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Making It Work: Three Case Studies on the Epistemology of Everyday Knowledge

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Dedication

To my grandmothers, who, even in the most trying of circumstances, found a way to make it work.

Abstract

Making it Work: Three Case Studies on the Epistemology of Everyday Knowledge

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The three case studies that make up this dissertation center on the role of social epistemology – the ways in which people construct lay knowledge in their social networks – to solve everyday problems, and how people know what they think they know.

First, I present a case study of legal knowledge within municipal and county-level courts in three large cities in Texas. I ask, where do people receive legal knowledge? How do they think and feel about the legal knowledge they have received? How is knowledge they received deemed legitimate? I find that the sources of legal knowledge shape legal knowledge legitimacy and have implications for people’s views about and experiences with the criminal justice system.

Second, I present a case study of a lead-in-water contaminated community in West Texas. I ask, how do residents understand the town’s water contamination, who (or what) do they blame for its condition, and why? How do those understandings of culpability shape people’s ability to collectively solve problems? I find that resident’s beliefs about the water crisis are shaped by their opinions of their neighbors and their opinions of their town. These two categories of opinions, private and public culpability, are talked about as the problem with the pipes on the one hand, and the problem with the

pool on the other. These opinions and beliefs go on to shape how residents organize to save public infrastructure and how the town responds to their claims.

Third, I present a case study of a cattle ranching community in the Texas Panhandle that suffered from devastating wildfires. I ask, how do community politics shape experiences and perceptions of disaster recovery? I find that the way residents narrated how they came together after the fires serves to reproduce everyday understandings of politics. Rather than talking about public expenditure in the form of millions of dollars of disaster aid funding that has historically buttressed the community against catastrophe, residents chose to highlight the role of their local community in helping each other.

Together, these three case studies outline how knowledge production is a social endeavor.

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Introduction

How do people know what they know? This simple, epistemological question framed my graduate studies. I would use it as a framework to deconstruct articles and books to better understand their arguments, and as a guide to fashion my own research questions and designs. The question's basic premise was especially on my mind as I set out to conduct the fieldwork that would eventually become this dissertation. That fieldwork was conducted from two very different projects. The first, The Multi-State Study of Monetary Sanctions, was designed to gather data from multiple sources on monetary sanctions in the criminal justice system and the people and institutions that were involved in their procurement, payment, and enforcement. Working on this project immersed me in urban Texas – inside municipal courtrooms, the downtown sidewalks outside of jails, and the public libraries or independent coffeeshops where I would meet participants and conduct interviews. The second, The Texas Study of Political Culture, was designed to better understand populism and political culture in rural Texas in the years following the 2016 presidential election. This project introduced me to small town Texas, specifically two cities with populations of approximately 3,000 residents.

For a few years, I was living between these worlds. I would drive to a *Monetary Sanctions* field site to meet potential research participants during and after their court appearances, interviewing them about their cases and experiences with legal fines and fees. After a day or two of data collection, I would head straight to a *Political Culture* field site in rural Texas, where I spent nights in a motorhome parked outside a small town

I had developed a deep interest in. Over summer and winter breaks in 2017 and 2018, I was able to dig deeper and spend more time, sometimes driving upwards of 10 hours to get to an interview in some far-flung corner of the state. And eventually, as seems to be the case when one begins transcribing and writing down the arguments that emerge from ethnographic and qualitative data, I saw the connections between these multiple sites that piqued my curiosity.

Take for example, the story of a participant for the Study of Legal Fines and Fees in Texas whom we shall call Jordan. In our interview, Jordan described the options his court-appointed lawyer laid out for him for the charge he was in the process of fighting. This included an option for deferred adjudication through a violence prevention program. Confidently, Jordan tells me that he will not be following any of his legal counsel's advice. He heard in jail that his court-appointed lawyer will collect a commission off any deal he signs and therefore he cannot trust his legal counsel. He weighed his decision against his experience with the police and other conversations he has had with close confidants in his neighborhood. What I found interesting about his story is not only that Jordan relies on the opinions of others who lack legal expertise to guide his decision making. Rather, I was even more intrigued by the social context which informs how he goes about deciding which informal legal knowledge is legitimate and which can be ignored.

On the other side of Texas, a research participant I call Clint had been speaking to me for months about his grievances with the municipal water supply. I was conducting research in the small-town Clint has called home since the mid 1950s. That town, which I

call Waverly, was in the midst of a lead-in-water crisis, and I was trying to map out how residents were affected by that crisis. But what I found instead were dozens of people with different stories and theories of culpability. While some stories stressed the contamination, others denied it. While some residents laid blame at the doorstep of municipal authorities, others found their own neighbors culpable. Clint listened to these conflicting accounts and came up with his own theories about the water based on inferences he made about how the municipal government solves problems.

I began to see a tie between Jordan's process of legitimizing the informal legal knowledge he collected from inmates, and Clint's process of consolidated blame-making from the varying accounts of the municipal water from social ties in his neighborhood. In an era of misinformation crisis and polarization, unpacking the socio-cultural contexts that shape people's beliefs is an increasingly important endeavor. The events of the last few years, ranging from the politicization of scientific expertise during the COVID-19 pandemic, the blame-making around politics and infrastructure that followed the 2021 Texas power crisis, or the stew of hyper partisanship, social media, and fake news that create entirely new perceptions of reality—all these create new urgency to better understand the relationship between knowledge production, social movements, and society.

One framework to think through these questions is the sociology of knowledge and expertise. Expertise is socially produced through official institutions and assemblages: universities, medical boards, and political scientific and cultural bodies of knowledge. Lay knowledge, on the other hand, are the ideas, theories, and culture that

people draw on to understand the world around them outside of formal expertise. Jordan and Clint's processes of collecting, understanding, and using lay knowledge were a puzzle that eventually became the question guiding the analyses of these data.

How do people weigh legitimacy in lay knowledge that they use to access resources and solve local political problems? I focus on how people solve local political problems, including accessing legal knowledge, fixing the water pipes and filtering out lead contamination, or recovering after a natural disaster. Focusing on local political problems presents an opportunity to both look at multiple sources of information in different contexts and to better understand how people make decisions between these sources and scales to come to their beliefs. The data for this dissertation come from five field sites across Texas, collected between 2017 and 2019. They span rural and urban communities, poor and wealthy communities, white, Black, and brown communities. Between these sites, in what follows, I attempt to reconcile the social forces which hold them in common.

