Chapter 12

WEATHERING THE STORM

Folk Ideas about Character

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On September 22, 2017, a cavalcade of musical celebrities gathered in the Frank Erwin Center in Austin, Texas, to perform for the Harvey Can't Mess With Texas benefit concert. Two of the night's stars, James Taylor and Bonnie Raitt, added to the event by performing a somewhat more gospel version of a folk-song that has come to be known as "Wasn't that a Mighty Storm?" whose origins, at least in recordings, lie with Sin-Killer Griffin. At the time of John Lomax's recording of Griffin in 1934, Griffin was a prisoner in Texas's Darrington State Farm (Lomax, Lomax, and Griffin 1934). The recording captures Griffin leading his small congregation of prisoners who accompanied him as he sang "Wasn't that a Mighty Storm?"

For those not familiar with the song, it represents the events occurring during a hurricane in Galveston in which people lose their lives either because they failed to heed the warnings or, perhaps through no fault of their own, they became trapped in the middle of a natural catastrophe and they had no choice but to die; the role of fate is highlighted in the oft-repeated line "When death calls you got to go."[1] Thus, like other moments in oral tradition, the song is a meditation on human nature in a time of crisis when, according to one strand of American tradition, one's true character is revealed out of necessity.

Indeed, success in the face of adversity is to "weather the storm." And so, this chapter's contribution to the current volume is, in many ways, to explore the verb side of "weather." That is, the weather is rarely simply the weather. It is, as "wait five minutes" suggests, a commentary on what we can know and the kinds of claims we make about knowing. To suggest to someone "wait five minutes" is to suggest that the future is unknowable or at least what we think about something as seemingly knowable as nature—we live, after all, in an age of science and reason where the natural sciences are the model for all

other forms of science—is to rebuke those epistemological structures for their inability to do something as simple as predicting the weather.

At the heart of this chapter lies two instances of the idea of weathering a storm: a collection of memes that tend toward the comic and an oral legend, indexical of a small collection of similar texts, that trends toward the tragic. Both the memes and the legend focus on historical weather events, and both feature abandoned trucks. As students of the two forms are well aware, both allow for a wide variety of form and meaning, and yet, when it comes to trucks weathering the storm, there is a striking continuity, a conservatism, in the ideas, both latent and manifest. Situated at the heart of American car culture and heightened in dramatic form when manifested as a truck, we have vernacular considerations of the status of the American dream. In addition to topical matters, what follows is also an exploration of folk ideas as they relate to forms like the meme and the legend and how viewing the forms through the lens of ideas might offer us a way to reimagine the relationship between forms.

Weathering Storms of Emotions

A range of expressions, from proverbs to sayings to metaphors, all reveal the role of stormy weather in our imagination. The premonitory forms tell us to be wary of "the quiet [or calm] before the storm" or warn us of the "clouds on the horizon." Admonitory forms caution us "not to rain on my parade" or resign us to the fact that "into every life, a little rain must fall." Disembodied and distinct from us, storms represent misfortune. Embodied, however, they reveal ill temper, like when someone "storms" into or out of a particular situation or their anger is revealed by their face being "clouded." When bodies accumulate, we worry when there are "rumbles" of discontent, and, of course, should those crowds cross the barricades, it is quite probable they will *storm* a building.

Such freighted metaphorical usage is not limited to folk speech, of course. Its role in literature is quite extensive, and we need only recall, in the context of the US South where our memes and legends are also situated, the storms that lie at the heart of Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) and William Faulkner's *The Old Man* (1948). In both, the protagonists are tested by events that unfold as a storm rages: in the former, Janie faces having to kill the man she loves, and in the latter, the unnamed protagonist saves a life, helps bring a new life into the world, and ultimately sacrifices himself. As Izabela Żołnowska notes in her discussion of weather as a source domain for metaphorical expressions, storm events, like rain, wind, thunder, lightning, and fog, are all associated with difficult times or problems. While each can also signify other dimensions of human existence (e.g., fog stands in for confusion),

together they reveal a tendency to imagine bad weather simply as bad. The result is, as Żołnowska (2011, 176, emphasis original) concludes, a metaphorical system within which "WEATHER CONDITIONS ARE PROBLEM INDICATORS." Hence, weather can be not only a problem in its own right but also a metaphorical realm into which we project out understanding of problems. And thus, in some fashion, weather shapes how we understand and act upon those problems. It is, for example, quite different to spit into the wind or wade through a difficult situation than to be drowning in your problems.

So, storms in stories are more than reports about the weather: external events are closely tied to internal events and not just any kind of internal events but those that challenge us and force us to reveal something of our "true nature." In the process, such external events make manifest that which is normally internal. To be sure, this notion is as commonplace as the ideas about storms just mentioned. The saying "adversity does not build character, it reveals it," often attributed to James Lane Allen, is sometimes described as a bromide, so commonplace are the pairings of crisis and character.[2] Similar sorts of statements have been attributed to Charles de Gaulle and Arthur Schopenhauer as well as a host of lesser luminaries.[3] And such a list would be incomplete without including perhaps the most famous of them all and which so bears on the topic at hand that it would serve just as well as the title of this chapter: "There is a tide in the affairs of Men which taken at the flood leads on to fortune" (Shakespeare 1998, 218–19).

The point is that memes and legends draw upon similar reserves, reserves which we might describe as folk ideas, but enact them differently. While some might argue that all folklore forms are ideological in nature, in keeping with Roman Jakobson's notion of the dominant, I would like to suggest that some forms are more ideological in nature than others: they foreground that ideas are in play. (And "play" is an operative word here.) As Jay Mechling (2004) notes, the ties between certain kinds of authorized forms, like proverbs and myths, are well established. And yet no legend scholar would dispute the moral implications of any number of legends. This does not require a hierarchy of any kind: different forms provide users with different levels of commitment to the ideas they understand to be latent within any particular event that is either under discussion or being created.

