forming.[26] I encountered people who seemed stuck in this roaming, which made me think about the historical present as an impasse that, despite ostensibly describing a lack of movement forward, still has things to tell us: impasses are not voids—they have messy contents that convey signals. It might be the effects of these contents that flounder in an endpoint of stuckness.

What the impasse conveys is that the "the way things are now" is a fruition of bad feelings, what the media has pointed out with some shock as the arsenal of Trump's rural white working class, his "emboldened" masses. The danger of seeing the actions of these masses as new is not only myopic in the immediate sense of forgetting the cyclical nature of reactionary political moments in the United States. It also does not take into account the strange temporality of Benjamin's version of history, which tells us that while the quirks of the impasse may be new, while Trump's rhetorical strategies may be novel, the elements underneath them are not. Beside the fact that the rural white working class was not solely responsible for the election of Trump, it is vital to pay attention to how such an image, possibly

even a specter, of rural whiteness is raised to not only purify oneself and one's immediate context from the source of bad feeling, but to identify the places where the bad, dangerous people are and to bolster a great American story: the story of the feral whites out in the badlands, stuck in time, gnashing their teeth and waiting to strike.

Most people I knew in SE Texas felt that America was stuck, and for them, the stuckness was most deeply felt in their economically depressed, forgotten region. But in many ways, SE Texas is a paradox, an example of what Kim Fortun might call a thriving late industrial zone where the burgeoning, inestimable wealth of the petrochemical industry and its minority of benefactors acts as a smokescreen to obscure the suffering of the masses.[27] It is also true that the majority of Texans voted for Trump in hopes of alleviating this impasse.[28] Many of the expressed viewpoints with regard to race, religion, gender, and sexuality, which would be considered repugnant by most liberals, had direct connections to the alleviation of this impasse. Various hierarchies, in which they found themselves at the bottom, were destroying their lives. There was a pervasive idea that people of color, LGBTQ+ people, minorities of every kind were doing better than they were because of "government handouts" and other conspiracies. I heard these opinions expressed not only by white men, but by women, people of color, and LGBTQ+ people—the very people these unfounded claims were leveled against, apparently turning the weapon against themselves. But also, these so-called minorities were speaking from a position of exception justified by what I came to understand as a stubbornly Texan individualism: *I ain't like them*. Some of them, in short, lived up to the stereotypes in the way they spoke and what they thought. And then others didn't.

The impasse is not just stuckness, but a set of encounters that its inhabitants experience. Styling themselves along a spectrum of types, from witty observer to scarred warrior, storytellers not only voice the recognizable ideology of Trump's America—they display the somatic attunements of daily life in a region conceived broadly as a sacrifice zone, a place where the negative elements of the way things are now have come home to roost.[29] There are expressive elements to these stories that contextualize how a nonpolitician with a Weberian charismatic appeal could grab the attention of such a public, capitalizing on the excesses and affects of a region characterized by the story of being stuck. The excesses preceded Trump and will linger long after the broken promises, which have already begun to sting, fade away.

In this book, the frame of ecology is more than biological, more than physically environmental. I follow the lines of social ecology drawn by thinkers such as Gregory Bateson, Félix Guattari, and Murray Bookchin, who maintain that the ecological conditions of life are deeply interwoven with sociality. It is not my contention that bad people make a bad planet, or vice versa. Rather, what I learned from talking to the folks in SE Texas was that in the state of impending eco-collapse that we find ourselves in and that we have brought ourselves up to the precipice of meeting, life flickers on in intense ways. I trace what it feels like to be in a place at the heart of the impasse at multiple levels: economic, environmental, semiotic. When I drive back into SE Texas, I think of it as entering "the Zone," an idea I first encountered in the 1979 Andrei Tarkovsky film *Stalker*. The film describes an isolated, difficult to access area of a world that operates by some unknown and dire logic. And it presents to its unfortunate visitors an eco-portrait of place at its most harmed, mutated. In the Zone, time operates differently and the prospect of getting out of it once you enter feels impossible.