In the first paper that makes up this dissertation, "Seeing Like a Court: Sources of Legal Knowledge and their Legitimacy," I ask: From where do people get their legal knowledge? And how do they think and feel about the legal knowledge they have received? I find that sources of legal knowledge shape legal knowledge legitimacy and have implications for people's views about and experiences with the criminal legal system. Perceived experience navigating the criminal legal system is discussed as more trustworthy than sources with expertise about the system. Dispositional knowledge delivered via routine organizations is seen as more legitimate than legal rational

knowledge delivered through formal institutions. This finding builds on what we think we know about how people interact with the criminal legal system, how they navigate institutions, and the types of capital they employ to do so.

In the next paper, “Boomtown Poison: Political Culture Under the Shadow of Lead Poisoning in West Texas,” I ask how residents of Waverly understand the town’s water contamination, who (or what) they blame for its condition, and why. I further interrogate how those understandings of culpability shape people’s ability to collectively solve problems. I find that lay knowledge is contextualized through a history of industrial decline. Resident’s beliefs about the water crisis are shaped by their opinions of their neighbors and their opinions of their town. These two categories of opinions—private and public culpability— are discussed as the problem with the pipes on the one hand, and the problem with the pool on the other. These opinions and beliefs go on to shape how residents organize to save their social infrastructure and how the town responds to their claims.

In the third and final paper, “Community Politics and Perceptions of Disaster Relief in the Texas Panhandle,” I ask, how residents of Miles City understand the aftermath of the wildfires that devastated their community. I examine how their beliefs and values shape the way they narrativize their recovery. Here, I find that the way residents narrated how they came together after the fires serves to reproduce local understandings of politics. Rather than talking about public expenditure in the form of millions of dollars of disaster aid funding that has historically buttressed the community against catastrophe, residents chose to highlight the role of their local community in

helping each other rebuild and recover. Understandings of disaster recovery, when viewed through the lens of local community politics, produce disaster recovery narratives which privilege some actors, organizations, and events over others. These findings have implications for understanding how disaster recovery *narratives* are sites to further research how people think about, talk about, and narrativize, politics.

By putting these three articles into conversation with each other, I touch on several strands of scholarly literature and debates which I outline below.

EXPERTISE AND KNOWLEDGE INEQUALITY

Sociologists have documented the inequality produced when the internal logic of an institution clashes with the subjective understandings and practices of people who engage with that institution (Bourdieu 1987; Lareau 2015; Rivera 2015). While institutions have certain formal and informal rules which govern the way they operate, inequality is produced when access to the resources which transmit that knowledge is disproportionately distributed, be they class-, ethno-racial-, or gender-based categories, of a population.

In Article 1, “Seeing Like a Court,” I unpack this institutional inequality in the criminal-legal system. Recent studies focusing on courtroom actors like judges, attorneys, and clerks, show that they have their own internal culture – routines in the court, previously held beliefs about defendants and the role of the court in their life, and frameworks for how to use their discretion (Clair and Winter 2016). I draw on theories of where people learn about the criminal legal system, such as, legal consciousness, legal

cynicism, and legal socialization. I unpack how my data relates to these three theories by centering legal knowledge, which I define as the understandings, strategies, and dispositions people hold to navigate processes of the criminal legal system.

By centering on the knowledge of courtroom strategies and processes, legal knowledge is conceptually independent of two adjacent theoretical frameworks: legal consciousness and legal cynicism. Legal consciousness refers to the ways in which we think about abstract ideas such as justice, equality, and the sources that inform those categories. Legal cynicism is a framework for understanding the result of various unjust and overly burdensome courtroom interactions. Therefore, while legal consciousness is a pre-courtroom idea, legal cynicism is a post-courtroom idea. Legal knowledge encompasses the ways in which the participants we spoke to over the course of this study understood the ways in which they were supposed to perform in the courtroom in order to maximize their chances for a favorable ruling. Legal knowledge is a framework that seeks to explain how people understand the inner functions of the justice system, rather than the predicate or result.

Articles 2 and 3, “Boomtown Poison” and “Community Politics,” respectively, focus on a different form of institutional inequality: understandings of community politics and how they shape conceptualizing solutions to local problems. In Article 2, I examine the literature on how people gain knowledge of environmental hazard and how they assess its risks. People live and make sense of toxicity and contamination in varying ways because of inequality in risk to toxic exposure. And we are also learning more about people’s reasoning for why they stay in contaminated places (Hernandez 2019; Jerolmack

and Walker 2018), when and how they decide to leave or are expelled (Sassen 2014), and why they choose to return (Harrison 2017). In the absence of a trusted source of information around the risk of lead-in-water, and a clear answer on who is responsible and how they can fix it, residents of Boomtown develop a series of opinions and cast nets of culpability to account for their misunderstandings of the risk and severity of the crisis.

These articles also draw on work in social epistemology such as the concept of knowledge legitimacy as elaborated on by Hirschhorn (2008) and theories of parallel institutions of knowledge production as theorized by Eyal (2006). Knowledge legitimacy builds from a rich literature in social epistemology, understanding the social foundations behind how people know what they know. Drawing on epistemological work formulated by Eyal (2006), legal knowledge, in the case of the first article, “Seeing Like a Court,” is made legitimate when respondents see that the knowledge originates from a parallel network of institutions and actors perceived as more complementary to their struggles and worldviews. In the case of “Boomtown Poison,” the second article, this legitimacy comes from actual contact with the lead-in-water crisis through sights, smells, and tastes. And, in the case of “Community Politics,” the third article, the legitimacy of the disaster recovery narrative is derived from the patrimonial hegemony of old families.

My findings in “Seeing Like a Court” also develop our understanding of the role of routine organizations in producing knowledge legitimacy, a set of organizational observations articulated by Small and Gose (2020). I understand the role of the sources and institutions where respondents claim to have developed their legal knowledge through the framework of routine organizations – i.e., organizations where social ties are

developed, and social networks are formed. Routine organizations (Small and Gose 2020) play a role in establishing the legitimacy of legal knowledge by bringing people with past experience with the criminal legal system together to exchange information. In this sense, routine organizations play a role in dispensing habitual or dispositional knowledge. By using a framework of routine organizations to understand the sources where respondents claim to have developed legal knowledge, I build upon a rich organizational literature which catalogs the ways that social networks grounded in everyday institutions deliver dispositional knowledge.