Setting aside this larger framework, let us return to our discussion of the nature of character, especially American character, as found in folklore. Legend is one form where character comes into play. Adjacent to legend in many discourse communities that I have studied, and often adjacent in form and in topic, is the anecdote. The two together offer a kind of communal and individual testimony on the nature of what it means to be a moral actor. Where proverbs end and legends begin, or where myths end and memes begin, is not

really the question. All participate within a larger complex that some have called "worldview."

Within the realm of possible responses to adversity as presented by storms (and other weather events), there seem to be four possibilities: those who do the right thing and are heroes; those who do the wrong thing and are villains; those who do things of uncertain moral nature and are tricksters; and those who have things of uncertain moral nature happen to them revealing them to be numbskulls. Of these four character types, the two that dominate the memes and legends discussed here are tricksters and numbskulls. Why the characters of uncertain moral valuation predominate will be taken up after we have a fuller account of them in action.

Numbskulls

The numbskull has long been a favorite in a variety of American traditions. In many communities, numbskulls are commonly featured in jokes. In Louisiana, like elsewhere in the United States, numbskulls appear regularly as a pair: dumb and dumber. Boudreaux and Thibodeaux jokes feature the pair in a variety of activities, some represented as generally American and some as particularly part of the area—those jokes that hinge on some interplay of French and English or on game peculiar to the region are often examples of more widely available localizations. While in a small number of instances the native wit of Boudreaux and Thibodeaux is the focus, in most cases it is their misapprehension of simple things—throwing away nails with the heads on the wrong end, for example—that makes the joke work. When their families are featured, most often one or both of their wives, they are there largely as props for the behavior of the two comedic protagonists. In the case of the following joke, however, it is the wives who dominate the joke, which might underline that what's at stake is human nature set against mother nature:

> One night, a torrential rain soaked South Louisiana. The next morning, the resulting floodwaters came up about 6 feet into most of the homes there. Mrs. Boudreaux was sitting on her roof with her neighbor, Mrs. Thibodeaux, waiting for help to come. Mrs. Thibodeaux noticed a lone baseball cap floating near the house. Then she saw it float far out into the front yard, then float all the way back to the house. It kept floating away from the house, then back in. Her curiosity got the best of her, so she asked Mrs. Boudreaux, "Do you see that baseball cap floating away from the house, then back again?" Mrs. Boudreaux said, "Oh yes, that's my husband; I told him he was going to cut the grass today come Hell or high water!"[4]

The saying "come Hell or high water" appears to have a mid-nineteenth-century American origin, with its first appearance in print coming in 1882 in the Iowa newspaper the *Burlington Weekly Hawk Eye*. It is not unlike the common southern saying "Lord willing and the creek don't rise." In both cases, a (literally) supernatural event and natural event are conjoined, marking the importance of proper conduct in human affairs and the possibility for failures of character.

Those familiar with Hurston will immediately be reminded of the story about the Johnstown flood that features early in *Mules and Men* (1935). In it, a man who dies in the flood goes to Heaven and proceeds to tell everyone he sees about the terrible flood that killed him until he tells one man whose only response is "'Shucks! You ain't seen no water!" When he asks Peter who that man was, Peter, after asking a few questions to clarify the man's identity, responds that it was Noah. Peter and the joke finish with "You can't tell him nothin' 'bout no flood" (Hurston 1935, 13). The joke, in other words, is on the seeming protagonist of the story, who thinks, having been drowned by a historical weather event, he has experienced something extraordinary. He appears the fool in comparison to the biblical event.

Fools and floods seem to go hand in hand. The numbskull is such a popular trait that KRON TV 4 in San Francisco has a series called *People Behaving Badly* that features, in addition to the usual assortment of people being rude to each other, people being too adventurous in regard to waves or flooded roads. One episode even features the reporter, Stanley Roberts, interviewing drivers as they queue to plunge into an obviously flooded stretch of road. Such adventurousness not only has a place in news but also in law, with a number of states enacting "stupid-motorist" laws. In Arizona, the statute states: "a driver of a vehicle who drives the vehicle on a public street or highway that is temporarily covered by a rise in water level, including groundwater or overflow of water, and that is barricaded because of flooding is liable for the expenses of any emergency response."[5]

One such foolish driver captured national attention when his red Jeep Grand Cherokee appeared to have been abandoned on Myrtle Beach as Hurricane Dorian made its way to South Carolina. As with all hurricanes, the combination of winds pushing in water in the form of higher tides and water coming down in the form of torrential rain led local officials to order coastal towns evacuated. Sitting in the center of sixty miles of beach known as the Grand Strand, Myrtle Beach has a history shaped by hurricanes—one of its national landmarks was historic for having survived Hurricane Hazel in 1954. With a population of twenty-seven thousand, Myrtle Beach annually hosts an estimated fourteen million tourists who come to the Grand Strand throughout the year, staying in high rises that are strung along its beaches and possibly playing on one of

the hundred-odd golf courses. And yet, with all this revenue, the average take-home pay for someone living in Myrtle Beach is $23,000.