Aftereffects

After I left SE Texas for the last time in 2016, a number of world-shifting developments took place. The first was, of course, the election of Trump, which occurred only a few months after I left. I had watched the momentum of the election building up over the course of my fieldwork and the many visits I had made to SE Texas prior to that time. The element of Trump was introduced in a more significant way as the election date approached. On return visits, I noticed people clinging tenaciously to the idea of Trump. He had squashed the other candidates, and it looked as though there was no choice but to respect that sort of steamrolling—besides, he made superficial concessions to the working people. I noticed that these mentions were read as winks, almost conspiratorial in nature, to working-class whites. But even beyond that, Trump's comments about "helping the workers" were read as messages to white people, many of them middle and upper class, who somehow identified with or valorized the poetic idea of the disenfranchised, decentered American white working person. The intensities of this resultant atmosphere created a host of new scenes that people found themselves in, ranging across the spectrum of hope, denial, newly sparked rage, or a deeper and more impenetrable hopelessness.

The second event was Hurricane Harvey in the late summer of 2017, which completely engulfed SE Texas and affected many of the sites that I had lived in, including the RV park in Beaumont and nearby Vidor. It was a reminder of the perpetuity of hurricane disasters in SE Texas, and the immediate media reaction to the event marked it once again as a symbolic sticking point. I watched a wave of studied apathy on social media, relegating those who were suffering to the flattened category of climate change deniers. On the other side, inspirational stories of communities "coming together" in the face of the hurricane offered a counterpoint. People waded through the floodwaters, rescued on boats by local volunteer groups like the Cajun Navy, their lives washed away like so much detritus in the storm.[30]

The third was COVID-19, in 2020. The landlord of a trailer park, one of my key informants in this book, contracted the virus and was briefly intubated before being flown to a hospital in Houston where he received further treatment and recovered. I stayed in contact with him intermittently during the ordeal. He caught the virus at a party, before there was any uniform messaging in the United States about social distancing or masks (made more complicated by Texas government officials' generally lax and even nihilistic attitude toward the virus in general), and texted me long supplications to please be safe and to "take this thing seriously."[31] The tone of his messages warning me about "Corona 19" surprised me, because many of my informants whom I had stayed in touch with after leaving the field didn't believe COVID was real. In fact, since 2017, I had noticed a lot of their ways of thinking and the stories explored in this book had further mutated into what can only be called "conspiracist thinking." Many of them, especially the ladies in the health food store (chapter 2), had already been onboard with these strands of thought. They ranged from anti-vaxxers, to believing that certain dead celebrities or politicians were still alive and that certain living politicians were dead, to having histories in militias and millenarian movements. The Trump presidency and the birth of the ur-conspiracy movement called QAnon seemed to both intensify and focus these beliefs into a shared mode, and it also spread these beliefs beyond the traditional confines of where we find conspiracy thinking.

QAnon is a pro-Trump, quasi-secular millenarian movement that began online in October 2017 when a mysterious user called "Q" (short for Q Clearance Patriot) posted a series of cryptic, instructional warnings to "patriots" on the notoriously right-wing imageboard website 4chan.[32] QAnon has seeped into the collective consciousness and real-life events (such as the January 6, 2021, storming of the US Capitol), foreseeing an

era of societal unrest called "The Storm" that draws on multiple previous conspiracy theories in a collection of beliefs that can be traced back to the early twentieth century.[33]

QAnon is composed of a dazzling pastiche of narratives that center around the idea that Donald Trump is battling a deep state run by a Satanic pedophilic cabal whose members drink the adrenochrome-rich blood of children and clandestinely rule the world, hiding in plain sight. From this baseline allegation, hundreds of conspiracy theories reveling in the spectacular mythos of what Susan Lepselter calls the "American Uncanny" proliferate across epochs and cultures.[34] They capture major US politicians and celebrities in their tendrils and blast populist dogma through Q drops, apocryphal messaging uploaded periodically to a website, Qmap, with more than 10 million monthly users.[35] Qmap served as QAnon's sacred palimpsest until it was shut down in September 2020.