PLACE-BASED TRUTHS

The articles that make up this dissertation hold in common their focus on place-based truths. That is, how knowledge is socially constructed as legitimate, useful, and/or accurate based on the place where the respondent first encountered it.

Space and place, for example, play a meaningful role in experiences of toxicity, specifically how our social networks which are embedded in physical landscapes and material infrastructures shape how we understand and engage with toxic environments (Hernandez 2019). Yet even with all of our knowledge of the social determinants of contamination, people who bear the burden of the physical effects of toxicity are made to feel as though they were themselves to blame. While contamination is often individualized by the powerful, as in the case of asthma patients who are told to focus on personal responsibility (Kenner 2018), it is a socio-structural problem with environmental determinants. The sights and smells produced by toxicity and contamination are

intricately linked to our understandings of home and being in the world (Auyero and Swistun 2008; Hernandez 2019). Our ways of understanding toxicity are relational, as is the uncertainty of what to do about it (Auyero and Swistun 2009).

In Article 2, I understand place-based truths through the framework of social infrastructure as elaborated by Klinenberg (2018). Social infrastructure is “the physical conditions that determine whether social capital develops” (Klinenberg 2018:5). It is the background behind our social networks that can sustain or diminish them. Social infrastructure could be understood as physical institutions such as libraries, schools, and other routine organizations (Small 2009) that encourage and discourage participation (Klinenberg 2002). And it also could be argued to be the physical and material infrastructure that makes society possible: the roads, bridges, wires, sockets, and pipes that bind, divide, categorize, and exclude (Star 1999).

In Article 3, I tackle a different dimension of place-based truths, the way that a history of a place shapes its current events. I focus on the role of powerful old families, institutions in and of themselves which shape the way residents think about community politics. These old families, and the everyday political processes that they fund and produce, are products of the political, economic, and historical characteristics of Miles City itself. As we outline in the next section, the tradition and character of places are produced over time in physical and social processes. Space and place have become central concepts within cultural sociology for two interrelated reasons. First, in Gieryn’s (2000) reading, physical space becomes a place when actors attach meaning to space above and beyond its physical characteristic. Second and relatedly, the confluence of

history, local environment, and the emotional and subjective power of place, structures the possibilities for action in the present by sponsoring local culture and institutions.

CONCLUSION

These case studies have shown me the ways in which knowledge production is a social endeavor. In all of my cases, I find that knowledge is produced contextually and is specific to space and place. In order to navigate institutions, whether it be the criminal legal system, an environmental challenge and its resulting social movement, or the recovery process around a natural disaster, people produce knowledge outside of the scope of formal institutions that then go on to help them navigate those institutions. These macro level themes have implications for how we think about people's processes of acquiring knowledge and individuals' engagement with formal institutions using lay knowledge in their everyday lives.

Seeing Like a Court: Sources of Legal Knowledge and their Legitimacy

“You see, the thing is every time I walk into court, I really try to put myself in a lawyer's shoes and I say, ‘Hey, I'm trying to beat ...’ If a lawyer's trying to beat this, how would he do it? So, I try and talk the judge out, but if you got no legal knowledge, you can't do much about it. No matter how bad your situation is, you can't unless you got that knowledge. That's what I'm trying to get.”

(Jamie, Interview 57)

INTRODUCTION

We meet Tara, a middle-aged Black woman, outside a municipal court in [Texas City A]. She describes her long history of receiving traffic tickets and their resulting court appearances; in her calculation she has been to court approximately twenty times and paid over \$1000 in fines and fees. This time, she's here to appear for a misdemeanor theft ticket after being arrested for stealing a lighter and a pair of pants totaling less than \$75. After her arrest, she describes spending two nights in the county jail until she was transferred to a men's holding facility underneath the municipal court while she waited to post bail. But she knew she was getting out soon, she tells me: “I have been before. That's how I know how the processing goes. I know about when I'm going to get out” (Interview 19).

Tara has been to this specific jail three times before. She is familiar with the layout and practices of the courtroom that is built above it, as well as the other municipal and county courts around the city. “I've been to different courts, several different courts,” she explains, “supporting my cousin, supporting other family members, and just being here for traffic tickets or coming up here for a reset” (Interview 19). When she gets out, she imagines her sentence will include probation. And she knows how that's going to go too, based on observing and hearing what it's like from her sister-in-law, who went through the same process last year. “I've seen the process, and I've actually been inside the probation office and sat in there and seen how they actually conduct and work” (Interview 19). She knows about the diversion programs, the classes, the fines, and the fees, because earlier this year her friend had to go through a similar punishment process

for a misdemeanor drug possession charge. She's learned the ins and outs, who's who, and when and under what circumstances she can trust while in the courtroom. Based on conversations she's had with her relatives and neighbors, she decides not to trust the court appointed lawyers, who she says are "not really for you, unless you hire them for you." She continues, "a lot of us don't understand that until someone has told us, or we've been here enough times to really know" (Interview 19).

Tara's story illuminates a trend that was common among research participants fighting low-level offenses at municipal and county courts across Texas – many rely on alternative sources of legal knowledge to navigate the criminal justice process. We know that when lawyers are provided to those with business before the court, there are a number of racialized and class constraints that lead people to mistrust their court appointed lawyers (Clair 2020). And we also know that there is a large demand for non-lawyer services from those with business before the courts (Sanderfur 2020). Given the mistrust of court appointed lawyers, alongside the demand for specialized legal expertise, legal knowledge is often generated by lay sources to navigate criminal legal entanglements and courtroom processes (Clair 2020). We do not know enough, however, about how different sources of legal knowledge compare with each other and how people sift through multiple and contradictory sources of legal knowledge to find legitimate knowledge and guide their decision making.