As the surf rose and the winds began to blow, some who had stayed behind looked out on one of the beaches and saw something odd: a late model, ruby-red Jeep Grand Cherokee parked on the beach. While it is hard to know who first noticed the Jeep, the first moment it appears to have been brought to a broader public's attention is in a story posted at 10:21 a.m. by local NBC affiliate WMBF. A little over an hour later, at 11:45, Kathleen Serie, a reporter for the local Fox affiliate WZTV, was on the scene and captured not only video of the waves breaking over and the water swirling round the Jeep, but also a small cluster of ten or more onlookers who appeared simply to be standing there, waiting to see what would happen next. Later that day, WZTV included the video as part of a story that ran under the headline: "Jeep Abandoned on Myrtle Beach as Hurricane Dorian Rages; Onlookers Take Selfies." Their report includes the following:

> This Jeep owner clearly left things in Mother Nature's hands. As Hurricane Dorian raged off the coast of the Carolinas on Thursday, a unique sight appeared on the shores of Myrtle Beach, S.C. A Jeep SUV was seen stuck on the beach as fierce waves from the hurricane could be seen battering the vehicle. . . . As time progressed on Thursday fierce waves engulfed the Jeep, knocking its bumper off. Onlookers could be seen taking photos of the Jeep and selfies before police cleared the beach area. One man was seen posing for a photo on top of the vehicle as it was engulfed by water. WZTV reporter Kathleen Serie said that as the waves got more violent, the Jeep's tires became loose.[6] (Fedschun 2019)

That the phrase "fierce waves" occurs twice appears to be part of a larger trope that grants nature considerable agency: the storm rages, knocks off the Jeep's bumper, and then both engulfs it and becomes more violent. The storm itself is part of a larger agency, Mother Nature, into whose hands the Jeep's owner has passed its fate.

While arguably the prose of the local news post is a bit overblown, if readers will forgive the pun, it does capture something of the Jeep as not simply another object dotting the beach but as a kind of objet trouvé, a found object that refocuses our attention and our understanding of events in a particular way. How else to explain the explosion of interest that followed, except that the Jeep is not simply an inert thing but an abandoned thing, a thing that asks questions about what it means to buy and pay for and own a reasonably expensive object like a Jeep Grand Cherokee only to strand it in a storm?

The first image in the emergent vernacular we have are the selfies, which happened also to be documented by the local news. A steady stream of individuals acting ostensively, coming out either to see what's happening to/at the Jeep or to be part of what's happening, followed. The simplest form of ostension was the selfie; the more complex forms involved other kinds of performances, the most notable of which was a man playing the bagpipes while circling the Jeep as the water came up around it. The series of events was captured by David Williams (2019) of CNN:

> The owner of the Jeep abandoned on Myrtle Beach during Hurricane Dorian will probably think twice before giving someone his car keys. The red SUV became a social media sensation Thursday as it was bashed by strong surf whipped up as the hurricane moved past South Carolina and up the Atlantic coast. People posed for selfies with the Jeep and some even climbed on top of it. One man dressed in black walked solemnly around the vehicle in his flip-flops while playing "Amazing Grace" on the bagpipes.

The Jeep survives, and yet it is also dead, the subject of a spectacular funeral procession, as CNN and the world watched. The scene underlines the long relationship news outlets—first newspapers and later websites—have had with legends: as much as news outlets wanted to be outside the zone of ostension themselves, they were an integral part of the legend's circulation, with a number of stations actually establishing video feeds of the Jeep.[7]

What followed was a number of selfies posted various places, the establishment of at least two Twitter accounts, and even a parody produced by a gradeschool child for the amusement of her friends and parents. Two minutes after Serie tweeted her video of not only the Jeep but also of people taking selfies of the Jeep, @daily_staley posted a video of someone sitting on the Jeep crosslegged, as if meditating. He tagged local weatherman Ed Piotrowski, who would himself become a part of the growing body of lore and ostension surrounding the Jeep. While people continued to flock to the Jeep and at least one local news station set up a video feed, Twitter was momentarily quiet. Then, an hour later, @the_Jameson asked, "does the Myrtle Beach Surf Jeep have a twitter account yet[?]" (Jameson 2019, n.p.).

Within two hours of that question being posed, two Twitter accounts for the Myrtle Beach Jeep sprung to life. The first, @DorianJeep, was created shortly after 2 p.m., and its first post was at 2:13 p.m. and was, as was only fitting, a photo of the Jeep firmly ensconced in water with the hashtag #selfie (DorianJeep 2019, n.p.). Twenty minutes later a second account was created, @MyrtleBeachJ33p, and its first post was also an image of the Jeep with waves crashing around it.

It too only had a hashtag for text: #NewProfilePic (Myrtle Beach Jeep 2019, n.p.). In this way, both accounts reinforced the notion that there would be an account from the Jeep's point of view. By the time the storm and interest in the Jeep had run their parallel courses, @DorianJeep had tweeted thirty times, with the last coming sometime later on the same Thursday afternoon as the account's creation. By contrast, @MyrtleBeachJ33p posted 496 tweets, principally on Thursday and Friday with limited activity on Saturday and then sporadic activity through September 17.[8]

Of the almost five hundred tweets from @MyrtleBeachJ33p, 136 were outbound tweets originating with the account, sixty-eight were retweets, and 292 were replies.[9] Of the media created and circulated in the course of the day, there were sixty photos, ten videos, and eight GIFs.[10] It will surprise no one that the texts of tweets often anticipated or echoed media incarnations. The first photos and videos are mostly concerned with the Jeep itself, with images of the water and of people interacting with the Jeep amid the incoming waves, but later in the afternoon, Twitter users had found ways to make the inanity of an abandoned Jeep and people wandering during a storm taking selfies with it into something more. It began with a tweet from @alwaysjathis with a screenshot from a smart phone of a listing for the Jeep on the Facebook Marketplace. While the other vehicles have expected price tags, the Jeep is listed for one dollar. @alwaysjathis's comment is: "@MyrtleBeachJ33p wtf. I believed in you" (Shelter 2019).

Tricksters

Insofar as the Jeep is the main character of the memes, then "numbskullery" is the feature, though it is interesting to note that often the local media stories, which depend more on the anecdote for structure, tend to feature a somewhat larger repertory of character types: heroes, villains, and occasional tricksters. Perhaps no better example can be had than the piper circling the Jeep as the storm waded onto shore. Of course, the action is ludicrous: it foregrounds play and makes judgement of the actions as good, bad, wise, or foolish impossible. The same holds true for a handful of legends that emerged after a rare but disastrous weather event that struck south Louisiana in 2016. Like the preceding set of memes and other kinds of texts, the legends focused on property, and in the case of a particular legend that was performed for me by an acquaintance, they featured a truck.