After I left SE Texas, I stayed in touch with many of my informants and friends via text and email. I noticed that Q talk had seeped into all kinds of ideas about history, politics, religion, health, and culture. It was a new and exciting narrative for people who were still looking for a way out of the feeling of stuckness, but it was largely composed of a collage of old ideas and paranoias. In retrospect, I see the conversations and stories in this book as the documentation of a prescient or anticipatory moment: right before the shift into millions of Americans waiting for Trump to unleash The Storm and bring about The Great Awakening.

Getting Into Things

When I first came to SE Texas in the summer of 2008, it was for a funeral. My best friend Danny's grandmother had died, his Meemaw. The service was held in the main room of a funeral home in his hometown of Vidor. The room was new-feeling and beige carpeted, with shiny pews and artificial flowers. It felt like a room where you might have day camp on a rainy day or an AA meeting. Meemaw was laid out in her closed casket, and a line of people, mostly old-timers, queued up to pay their respects. It was a new experience for me, having grown up Catholic in the northeast in the world of open-casket wakes and morose cemetery rituals. It fell somewhere between my understanding of a wake and a funeral—a Southern Baptist "service." The pastor was coiffed, jovial. He talked about what a good, godly lady Meemaw had been and how he knew her husband personally—they

even played golf together. It seemed clear that he hadn't actually known her, and that this was somehow beside the point. A screen lowered from the ceiling with a loud, mechanical drone, and images of Meemaw and her family were projected on it. Music played over the speakers—Christian easy listening, devotional hymns. The air conditioning billowed the screen slightly, warping the images.

Afterward, the whole family gathered in the gravel parking lot under the glaring Texas summer sun. They are a dynastic working-class family in the Texas style, ten siblings, gatherings full of laughter and tears, hard-luck yarns, deep feuds that carry on for years where guns are drawn in driveways over financial matters, infidelities, or the unhinged moment of a person driven to the edge. Betrayals, alliances, dark rumors, absurdity, the swirling about of an excessive atmosphere. They adopted me without hesitation on that first visit, initiating me with ribald humor and quasi-accusatory indictments. A libertarian uncle of Danny's demanded to know why "you New Yorkers make us wear seatbelts!," which I was never really able to answer. Underneath this ritualized induction, I could tell they appreciated the way I rolled with the punches. They joked about how brave a Yankee was to "come all the way up here," even though I had come down—way, way down. They are the reason this book exists; their stories breathe life into the atmosphere of the place. They showed patience when I continually prodded them to retell stories, to be recorded, to consider elements of the things they were saying so that I could "bring all this stuff back to Austin where y'all are gonna laugh at us!," as Deb, Danny's mom, used to suggest, only half-joking. Their love and their loyalty haunt me, and it isn't without a bit of shame that I share this clumsy glimpse into their world, hoping to be more than another element wrapped into their long genealogy of the Bad Things That Happened to Us.

In the decade following that first visit, I learned much about the world that they generously shared with me, sometimes in stories and lessons, and sometimes in inscrutable gestures. I spent countless hours *visitin' with* them, a Southern phrase for hanging out, but one that connotes more profound reciprocity in conversation and active listening. It's time spent slowly, perhaps strangely, with great big pauses that let the stories come as they will. *Visitin' with* correlates to the "deep hanging out" of ethnography, and it was in this mode that I heard the epochs of their lives, sometimes unwittingly.[36] I have seen them love, suffer, move away, get stuck, and leave this earth in an equal measure of unthinkable severity and the easy, gentle

way in which you can lean back, turn on the radio, and zone out driving down those long, flat SE Texas highways.