What are the sources of people's legal knowledge, and how do they think and feel about the legal knowledge they have acquired? In this paper, I describe and explain legal knowledge produced from three alternative sources: neighborhoods, jails, and courts. While legal knowledge comes from multiple individuals within these sources, not all knowledge is trustworthy, valid, or legitimate. Through analyzing respondents' thoughts and feelings about the legitimacy of the legal knowledge they have acquired, I find that respondents see navigation of the criminal legal system as habitual knowledge, rather than rational knowledge. That is, sources with experience navigating the system are perceived as more trustworthy than sources with expertise about the system.

To understand this phenomenon, I describe and explain the concept of legal knowledge. Legal knowledge encompasses the understandings, strategies, and dispositions people hold to navigate the processes of the criminal justice system. By centering on the knowledge of courtroom strategies and processes, legal knowledge is conceptually independent of two adjacent theoretical frameworks: legal consciousness and legal cynicism. Legal consciousness refers to the ways in which we think about abstract ideas such as justice, equality, and the sources that inform those categories. Legal cynicism is a framework for understanding the end result of various unjust and overly burdensome courtroom interactions. Therefore, legal consciousness is a pre-courtroom idea, while legal cynicism is a post-courtroom idea. Legal knowledge encompasses the ways in which the participants we spoke to over the course of this study understood how they were supposed to perform in the courtroom in order to maximize their chances of a favorable ruling. It is a framework that seeks to explain how people understand the inner functions of the justice system, rather than the predicate or result.

I find that not all legal knowledge is considered legitimate. I ground this finding within the concept of knowledge legitimacy as developed by Hirschhorn (2006). For Hirschhorn (2006; also see Dewey 2008) knowledge cannot be separated from context, form, and content, three features which contribute to the legitimacy claims knowledge holds between everyday and expert sources. To differentiate between what respondents perceive as legitimate and illegitimate legal knowledge, I expand the term knowledge legitimacy to include mechanisms people use to trust information learned through various non-expert social ties. Knowledge legitimacy builds from a rich literature in social epistemology, understanding the social foundations behind how people know what they know. Drawing on epistemological work formulated by Eyal (2005), I argue that legal knowledge is made legitimate when respondents see that the knowledge originates from a parallel network of institutions and actors that is perceived as more complementary to their struggles and worldviews.

I conclude by comparing the legitimacy of legal knowledge between sources and discover that sources with perceived experience navigating the criminal legal system are

considered more trustworthy than sources with expertise about the system. I understand the role of the sources and institutions where respondents claim to have developed their legal knowledge through the framework of routine organizations – i.e., organizations where social ties are developed and social networks are formed. Routine organizations (Small and Gose 2020) play a role in establishing the legitimacy of legal knowledge by bringing people with past experience with the criminal legal system together to exchange information. In this sense, they play a role in dispensing habitual or dispositional knowledge. By using a framework of routine organizations to understand the sources where respondents claim to have developed legal knowledge, I build upon a rich organizational literature which catalogs the ways that social networks grounded in everyday institutions deliver dispositional knowledge.

Legal knowledge is not the same as legal expertise derived from lawyers who are trained and could be employed on behalf of respondents. In the narratives I encountered, legal knowledge is sometimes used as a parallel to legal expertise. At other times, legal knowledge replaces legal expertise, often dependent on what resources the respondent has access to and how they choose to view the legitimacy of the actors who deliver legal expertise. In these situations, rather than use legal knowledge to determine case outcomes, respondents use legal knowledge to make sense of their experiences in a confusing and contradictory criminal legal process.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Legal Knowledge

The way that individuals develop legal knowledge through their everyday interactions has been explored by two key theoretical frameworks: legal consciousness and legal socialization. Legal consciousness is a theoretical framework which seeks to unpack commonsense understanding of the law and how that might structure people's beliefs about other social phenomena (Nielsen 2000). However, the legal consciousness literature does not offer much in terms of practical knowledge of how to engage with

criminal legal institutions, focusing on more metaphysical conceptions of justice and fairness (Young 2014). Previous studies highlight frontline actors, like the police, in establishing criminal legal legitimacy and public cooperation (Tyler and Fagan 2008; Tyler and Huo 2002; Tyler and Sevier 2013). And a number of recent studies have documented how and from where people generate their understandings and opinions of the police, and by extension the criminal legal system. Their understandings and opinions come from their personal experience with police (Bell 2017; Stuart 2016a; Weaver, Prowse, and Piston 2019), their families (Brunson and Weitzer 2011; Comfort 2009; Malone Gonzalez 2019; Pennington and Farrell 2019), and the structural conditions of their neighborhood (Kirk and Papachristos 2011; Sampson and Bartusch 1998). Interaction with the police disengages individuals from certain institutions and draws them closer to others (Brayne 2014), which could potentially shape understandings and opinions about the police, and by extension the criminal legal system.

Similarly, legal socialization theory traces the pathways by which people acquire legal consciousness and other opinions and beliefs about the criminal justice system, through everyday interactions with non-criminal legal contexts. While these theories focus on how the criminal legal system is made visible by interactions with police and experiences of policing, the legal socialization literature focuses on understandings of the legitimacy of law enforcement as it relates to cynicism and legal estrangement (Bell 2017). The literature reveals that people who go to court possess varying degrees of knowledge about the criminal legal system, its actors, and its institutional logics (Clair 2020). Contemporary courtroom ethnographies show that going to court is less about adjudication, and increasingly about *procedural hassle* – dealing with “burdens and opportunity costs attendant to complying with the legal proceedings” (Kohler-Hausmann 2013:353). In return, people come up with strategies from different sources of information in their networks regarding how to navigate these procedural hassles outside of the court (Bell 2017; Clair 2020).

A number of recent studies of the criminal legal system note that confusion and uncertainty is at the center of the process (Haney 2018; Harris 2016; Kohler-Hausmann

2018; Van Cleve 2016). The conditions which create information asymmetries and uncertainties are socially produced (Auyero and Swistun 2008), and confusion in criminal courts is accounted for in the literature in a number of ways. First, there is no universal criminal legal system in the United States; rather, there are fifty state-based systems, a federal system, and dozens, if not hundreds, of municipal variations in local criminal legal systems to account for. This variation makes it difficult to universalize procedure across departments and to formalize education for the public (Kirk and Wakefield 2018; Muller and Wildeman 2016). Second, the blending of courts with financialization through income verification and payment plans create contradictions which confuse the purpose of the court (Kohler-Hausmann 2018). Finally, the amount of time that people spend engaging with the court shapes their beliefs and ideas about the court and how they go on to share information in their community (Clair 2020; Tyler and Huo 2002). A relational approach focused on how people interact with lower-level courts and gain legal knowledge through their social networks can reveal insights into court functioning (Ulmer 2019).