The August 2016 storm itself was eventually described by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration as an "inland sheared tropical depression" (Dolce 2016). For most residents of the areas affected, it looked a lot like

a typical Gulf Coast thunderstorm with the accompanying possibility of flash flooding. Such rains can last for a couple of days, usually coming in waves that offer some relief to infrastructure focused on moving the water out of harm's way. Residents of Louisiana are used to this kind of storm and are also used to flash flooding, and they keep track of which streets are impassable—this task is simplified by the fact that some streets and/or areas are known to flood. People plan their day according to an emergent mental map they develop based on local reports culled from news outlets as well family and friends.[11]

While the idea of threading one's way through flash floods might strike some as foolish, it is a relatively quotidian experience for area residents. Almost everyone in the area has lived through a named storm that did not completely flood an area or otherwise cause a clear and present danger. It is the experience of most residents, and thus a kind of folk wisdom, that even the most punishing of storms does not pummel a region evenly: most take it as a given that it is better to try and turn back then not to try at all if you need to go to the grocery store or get to work. In fact, many businesses remained open throughout the weather event simply because they, and enough employees, were not affected by the unevenly occurring storm. Thus, it was a fairly common trope of the stories that emerged after the storm to feature individuals driving around and encountering something usual or unusual, depending upon the focus of the text. In nonnarrative texts, this was a moment to describe or explain something that had happened. In narrative texts, the usual or unusual would signal, dramatized within the text itself, that either the protagonist did not yet know what was to come or that things were, in fact, coming.

A month after the "inland tropical depression," September 17, on what was a warm Saturday afternoon, I sat on a set of small bleachers with a fellow dad as our daughters practiced nearby. The two of us were catching up on events in each other's lives, our conversation followed the general conventions of most such speech events in North America, with an especial focus on the recent dramatic event, the flooding of the area, acting as a lens through which other topics passed. In the middle of what had become the usual course of conversations about the flooding as described above, my friend told me about vehicles being abandoned in the rising water, seemingly for the insurance money. Used to the current conventions of "storm stories," I did not notice the shift in genres at first, but as the telling unfolded and people and places went unspecified, I realized I was in the middle of a legend performance. My attention shifted and as soon as the larger conversation was done, I transcribed what I had heard as closely as I could. The text as I recorded it that day went like this:

> So, my buddy was out. And he went to cross the bridge, and he'd been across it not long before and it was okay, but now he could see it was

> kind of deep. So, he got part way in, and then he decided "nah ah" he didn't want to risk it. But, you know, some trucks were. . . . My buddy said he saw some nice trucks. Some nice trucks got flooded out. Some guys just drove their trucks in the water. I guess they were already under water with their payments, so they thought why not, you know? Anyway, my buddy says he saw some trucks and their windows were rolled up. You know if you got stuck, you'd roll your windows down to climb out. But their windows were up. So, they were pushed. People got to the edge of the water and then pushed their trucks in. He said he'd seen a bunch of nice trucks with their windows up. You know, I guess people were just doing what they felt they had to do. I'm not saying it's right. But I can understand it.

As noted above, it was not the case that information about whether and where the flooding was happening was well established or evenly distributed. Stories about places flooding that do not normally flood were part of the larger set of genres, and they are often framed in terms of driving and coming upon such a place rather suddenly or unexpectedly. So, when the story began with an account of a friend, who lives in a nearby town along one of the major waterways in the area, it was not remarkable that the text's protagonist was out driving.

Flood stories, as they came to be called, had a predictable sequence in which streets, and even bridges, which were normally passable were discovered to be impassable. In most textual interchanges, this opened up the conversation to a discussion about water actually flowing over the bridge and even how deep it was. It was not unusual for the anecdotes and reports to feature a decision to turn around to emphasize the impassable nature of the route. So, when this particular text has the protagonist look around him to see other trucks like his that have attempted to pass and have not made it, it does not seem all that remarkable. The narrative wobble—where the text has to back up to repeat the point of view, of "my buddy," and changes point of view from the friend to trucks to unnamed individuals—marks the shift from anecdote to legend.

Because the trucks are a defining feature of the legend, their presence is worth consideration. Southern Louisiana has been dominated first by agriculture and then by the oil industry, both sectors that require a fair amount of heavy equipment that needs to be hauled from one job to another. Pickup trucks are ubiquitous, and while most will think of trucks the size of a Ford F-150, it is not uncommon to see the likes of F-250s and F-350s or their competitive counterparts parked in driveways. Extended and crew cabs add to the overall size of these large trucks, which are also often elevated, because both farmers and oil workers tend to work in a variety of environments. Large pickup

trucks are the coin of the realm, and where other regions might focus on fancy cars, foreign or domestic, as status symbols, in south Louisiana it is the truck.[12]

Just as importantly, in terms of these legends, trucks like these are expensive, some approaching the cost of a small home. Because car loans are shorter than most mortgages, many face monthly truck payments exceeding their mortgages. But farmers have to have them and fold them into the cost of their farm operations, and many workers in the oil field and adjacent industries just regard them as part of what you own and who you are. When times are good in the oil industry, men can make six-figure salaries that make a $700-a-month note look like a pittance. In the two years leading up to the 2016 flood, gas prices had dropped, and the oil industry had shed twelve thousand jobs in the region. Area newspapers slowly switched from hopeful stories about what would happen when oil returned to a price above fifty dollars a barrel to stories of how workers and their families were adjusting to what was coming to be considered the new normal (see, e.g., Truong 2016). It was becoming increasingly clear that a good number of the jobs would never be coming back.