One of Danny's aunts suffered from a rare condition called Moyamoya disease—it constricted arteries in her brain and caused her to have what the doctors called "mini-strokes," resulting in severe cognitive and motor disability. Her family described her as having the "affect" of a child. She was mostly silent but said a few words here and there. During a lull in the conversation in the parking lot after Meemaw's funeral, she slowly lifted her arm and pointed at a spot on the gravel. "Ah see a thang," she said. We asked her what she saw; she kept pointing to a spot in the middle distance. "Ah see a thang." Finally, I recognized a piece of confetti in the gravel. It was barely perceptible—it gave off tiny metallic flickers. "Is that what you see, Brenda Sue?" asked her husband. She didn't answer, kept her hand pointed out: "Ah see a thang."

I was struck by her perceptions of the place she was living in, floating just below the register of talk and so-called normative sociality, but also observant of things that floated just under "our" perception, the attunements of that same field of observation. One of the first questions I asked myself when it became clear to me that I would be doing a project on SE Texas was, What is a thing here? Like Aunt Brenda, I wanted to *visit with* the things just beneath the surface of the obvious that mattered to people. I wanted to listen to the thing being told, and watch the way that told thing joined together with others and flickered into an existence, here enacted by those whose specialty it is to be a character, relatable yet specific, and to enliven these stories with intensities.

Notes

Introduction

1. Peacock, *Nature Lover's Guide to the Big Thicket*, 1.

2. "What Is the Golden Triangle of Texas?," Gobeau, accessed May 12, 2022, https://www.gobeau.co/post/what-is-the-golden-triangle-of-texas.

3. "Beaumont's 135-foot Alligator," Beaumont Convention and Visitors Bureau, accessed May 12, 2022, https://www.beaumontcvb.com/things-to-do/roadside-attractions/giant-alligator/.

4. Reed and Bialecki, "Introduction to Special Section 1."

5. Bauman, *Story, Performance, and Event*.

6. McCormack, "Atmospheric Things and Circumstantial Excursions," 605.

7. Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 199.

8. Marisol de la Cadena's ontological concept of multiplicity, elaborated in *Earth Beings: Ecologies of Practice across Andean Worlds*.

9. De la Cadena, "The Politics of Modern Politics Meets Ethnographies of Excess through Ontological Openings."

10. See, for example, Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*; Mead, *And Keep Your Powder Dry*; and Gorer, *The People of Great Russia*.

11. See the special section on anthropology and character in *Social Anthropology* 26, no. 2 (2018), edited by Adam Reed and Jon Bialecki.

12. I borrow the term *figuration* from Donna Haraway, who uses it throughout her work and elucidates it most clearly her 2000 lecture "Birth of the Kennel," accessed April 12, 2018, from Latvijas Antropologu Biedrība / Latvian Anthropological Association, http://antropologubiedriba.wikidot.com/haraway-lecture-cyborgs.

13. Here I am drawing from Auerbach, *Mimesis.*

14. Candea, *Comparison in Anthropology*.

15. Bonney, *Big Thicket Guidebook*.

16. Ogden, *Swamplife*.

17. Lingeman, *Small Town America*, 103.

18. Pittman, *The Stories of I. C. Eason, King of the Dog People*.

19. Chambers, "Goodbye God, I'm Going to Texas."

20. "Beaumont," Tour Texas, accessed April 4, 2022, https://www.tourtexas.com/destinations/beaumont.

21. This thread begins in the early 1990s with Susan Harding's seminal essay "Representing Fundamentalism: The Problem of the Repugnant Cultural Other." It is continued in various disciplines, throughout the 1990s and 2000s by anthropologists (Hartigan, *Racial Situations*; Hartigan, *Odd Tribes*) and sociologists (Newitz and Wray, *White Trash*; Wray, *Not Quite White*) and has reached best-seller status in works for a more general readership in recent years (Isenberg, *White Trash*; Vance, *Hillbilly Elegy*; Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land*).