Knowledge Legitimacy

Sociologists have documented the inequality produced when the internal logic of an institution clashes with the subjective understandings of people who engage with that institution (Bourdieu 1987; Lareau 2015; Rivera 2015). Recent studies focusing on courtroom actors like judges, attorneys, and clerks, show that they have their own internal culture – routines in the court, previously held beliefs about defendants and the role of the court in their life, and frameworks for how to use their discretion (Clair and Winter 2016). Gonzalez Van Cleve (2016) spent a decade studying a municipal court in Crook County and noted the racial gap between court actors and defendants in the county’s criminal courts. Her work describes the internal culture of courtroom actors as a legal habitus – a socialization which leads to a separate cultural-rhetorical system which increases the outsider status of defendants. These studies describe how the court operates

under a series of norms that “make up the unwritten legal rules of the court, which delimit the way certain rights and procedures can be employed by defendants” (Clair 2020:15).

Social capital theorists contend that information is a type of capital distributed within a social network (Small 2009). Other researchers have documented how the strength and quality of networks vary by actor characteristics (Desmond 2012), network position and structure (Burt 2004), and network embeddedness (Small and Gose 2020). In his study of poverty in Milwaukee, Desmond (2016) contends that structural conditions such as poverty and precarity shape the way that people engage with and use their network ties to get information. Similarly, studying how mothers in New York City form their social networks and how they put them to use, Small (2009) documents the ways in which community organizations provide the space for network ties to emerge and the types of information that flows from them. These routine organizations (Small 2009; Small and Gose 2020), serve as a focal point for channeling the micro interactions that make up social networks (Stovel and Shaw 2012), as well as the structural conditions that shape those networks (Marwell and McQuarrie 2013).

Social networks do not exist in a vacuum. A long history of community ethnographies points to how networks are grounded in places that are unequally resourced, which shapes the distribution of information within those networks (Domínguez and Watkins 2003; Klinenberg 2002; Small 2004). When it comes to the criminal legal system, geographically distributed phenomena may influence the spread of information within a network. Procedural (in)justice, vicarious racism, and legal estrangement all shape the risks people have for criminal justice system contact, their experiences with the system, and their takeaways (Bell 2017). Further, routine organizations exist within neighborhoods that have varying levels of factors concerning sources and legitimacy of legal knowledge such as police contact, poverty, and community history. These variables go on to shape the routine organizations where network ties are formed, as networks exist in varying social contexts of trust, social solidarity, collective efficacy (Desmond 2016; Sampson 2012).

DATA & METHOD

This study uses data from 62 interviews with defendants in municipal and county level courts in three large Texas cities in order to investigate where people get their legal knowledge and how they think and feel about the legitimacy of legal knowledge they have acquired. These data were collected under the research design of the National Study for Monetary Sanctions by a Texas-based research team (PI: Dr. Alexes Harris). For a detailed description of participant recruitment, as well as the personal characteristics of interviewees, see Needham et al. (2020) and Slavinski and Spencer-Suarez (2021).

Although the interview guide was not specifically designed to collect information about legal knowledge, it was a topic and theme that came up organically often in relation to perceptions of fairness of the criminal legal system, the system of monetary sanctions as a form of punishment, and the criminal legal system more broadly. The author, as part of a team of researchers, was involved in the collection and analysis of these data.

To analyze these data, I use a grounded theory approach (Charmaz 2006), reading the transcripts until patterns emerged from the data. I found moments in the transcripts where defendants described their thoughts, strategies, ideas, and understandings of what was happening to them and how they would navigate the court process and criminal legal system. I refer to these as their legal knowledge.¹ Their answers were then coded for the mechanism which gave them information, for example: Judge, Neighbor, Inmate. The codes for these mechanisms to information were collected and organized based on where they existed in relation to the respondent. From this analysis, I was able to distinguish three sources of legal knowledge: neighborhoods, incarceration, and the courts, which I describe in detail in the following section.

In order to understand how knowledge perceived as legitimate was produced from these sources of legal knowledge, I read closely the transcripts of respondents that credited multiple different sources of legal knowledge. Doing so revealed how

respondents weighed multiple sources of knowledge against each other and, in some cases, in contrast to more expert sources of legal knowledge. I analyzed the narratives of these respondents by using the interview data to reconstruct personal histories that I then read against their charges and the sources of their legal knowledge. Next, I reconstructed how different sources of legal knowledge fit together in their stories. I searched through their narratives for clues about how they viewed the legitimacy of those sources and the legal knowledge they received. I noted how mechanisms to understanding were shaped by the sources that knowledge emerges from and explain this in detail in the findings that follow.

FINDINGS

People receive legal knowledge from three major sources: 1) their family, friends, co-workers, or police stationed in their neighborhoods; 2) the probation and parole officers, guards, and inmates within the penal institutions they are processed through; and 3) from the prosecutors, clerks, bailiffs, and judges of the courtrooms where their cases are heard. In what follows, I unpack and describe these three sources of legal knowledge. I explain how people understand legal knowledge relationally, in conversation with the actors who are present at key moments in the process of the criminal legal system. By criminal legal process, I refer to the ideal-typical timeline of events from arrest, to incarceration, to a courtroom hearing. Using their legal knowledge, the respondents I spoke to told me how they were able to navigate arrest, processing, incarceration, and reentry.