The legend addresses the current situation for many head-on: many people before the flood occurred were already "under water" financially. The flood was simply a physical manifestation of a less visible economic and emotional reality. The rising waters were a concretization of a landscape that was already flooded with despair and possible destitution. The mud-filled waters that creeped and then drowned people's homes and left behind the danger of black mold were simply confirmation that the current situation could not hold. For many more than have been reported, it is said, it was simply the last straw, and they left their homes behind, much like what we were told happened in Las Vegas when the housing bubble burst in 2007.

After encountering the legend above, I asked others if they have heard anything about vehicles being abandoned during the flood. That was the extent of the prompt—"vehicles abandoned during the flood"—with no mention of insurance, though sometimes I substituted "car or trucks" for "vehicles." I received a number of positive responses, many of which cited as evidence for their claim a report seen on a local television station. Inquiries to local news outlets turned up only stories that were basically requests from authorities either urging avoidance of or caution when using local roads due to debris or abandoned vehicles. For example: "The following areas are still reporting problems with high water in the roadway. The public is asked to avoid these areas until the water subsides and the streets are cleared of abandoned vehicles" (KPEL 96.5 FM 2016, n.p.).

Finding no evidence for actually abandoned cars in the historical record, it made sense to seek out possible verification from the foil in the legend, the insurance industry.[13] A representative of one of the big three insurance

companies, who notes that his company probably insured one car in six in the region, responded that, while such cases were not unknown, there were no such cases pending before his company in the months following the flood. He notes that it was important to understand that the industry regularly distinguishes between clear-cut cases of fraud and insured individuals simply being stupid—the determining the latter, he emphasizes, is simply one function of insurance, catching us when we are not at our best. While there had been a few cases of people having driven their vehicles through a flooded area and then claiming that the vehicles had been flooded in place, there were no cases, of which he knew, of people driving cars or trucks into flooded areas and leaving them there.

Moreover, the insurance representative notes in those confirmed cases of insurance fraud of this kind that it is rarely the case that the insurance disbursement will pay off what is owed completely. The nature of being upside down, he observes, is that your vehicle is already worth less than what you owe. Even receiving full compensation will leave you with money owed on a loan. In most instances—and it was especially his experience with the flood—people plead to have their vehicles not totaled. In these cases, he said, cars and trucks are usually paid for, and the person is not able to afford, or would rather not take on, a monthly loan payment. Unfortunately for the insured, insurance companies will not pay more to repair a car or truck than it is worth in terms of resale value. In terms of veracity, then, not only is there little evidence to support our legend, but the stories from the other side reveal that far from pushing trucks into the onslaught of flood waters, most individuals were really left "high and dry" when their insurance company declared their vehicle a total loss and simply issued them a check for its current value, which is often far less than the value the vehicle has for them or what it would take to replace it.

The fit of the legend here is not simply the topical context of flood discourse but also the larger ideological network: of people already drowning metaphorically, such that abandoning an artifact that not only has high utility, but also high social status, achieves such effective narrative closure. Another legend very similar to the current one repeats the idea of insurance fraud, but in the case of the versions I heard, none of them are as long or as structured as the one about trucks. The texts tell of a local business owner, sometimes owning a store and sometimes another kind of business, who, already on the brink of financial difficulty, decides to open the door to the flood, causing the contents of his business to be lost to the rising water. All the versions of this variant I heard located the business in the eastern flood zone, an area east of Baton Rouge in which a number of small towns were flooded.

In the case of at least one town, Walker, its mayor, Rich Ramsey, protested that the flooding was the result of the refurbishing of nearby Interstate 10 that

runs east-west through Louisiana, and, with its newly raised central divider, actually acted as a weir, preventing the rising waters from flowing, as they normally would have, southwards and toward the wetlands that border the western and northern edges of Lake Pontchartrain. Ramsey argued in the weeks that followed the flooding that "what they did was effectively create the largest retention pond in the world" (Jones 2016, n.p.), maintaining that he had requested additional drainage options, especially after similar flooding occurred in 1983.

The abstract "they" is significant here. Similar complaints about large construction projects have been made by Louisiana residents elsewhere, and it is part of a larger network of ideas that bureaucracies, both governmental and corporate, are at the very least indifferent if not hostile to local inhabitants and dismissive of their knowledge.[14] There are a variety of narratives that circulate that focus on the revelation that if an official of one type or another had simply listened, he or she would have learned that: that land has always flooded, that no one has ever grown anything there, and that you can't use that tool that way (even though the manufacturer says you can). In some ways, it is the quintessential American folk idea of "book learning" versus "common sense," with the common here being knowledge hard-won by years of living and/or working in a particular place. Barry Ancelet (2008) has documented similar kinds of narratives that followed the 2005 hurricanes, concluding that those from outside the community ignore local knowledge at their own peril, and that those who respect such knowledge, almost always represented as officials from inside the community, succeed.

Nonplayer Characters[15]

In his consideration of legends that circulated within communities affected by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, Carl Lindahl (2012, 143) notes that "Disaster legends may not report the facts, but they are an essential vernacular tool for expressing how the tellers feel about the prevailing social order and for helping their communities seek explanations that square with their convictions." Lindahl describes these kinds of stories as "the right to be wrong": they should not be judged by referential veracity but by their sensitivity to larger systems that for most are more often felt than understood. Legends allow their tellers to articulate, through decisive dramatic action, the dynamics at work within their world and to bring those dynamics into some kind of dramatic enactment with their worldview. Thus, while the legend here does not condone insurance fraud, it asks its audience to understand what lies behind the desperate actions that led to the trucks being under water.