22. I am not saying that there no Indigenous people in the figure of the rural Other. SE Texas was stolen from the Atakapa-Ishak, Indigenous peoples of the Southeastern Woodlands whose Western and Eastern bands were known as the Sunset and Sunrise People, respectively. The Big Thicket was home to the Western Atakapa Nial, or Panther Band, of the Atakapa. *Atakapa* is an exonym, the Choctaw word for *man-eater*, apparently a reference to the Atakapa-Ishak's cannibalism practices. Their autonym is *Ishak*, "the people." The border between what are now Louisiana and Texas was inhabited by the Tsikip, or Heron Band (Opelousa), of the Eastern Atakapa, who painted their legs and feet black like the heron during rituals of mourning.

23. A Confederate flag still flies at Evadale High School in Jasper County, as well as appearing on its gymnasium wall and football field; its mascot is the Rebel. Accounts of the Vidor highway sign's existence and tenure vary—some insist that it was on display until the 1980s; some say it was taken down in the 1970s. Others claim it never existed and support this with the fact that there are "no known photographs" of the sign. Yet many people I spoke to over the course of my time in SE Texas remember it clearly. Collective memory distorts consensus—the sign is lost in the miasmic fog of Vidor's misremembering.

24. Stewart called this repertoire "back-talk" in *A Space on the Side of the Road*.

25. Benjamin, *Illuminations*.

26. Stewart, *A Space on the Side of the Road*.

27. Fortun, "Ethnography in Late Industrialism."

28. Of those who voted: a fraction of the population.

29. Shapiro, "Attuning to the Chemosphere."

30. Burke, "The Cajun Navy."

31. Samuels, "Dan Patrick Says."

32. These later moved to 8chan and then 8kun. QAnon is a "*quasi*-secular millenarian" in the sense that it is entrenched in a cross-pollinating relationship with Christian fundamentalism and only partially committed to eschatology as such, yet deeply informed by its mythos. One podcast calls this "conspirituality." See Derek Beres, Matthew Remski, and Julian Walker, *Conspirituality*, https://conspirituality.buzzsprout.com/1875696. The identity of the figure of Q is theorized to be various people, most notably the owner of 8kun, Jim Watkins, and Jason Gelinas of New Jersey, who is supposedly behind QMap.pub and a new platform for Q believers called Armor of God. "Q Clearance Patriot" is a reference to the highest level of security clearance at the US Department of Energy. Q clearance has a long history within American conspiracy theory circles as a prestigious title for those with access to the most highly classified material. See also Nagle, *Kill All Normies*.

33. One origin point for Euro-American conspiracy theory is the publication of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* in 1903.

34. Lepselter, *The Resonance of Unseen Things*.

35. "QAnon Key Figure Revealed as Financial Information Security Analyst from New Jersey," Logically, September 10, 2020, https://www.logically.ai/articles/qanon-key-figure-man-from-new-jersey. The website was Qmap.pub; another website where the drops were uploaded is Qanon.pub.

36. *Deep hanging out* is a term often attributed to Clifford Geertz but possibly first coined by Renato Rosaldo.

Chapter One. The Strange Time of Hard-Luck Stories

Excerpts from this chapter were published as "Time Gets Strange: Texan Hard-Luck Stories," in *Feelings of Structure*, edited by Yoke-Sum Wong and Karen Engle (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2018), 106–15.

1. Bauman, *Story, Performance, and Event*.

2. See, e.g., "Beaumont TX Crime Rate 1999–2018," MacroTrends, accessed May 3, 2022, https://www.macrotrends.net/cities/us/tx/beaumont/crime-rate-statistics; "The 10 Most and Least Educated Cities in America," Forbes, September 16, 2014, https://www.forbes.com/pictures/fjle45iglg/no-1-least-educated-city/?sh=3bef413968ce.

3. Johnson, *Just Queer Folks*; Ferguson, "Sissies at the Picnic."