Neighborhoods

Neighborhoods, and the social ties within them, are an important source of legal knowledge. Family members like parents and siblings counsel respondents into engaging with the court (Interview 61), how to move forward with various sentencing options (Interview 26), or how to get out of jail (Interview 30). After Calvin, a 26-year-old Black

man, was arrested and charged with possession of a firearm, he leaned on his family. He recalls sitting in jail after recently turning eighteen, looking down the prospect of facing incarceration as an adult. His mother sat with him as they looked over a plea bargain in consultation with his court appointed attorney. “She so scared, she don't know nothing about the law,” he remembers about his mother. “She telling me, ‘Sign for it, just sign, you already got like two convictions’” (Interview 26). In the end, Calvon signed a plea bargain that included five years’ incarceration. He has regretted it since. In his telling, he was pressured by his mother who was being manipulated by an unhelpful public defender. And after spending five years incarcerated with others lamenting their under-resourced, poorly prepared, or uninterested public defenders, he tells the interviewer he uses his experience to illustrate how he would navigate the criminal legal system in the future and why he would never trust a public defender going forward. “That ain't a lawyer,” he tells me in the middle of a story about how his public defender forgot his name. “That's just a person who go do a receipt. Man, it's this whole system.” (Interview 26)

Delmy, a middle-aged Black woman, tells the interviewer her parents encouraged her to reach out to authorities to take care of her unpaid tickets. In her words, her parents “tell me to take care of everything, [they say] ‘Aren't you ready to get all this off of your back?’” Delmy’s legal issues stem from ten traffic tickets which have turned into open warrants because of ‘failure to pay’ over the last eight years. In Delmy’s telling, her everyday life is full of overlapping and extractive institutions: a criminal justice system pursuing her for unpaid tickets, car payments for a shoddy used car dealer, and employers from minimum wage jobs asking for official accounts of her whereabouts when she is only minutes late to work. “I do want to get this taken care of, but I don't have a job,” Delmy says, reflecting on how one disadvantage compounds into another in the system she feels trapped in. “I can't take care of it if I can't get a job. It's hell,” she noted. (Interview 61).

Delmy sees the criminal legal system as stacked against her. Mediating the relationship between herself and the system is the constant question of who and what to

believe, doubts grounded in distrust resulting from past experience, stories from friends and family, and talk amongst her neighbors and colleagues. She lists a number of examples: an arresting officer read the wrong number on a breathalyzer test; a courtroom worker who lost her record of a paid ticket; and a judge who denied her a public defender because of a misguided perception of her income. In this latter example, because Delmy was able to pay bail, the judge assumed she had the money to afford a private attorney. Her legal knowledge is structured by her neighborhood, and the advice of her parents is weighed against her understanding of how an entire extractive system operates in her neighborhood.

Delmy and Calvin's narratives illustrate how people challenge the legitimacy of the legal knowledge they receive from their neighborhood social ties. For others, the data shows that respondents believe the best source of legal knowledge is from the past experiences of social ties concentrated in the places where they spend their time. For example, Carlie, a middle-aged white woman, learned how to handle her multiple DWI charges from the regulars she sat with at the local bar. "I know a guy that's had like eleven DWI's," she tells me (Interview 46). When she received her third charge and faced the possibility of jail time, she describes how she cut off all of her hair over the bathtub in her apartment because she heard that the facility she would be sent to did not have air conditioning. When asked where she heard this, she responds, "I was raised in bars," signifying how her neighborhood institutions and experiences shape the perception of legitimacy of the legal knowledge she receives (Interview 46). But why are some relations viewed with suspicion, such as Delmy and Calvin's parents, while others justify a decision to alter an entire person's appearance, such as Carlie's?

The data suggest that perceived experience with the processes of the criminal legal system helps establish knowledge legitimacy, and the amount a social tie can transmit that experience is key. Going back to an earlier account, Delmy describes how she handled a previous police encounter: "They [her family] never informed me, until I went through things. Experience taught me" (Interview 61). Her parents lacked that experience. It is not that they did not have thoughts on whether Delmy should turn herself

in for her unpaid tickets, but rather *how* to engage with the criminal legal system in a way that protected their daughter from abuse.

The data reflects the distinction between advice versus experience with the process. After court proceedings have begun, respondents described reaching out to their networks for directions for navigating the bureaucracy of the courts and the peculiarities and local variations of the customs and practices of courtroom processes. Examples of this include how to use time served (Interview 15), which defensive driving class to take (Interview 12), whether and how to pay probation fees (Interview 36), how to reinstate a suspended license (Interview 31), and whether a contact on the inside of the court can strike a backroom deal (Interview 40).

Routine organizations in the neighborhood provide respondents with legal knowledge from social ties. These social ties are perceived as more legitimate because of their experience and positions of authority; for juveniles, schools and teachers serve as a vital resource for legal knowledge, especially when other family members are unfamiliar or not present. For example, Ignacio, an 18-year-old Latinx man, tells a researcher he did not receive legal knowledge from his father when he was charged with trespassing at the age of 14, so he turned to the teachers in his high school who helped him navigate probation and gave him tips for how the courtroom operates (Interview 18). Churches (Interview 2) and workplaces (Interviews 30, 33, & 36) serve a similar role: they are routine organizations (Small 2020) concentrated with knowledgeable social ties. A number of respondents reported that, if they did not know the answer to a particular question posed to them about their case or sentences, they would follow it up with their co-workers. Here, Jules, a middle-aged Latinx man, tells the interviewer about his job as a cook. “Something like three quarters of the people you work with have dealt with probation or are currently dealing with it” (Interview 36), suggesting that the perception of legitimate legal knowledge could be different by workplace.

When respondents were confident in the legitimacy of the legal knowledge, they would pass it on in their networks. Jessica, a white woman in her 30s, learned after ignoring her unpaid tickets for years that she would eventually be reset (rescheduled for a

different court date) to a judge who would be willing to dismiss them. When asked whether the legal strategy worked out well, she said “Oh yeah. I always recommend it to people, but nobody believes me.” Later in the interview, she emphasizes what she tells her friends:

“Like, don't get a lawyer, don't... People get antsy, they want it over with. No, you don't want to do that, you want to be patient. You want to just let it swirl around until you get offered something that you can do” (Interview 20).

Similarly, when reflecting on the ordeal of his experience with a shoplifting charge, Remy said that going through the legal process was worth it because he “used it as a lesson to my children, as to what happened and this is why you don't do it and here's what happens” (Interview 21). For Jessica and Remy, the legitimacy of legal knowledge is characterized by their experience and their ability to pass on their legal knowledge to their family and networks.