While the legend foregrounds the existential ambiguities that a storm highlights, the memes that surrounded the Myrtle Beach Jeep offer additional vernacular dramatizations. All these texts present, by offering a version of the things as they should be (if things felt were made manifest), an alternative world. As Hilary Dannenberg (2008) notes in her discussion of multiple temporal dimensions in novels, the effect of creating an alternative possible world is to intensify, or sometimes frustrate, the logical force of texts by offering more than one possible version of events. I think it is fairly safe to say that the force of these texts is that they not only inherit the general traits of the actual world, as most mimetic narratives do, but that they also inherit traits of a particular set of folk ideas—folk ideas that run counter to the ideas presented in official press releases and in journalistic outlets.

In the wake of almost any severe weather event, news outlets feature stories about local heroes, some of whom are emergency workers and some of whom are merely ordinary citizens. Part of the larger genre of "human-interest" reporting, these mediated heroic tales have all the features that might make them available for vernacular reproduction: they have a clear theme, usually stated in brief in the opening voiceover; they feature dialogue with either the hero or those whom he saved giving brief, plain-spoken accounts of the events that transpired; and, perhaps more than anything, they feature a clear emotional core. Human-interest stories and legends have either overlapped or fit into the same space in local newspapers, as a number of folklorists have pointed out over the years, and yet we have never really examined how some stories pass mediated to vernacular circulation or, at least, which texts do. In the case of weathering the storms, it would appear to be the case that, as intertwined with media as memes and legends have long been, there were no circulating accounts of heroes nor villains. No doubt there were such stories performed by one person for others, but those stories do not seem to have gained much distribution. And this lack of distribution occurs in spite of the overwhelming flood of such stories, especially those focused on heroes, that flood local and national news outlets after storms.[16] It is, in fact, the relative absence of the expected character types from the vernacular texts that marks them.

The vernacular texts by and large do not explore notions of heroism or villainy. Instead, they are drawn to characters of more ambiguous nature, the numbskull and the trickster, characters whose motivations or intentions are opaque to us, perhaps as opaque as our own actions might be to ourselves should we face a similar plight: How might we fail in the face of disaster? How might we do the stupid thing or the wrong thing for perfectly reasonable reasons? Certainly, one dimension of the ambiguity in these texts, as Lindahl might note, is in the very "there-but-for-the-grace-of-God-go-I" dimension of them. This ambivalence is captured in the legend itself with the following

closing lines: "You know, I guess people were just doing what they felt they had to do. I'm not saying it's right. But I can understand it." This closing series of assertions, which acts as a kind of coda in the Labovian model, opens with a reference to the audience in order to distribute the load pragmatically. The rest of the sentence establishes a clear triangulation: adding *I* and *they* to the initial *you*. The action of abandoning their trucks for the purposes of claiming the insurance money is further distanced by reducing everything to *it*. The ending couplet reinforces this moral distance: something seen need not be understood.

The Folk-Idea Complex

One element of these vernacular responses that we have not yet considered is the role of the truck. While cars might be desirable for a number of reasons—luxury, performance, value—trucks are almost marketed on the basis of their ruggedness. They are, after all, according to the three major American makers: "built Ford tough" so that they are (one supposes) "like a rock" (Chevrolet), which they would have to be if you were going to "grab life by the horns" (RAM). The association between trucks and masculinity in America is fairly well established.[17] Thus, these texts do provide a gender, either directly or indirectly. The oral legends, both the one focused on the truck and the ones featuring businesses, were all masculine in nature, and so, it is tempting to consider these vernacular texts as part of an ongoing, diffuse exploration of masculinity in America. And, even within the sphere of trucks, there is further gendering: in the oral legend, "some guys" were *driven* to push their trucks into the water, while in the meme, the SUV seems to offer a slightly less gendered enactment, featuring as it does a ruby-red—like Dorothy's slippers?—Jeep Grand Cherokee. Does an SUV and not a truck incline the meme to be a numbskull performance rather than a trickster one?

So far in this discussion, I have used "trickster" over other kinds of designations. I have largely done so out of the felt nature of the tale in which the performer clearly saw the owners of the abandoned trucks as amoral characters: moral men forced into immoral choices, but because they were forced, they could no longer be classified within the accepted moral arena and, thus, had escaped it and become amoral actors. Another possible designation for this particular character type is that of bandit hero, a widely popular type in American folklore in general and in Louisiana folklore in particular.[18] The actual designation is less important than the fundamental ambiguity that underlies these texts. As Lindahl (1986, 6; emphasis original) notes in his consideration of modern legends: "the central symbols of many of these no longer behave according to obvious moral patterns. Many of the newer figures are deeply

and thoroughly ambiguous in identity, in behavior, in their implications for *human* behavior."

Lindahl's emphasis on the human is a product of his argument about modern legendry—which might now be expanded to include vernacular forms like memes, which often achieve their effects, he suggests, through a kind of doubling. In the case of the UFO sightings of the seventies that Lindahl examines, the aliens represent both technology taken to an extreme—turned back on us, as it were—as well as a larger encroachment on what had once been spiritual matters. Where once gods dwelled in the heavens, now come alien forms to probe, abduct, or scare us. Questions about alien existence, he notes, create "a symbolic format against which to work out our hopes and fears concerning the value of the technological world and its ability to displace successfully the spiritual world to which people formerly turned to salvation" (Lindahl 1986, 8).

In the current complex composed of memes and legends with trucks abandoned in the face of storms, we have a similar doubling. If we begin with the idea from which our complex descends, we have something simple: *person leaves object*. Leaving can be, of course, both transitive and intransitive; we regularly observe "people leaving." Closer consideration reveals however that people leave places or groups; that is, the expression is still transitive, but the object, what is left, is often simply left off or out. The act of leaving, as many narratives reveal, is often simply a prelude to a return. We use "abandon" to emphasize the lack of the possibility of return, and that is certainly the idea that both meme and legend present.

Such an interpretation of the verb is debatable, since it occurs nowhere in the text, but the object is not: what is abandoned is a particular kind of object, one that has several dimensions. First, the object itself *moves*, or, rather, it moves us. We get in it: it carries us. Thus, its second dimension is that it *holds* us: we get in it, trusting it to keep us safe as we move through the world inside of it, and so *trust* is a corollary of the second dimension. Its third dimension is extrinsic to its objective qualities and ties it more closely to the institutional dimensions upon which the complex depends: it is expensive. A car or truck is, for most people the second most expensive thing they will purchase in their life, and for those who never purchase a home, it will be the single most expensive item they own. And, as the legend itself intimates, it is like a home for most of us, something we pay for but perhaps never fully own. It is thus a fraught object, one that tests our sense of what is proprietary as well as what is property: what belongs to us and what does not. The other images that often follow storms are those of houses emptied of people but still full of the things that make up their lives. The very notion of abandoned homes runs counter to the fundamentals of the American dream, and images of blocks of such houses after hurricanes or the 2008 financial crisis, which we conventionally imagine

as a storm, are one of the principal forms of enacting devastation, both in its literal and in its figurative senses.

This doubling of devastation, in its focus on things that are both objects and places, in the American context, is made clear by the focus on trucks, which are themselves scenes of rugged individualism. What the folk-idea complex makes clear is that the storm is an enactment of both powerful forces already at work: the natural storm reveals what has already happened, that an institutional storm has already eroded our place in the world, washed away our perceived and/or desired independence. We have to wonder, then, given the emphasis in American folk culture(s) of braving one's way through a storm, of facing storms of emotions or events, why these memes and legends focus on people, men in particular, who simply walked away. As Lindahl (1986, 10) notes, "Modern legend tellers, then, find themselves asking the same question earlier posed in the classic legends: of course, we want help in our lives, but at what cost?"

At the end of his survey of America in Legend, Richard Dorson (1973, 310) observes, "In every period bodies of folklore have reflected the currents of change, the new values, the new ethics, the new road to happiness." Legends have long astonished us with their seemingly limitless ability to enact our concerns and have remained one of the more vibrant bodies of folklore. Other vernacular forms have arisen as well in order to be able to articulate our concerns in a way that is separate from any direct statement about belief or truth with a simple "this happened." Quite often, it should be noted *what has happened*, either within the text or in the world without, is extraordinary and not so simple. In a world where the sheer complexity of it all threatens our very ability to process *what's happened*, these texts offer us a way to process, or begin to process, a large "what" into smaller, cognizable chunks or facets of "whats."

The relationship of the "whats," of ideas to their expression in various forms, remains an ongoing part of the work of folklore studies. Tim Tangherlini's (2017) recent explorations of online discourse focus on antivaccination efforts, the so-called Bridgegate, and a number of other rumors and legends have begun to articulate a methodology to map the relationships between ideas and the forms in which they are embedded. A lot of work still remains, and as is suggested here, the parallel work on conceptual metaphors is worth our consideration. How the rich and dense networks of ideas—which as encountered in the world are far too inconsistent and nonhierarchical to be considered ideologies—and vernacular expressions interact, each shaping the other, is a domain well suited to the interests and abilities of folklorists.

Notes

1. Griffin claimed to have composed the song himself but spirituals like it circulated among African American churches in the early 1900s. Because the origins of the song are not clear, there has been some debate about which of the Galveston hurricanes is chronicled in it: the famous 1900 storm which claimed between six thousand and twelve thousand lives or the later 1915 storm which claimed 275.

2. Allen was a prolific novelist from Kentucky who published twenty-odd books between 1891 and 1926, many of them considered to be regional in nature. The quotation itself appears nowhere in Allen's work. Rather, it seems to be a compression of the following passage from the 1892 novelette "John Gray: A Kentucky Tale of the Olden Time":

> All this feeling has its origin in my contemplation of the character of the President. You know that when a heavy sleet falls upon the Kentucky forest, the great trees crack and split, or groan and stagger, with branches snapped off or trailing. In adversity it is often so with men. But he is a vast mountain-peak, always calm, always lofty, always resting upon a base that nothing can shake; never higher, never lower, never changing; from every quarter of the earth storms have rushed in and beaten upon him; but they have passed; he is as he was. The heavens have emptied their sleets and snows on his head—these have made him look only purer, only the more sublime. (Allen 1892, 703)

3. A search for proverbs on the topic turned up one by a Robert McKee (1997, 101, emphasis original): "*True character* is revealed in the choices a human being makes under pressure—the greater the pressure, the deeper the revelation, the truer the choice to the character's essential nature." Another one, by a Dr. Paul TP Wong, is as follows: "A person's true character is often revealed in time of crisis or temptation. Make sure that you have what it takes to be your best in such times" (quoted in Quantum Leap Capital n.d., n.p.).

4. While I have heard this joke a number of times in conversation in south Louisiana, I do not have a recorded version. This particular text is from a website, the Boudreaux & Thibodeaux Cajun Humor Page, that has been around so long that it is at least venerable, if not traditional (CajunGuy n.d.). As proof of the website's reputation, I offer that I have even had students plagiarize from the website in the past when given fieldwork assignments.

5. Arizona Revised Statute 28-910: Liability for Emergency Responses in Flood Areas. https://www.azleg.gov/ars/28/00910.htm. Accessed August 25, 2022.

6. Please note that the text has been edited for readability with removal of the extensive paragraphing used by news websites. This was done to all the news texts.

7. From later reporting, in an updated version of the original WMBF post, we learn that the Jeep had come to be on the beach due to some carelessness followed by confusion:

> The owner of the Jeep, who does not want to be identified, reached out to WMBF News and explained what happened and why it was abandoned while a hurricane hit the coast. "My cousin has been around, he rides a motorcycle so I thought I'd let him borrow my jeep because the weather has been so bad. This morning he thought it would be cool to go on the beach and take a quick video of the sunrise

> before the storm came," the Jeep's owner said. But the ride on the beach took a turn for the worst. "So he got on the beach and started driving it. I guess there's that runoff there and he didn't realize it was in front of him, he was looking out the window when he went off and got stuck, which you can see he actually banged up the bumper a bit," the owner explained. (Rambaran 2019, n.p.)