Incarceration

Jails, prisons, probation offices, and other spaces organized by court mandated programs, are another important source of legal knowledge. Legal knowledge is received through conversations with fellow inmates and criminal justice workers such as guards, probation officers, and social workers. This knowledge is created in situ and in direct response to the conditions of incarceration and surveillance. Respondents said they used legal knowledge gained while incarcerated to clarify information about their cases (Interview 13), learn how to set up payment plans or organize fee schedules (Interview 23), or learn how to access re-entry programs (Interview 5). However, respondents also claimed that within these institutions, there was plenty of misinformation coming from multiple sources.

The data reflects respondents' total disorientation after being arrested and incarcerated. Respondents describe being processed at night and sometimes while under the influence. Others describe being shipped off to jail with no warning after they were pulled over for unrelated infractions and warrants from unpaid tickets came up. My

Monday morning interview with Abelina, a Black woman in her 20s, was stopped after I learned that she was arrested on the previous Friday night while on her way home and spent the weekend in jail unable to contact her two toddler-aged children (Interview 55). In jail, respondents reported meeting people who were in the same confusing situation and trading knowledge focused on getting them out of jail. “I guess when you get incarcerated...everybody thinks they're a lawyer,” according to Aguilar, a middle-aged Latinx man (Interview 29).

Casey, a 51-year-old white woman from Texas, tells me of her arrest in the early 2000s for misdemeanor possession of drug paraphernalia in the neighboring state of New Mexico. Because of an altercation with the arresting officer, she spent the first two nights in solitary confinement, missing Thanksgiving. Eventually, she tried to post bail to be able to get home but she was classified a flight risk because of her out-of-state driver's license. Casey tells me she quickly learned of a way to get around her predicament. “Well, I learned from [an] inmate to ask the judge, ‘May I pay the bond to the court?’” By requesting a specific type of bond payment to the court, she explains how she was able to negotiate her release. “You have to use a specific language” she says, a language specific to incarcerated persons waiting to be processed (Interview 12). The ‘specific language’ Casey is talking about is a clue to what makes this form of legal knowledge legitimate: a perception of specialized access that stems from past experience.

Delmy ended up in jail after a warrant for accumulated unpaid tickets. She wanted to find a way to lower or dismiss her charge and was unsure of where to turn. She found a resource in a counselor running a recovery program for sex workers. “She's been in jail before as well, so I guess she's gotten the strength to pay back and give back and help somebody else out,” Delmy tells me. “That was her goal, it seemed like,” she added (Interview 61). In Delmy's narrative, a sense of legitimacy is bestowed on past experience. The wider data reflect this: jails, prisons, and probation offices become routine organizations – not only a place where legal knowledge is concentrated but organizations which serve as legitimation mechanisms whereby past experience is rendered as trustworthy experience.

Legal knowledge learned in jail becomes extremely consequential for how respondents decide to forward their cases. Take, for example, the cases of Jordan and George. While incarcerated, Jordan, a 23-year-old Latinx man, decided he couldn't trust his court-appointed attorney and dismissed him. "I knew he was just trying to finesse me and try to scare me," he tells me, arguing that the attorney would have made a \$5000 commission off of a plea agreement that involved a pretrial diversion program. When asked where he heard this from, he acknowledged: "I heard it from some dude in jail, it may or may not be true" (Interview 58). Meanwhile, George, a self-identified Chicano middle-aged man, describes a similar source of legal knowledge while outlining the chronology of his accessory to robbery charge. While his lawyer was setting up a plea bargain, George would periodically update others in jail with the terms that were being discussed. "Then this old guy talking to me in jail, he was like, 'Man, you don't really want that probation,'" George explains. That fellow incarcerated person described probation to George as having "one foot in and one foot out" and cautioned George that law enforcement could "lock you up just like that." Instead, George was told he should use his leverage in the bargain to ask for a shorter sentence with no probation. And even though he feared going to prison, ("I don't want to go to prison. I never been to prison. I don't know nothing about no prison"), George saw the logic in the argument. In the end, George agreed to the seven years, and forwards this lesson on to others (Interview 10). While Jordan takes the legal knowledge received in jail as true enough to make the decision of dismissing his court-appointed attorney, George uses what he learns from a fellow inmate to shape his plea bargain. Both examples illustrate how consequential legal knowledge is for respondents while incarcerated.

Negotiation based on legal knowledge received in jail is reflected in the wider data and points towards when and under what circumstances knowledge was treated as legitimate. Oftentimes, knowledge considered legitimate came at a cost. While in jail, Elliot, a middle-aged white man, learned from fellow inmates that if he wanted his freedom, he would have to plead guilty to a negotiated plea bargain even if he was innocent. He explains that many men he met in jail learned to plead guilty to crimes they

did not commit: “See we don't grow up with our families getting us lawyers and stuff for to fight for our freedom. That's the way someone learn” (Interview 16). Aidan, a middle-aged Latinx man, expresses the confusion well. While commenting on how he learned to use the law library in jail to forward his case, he says the authorities “tell you your rights, but you don't know the laws” (Interview 25).

If jails are where legal knowledge is generated for the upcoming court process and for plea bargaining, prisons are where respondents reported receiving legal knowledge for their cases after sentencing. Tyndall, a middle-aged Black man, cycled in and out of prison and jail between a felony charge alongside lesser infractions of unpaid parking tickets and other misdemeanors. When reflecting on his first charge, he tells me that he “should have asked more questions back then,” as fellow incarcerated persons have since told him that a few of the charges in his history could have been dropped if he hired the right lawyers. When asked to explain how he learned about the legal process, he responds, “Going through it. And then being around it in that environment and then they [fellow incarcerated persons and guards] hear how whatever happened, happened, they tell me another outlook of it.” (Interview 6).

The literature on prison culture and status hierarchies among incarcerated persons documents how intergenerational socialization – older men counseling and teaching younger men about life ‘inside’ – is a key mechanism in ‘old heads’ gaining respect while incarcerated (Kreager et al. 2017; Stuart and Miller 2017). Commenting that he got to prison “young”, Guillermo, a middle-aged Latinx man, tells me that upon his arrival, it was the old heads that instructed him about the rules of the institution. “That really helped me, you know, just to calm down and relax” (Interview 51). Old heads are seen as legitimate sources of legal knowledge because of their experiences. The data shows that respondents do not trust in the processes of the criminal legal system, wanting instead to hear feedback and advice from someone who has been through it. Old heads reportedly know the stories of others who have been successful in challenging their charges and/or gaining their freedom versus those who are stuck, those who said the wrong thing, or those who took the wrong plea bargain.