With the mystery of the Jeep revealed, there was only its hauling away to come, which the city promptly accomplished with a backhoe and some chain, removing, from their point of view, a public hazard, but one which had been a welcome point of diversion for those waiting out the storm. (This story appears to have had an original posting date and time of September 5 at 10:21 a.m. How much local activity, and legendry, may have sprung up and/or been enacted before such documentation like this is currently unknown. This particular story indicates it was updated the next day, Friday, September 6 at 12:57 p.m.)

8. It's interesting to note that the @DorianJeep account was largely accessed through a web browser and that @MyrtleBeachJ33p through the Twitter app for iPhone. How the difference in devices involved was affected by power outages or mobility during use is something worth possible exploration.

9. Online activity, as principally evidenced by the more active of the two Twitter accounts, @MyrtleBeachJ33p, roared relentlessly for the first twenty-four hours, but by Friday afternoon, around 4 p.m. local time, appears to have wound down: the attention of pranksters and punsters had moved on.

10. The videos on the Myrtle Beach Jeep (@MyrtleBeachJ33p, emphasis original) Twitter feed during that timeframe include a time-lapse recording of one of the television live feeds of the Jeep with the caption "IGHT // IMMA HEAD OUT" super-imposed, the aforementioned bagpiper, which was enormously popular, and a young girl impersonating a reporter and recreating the entire event with a toy car. Hers was not the only toy reference of the day; another photo posted revealed a toy red Jeep ensconced in a zip plastic bag of rice with the caption "24 hours and it'll be good as new" (Myrtle Beach Jeep 2019).

11. This kind of "folk cartography," for lack of a better term, has been explored in a variety of ways by folklorists and anthropologists. Gerald Pocius's (2001) treatment in *A Place to Belong* is one of the more comprehensive, and Michael Jackson's (1995) *At Home in the World* is one of the more hermeneutical. In my own work, I have examined the role of unseen topographies and histories of tracts of land by Louisiana farmers (Laudun 2016).

12. With the rise of the medical industry in the region and the seeming preference of doctors for more traditional forms of status vehicles, this trend seems to be changing somewhat, and Lafayette now has its fair share of very expensive SUVs and German sports cars.

13. The insurance industry has, in fact, a term for this particular kind of fraud—opportunistic fraud, and they are acutely attuned to the opportunities offered by storms. As one study notes: "We first find that among the insured who encountered a typhoon hit, the insured who purchased automobile theft insurance but did not purchase typhoon/flood insurance had a significantly higher possibility of filing a total theft claim than the insured who purchased both types of coverage" (Pao, Tzeng, and Wang 2014, 93).

14. In keeping with the idea of outsiders not understanding, it should come as no surprise that one genre of anecdotes that circulated after the floods were those that targeted Red Cross meals for derision and disgust, with at least two different Facebook posts

substantiating their claims with photos and with captions that offered first despair: "Well today I'm in Baton Rouge helping a friend clean a house out. Well we stoped [*sic*] by the Red Cross van on way to [the] house at about the time for lunch. So we stopped and got a few plates. Look at picture and I will say no more." And then the other post offered disgust: "This was served to the people in Springfield La tonight by the Red Cross!! Disgusting! And the govt pays Red Cross $8 per meal they serve!! Really. Why don't our governor run them out of the state." Both accompanying photos featured partitioned Styrofoam meal containers opened to reveal their meager or inappropriate contents. The containers themselves are the kind often used by local lunch houses that specialize in generous portions of the kind of rice and gravy cuisine for which the area is known. The containers are also quite often used by churches and schools for fundraising, when Sunday dinners are bought by the ticket. The containers themselves, then, come with a fair amount of semantic weight, and, while the Red Cross is generally well received, its conflation with government bureaucracies, which here not only are not doing what they are supposed to do (provide a decent meal) but are doing so corruptly (getting more money than was spent on the food).

15. In a video game, you can interact with two different kinds of entities: those animated by other players and those animated by the game's programming. Depending upon the game, these nonplayer characters, or NPCs, as they are called, can occupy a number of functions, including helpers, henchmen, and even villains. In most games, the players are the heroes. Nonplayer characters are, in other words, those provided by the game and, as such, have fairly limited functions.

16. A web search for any given weather event will, inevitably, after the meteorological entries, feature individuals doing (mostly heroic) things. While no quantitative analysis was undertaken, most of the featured heroes are men, with most images and reports featuring a healthy, middle-aged man, often white but sometimes black, helping a woman or an elderly person. In some cases, it is a group of teenaged boys. On the other side of the moral axis, there are news reports, for example, of thieves breaking into cars abandoned during a snowstorm in Iowa (McGee 2020).

17. Further examples are a web search away: simply pairing a name of a truck and the word *slogan* turns up ample official and vernacular texts that abound in masculinities.

18. Orrin Klapp's (1949) catalog of folk heroes includes the conquering hero, the clever hero, the Cinderella, and the martyr—he also goes on to note that there are really only two kinds of villains: traitors or persecutors. To this list, Bruce Rosenberg (1972) adds the martyred hero with his study of legends and folk histories of George Armstrong Custer. For more on bandit heroes, see Graham Seal's (2009) work on "the Robin Hood principle" as well as, more recently, work by Nicholas A. Curott and Alexander Fink (2012) on the sociological and economic roles of bandit heroes. Barry Ancelet has also explored bandits in Louisiana folk culture in a number of papers presented at the annual meetings of the American Folklore Society.

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