Old heads also serve in transmitting a macro form of legal knowledge, which involves understanding the role of the criminal justice system and its discontents within wider society. Armani, a bi-racial middle-aged woman, described how stories behind her fellow inmates' incarceration shaped her views of the criminal legal system in contemporary American society. She recalled, "Some people were being mistreated, very mistreated...I heard a lot, a lot of crazy stories" (Interview 27). Armani commented that she had entered prison believing that she was solely responsible for her actions. She left prison with the understanding that the institution is grounded in structural inequalities.

The legal knowledge learned from old heads in prison transfers between institutions as well, such as in the case of Juan who describes how the legal knowledge he received in prison connected with his life on the outside:

"When I went to prison, there's things that I learned in there and I knew that would make me productive out here...I was like, lingual. Now I can talk professional, I can talk common sense." (Interview 31)

Juan, after gaining legal knowledge from legitimate sources inside the prison, reports becoming literate in a language that can be taught to his ties in the neighborhood. As such, old heads become one of the many pathways back into the neighborhood and the everyday lives of respondents outside the penitentiary, reproducing the learning process in respondents' neighborhoods.

Parole and Probation

Respondents described having sentences which included periods of parole and probation, creating new opportunities for the generation and transmission of legal knowledge between recently paroled persons and probation officers. Probation officers become key actors, especially in under-resourced municipalities, as respondents described situations in which keeping track of their shifting and overlapping legal responsibilities was a full-time job in and of itself. The confusion included letters being mailed to houses that never show up or that are no longer occupied by the respondent;

files and records that do not exist; confusion rampant and unaccounted for in the communication between two or more agencies; and faulty old technology, such as breathalyzers or ankle bracelets, that are unreliable, yet mandated by the court. Included in our fieldwork was the organizational fallout from Hurricane Sandy, which left multiple court offices closed while probation appointments and court appearances remained scheduled. Missing a probation meeting could result in fines, fees, and re-arrest. In these scenarios, probation officers are a lifeline to ensure flows of information continue unabated while respondents navigated life after incarceration.

For example, when the website to submit legal financial payments is down, Angel, a middle-aged Latinx man, explains how parole officers step in: “They’ll give you a sheet telling you when you got to go see them again and how much you have to bring” (Interview 23). Zamari, a middle-aged Black man, claims to have never received a notice, instead “when I go in and report, they tell me where I’m at” (Interview 7). Their stories reflect how the rigidly bureaucratic and highly consequential process of making legal financial payments could easily transform into a word-of-mouth transaction between court appointed supervisors and those who are supervised. These stories also demonstrate the variability of experience by municipality and office.

Daniel, a middle-aged Latinx man, had no idea that his court-mandated breathalyzer was not transmitting DUI reports, until his probation officer intervened to help him recalibrate his machine. In the meantime, he missed sending a Blood Alcohol Content (BAC) report. “I don’t know yet if I’m gonna get in trouble,” he tells me during our interview. “That’s why every time I report I see myself getting handcuffed, going to jail.” (Interview 48) The inconsistency in how punishment is meted out gives probation officers discretion in shaping respondents’ knowledge of their place within the system and what they have to do to get out of it. In some cases, interviewees reported receiving incorrect information that could be consequential to fulfilling the conditions of their sentences. In other cases, respondents reported their probation officers or other employees of state surveillance give good quality information. In both cases, officers’

positions are impermanent – many interviewees commented that their sources of legal knowledge within these offices are often transferred or change jobs.

What makes legal knowledge obtained through these types of interactions with officers perceived as legitimate? The data shows that respondents perceived the information they were receiving from their officers to be just for them, under the table, or a ‘secret window’ into the system. This is because the legitimacy of legal knowledge gained through penal institutions is based on whether or not respondents believed the source they were receiving the knowledge from spoke the ‘secret language’ of the criminal legal system – whether and how they had inside knowledge and/or past experience, a perception grounded in distrust of the possible existence of a position-independent, bias-free expertise.

Courts

People receive legal knowledge through their interactions with court actors and workers, learning as they go through the process in real time. Respondents shared that they did not fully realize they were in a position to make a legally binding decision, imagining their first court appearance as a type of consultation. Further, the infrastructure the court puts in place to educate the public about its rules and regulations presents a generalized view, which respondents describe as often superseded by courtroom actors. This situation leads to perceptions among interviewees that the court uses exclusionary and specialized knowledge. In court, respondents learn about diversion programs (Interview 52), negotiate the payment of past due tickets (Interview 9), or set up payment schedules for fines and fees (Interview 5), all of which are crucial information towards fulfilling the conditions of their sentences.

Cassandra, a 56-year-old white woman, was given a ticket for forgetting to pay for a grape and cheese tray while shopping with her daughter at Wal-Mart. She tells me how the loss prevention officer stopped them at the door, took them to a back office, and called the police. She describes a scene where everyone was dragging their feet to give her the ticket, with one associate trying to convince the other to just let her pay for her

goods and move on. But in the end, she took her ticket to court as she was told to do by the ticketing officer to explain her circumstance directly to the judge.

Cassandra had not been to court since a DUI charge thirty years earlier, and she assumed that the process would be explained to her when she got there. Instead, she found herself shuffled through a conference room where a crackly video defined terminologies like ‘probation’ and ‘deferrals’ versus ‘convictions.’ Within minutes, she was wheeled in front of a prosecutor. “She [the prosecutor] goes, ‘We’re prosecuting to the fullest.’ So, what’s a normal person supposed to think? To me, that means jail. I don’t know no other way. The TV shows and all that, it’s behind bars” (Interview 22). Feeling pressured by the prosecutor, she pleaded guilty to a \$400 ticket, plus court fees. Her monthly income is her disability check – \$986 a month. “I didn’t know if I could fight it or not. You go in there blind,” she sighs (Interview 22). In navigating her way through a speedy series of confusing interactions in the courthouse, Cassandra relied on a few overlapping sources of legal knowledge to move herself through: the court provided video and her own cultural understandings from mass market television.

Cassandra was not the only respondent that mentioned being confused by a lo-fi courtroom video. Marie, a middle-aged Latinx woman, and Remy, both described similar experiences. What both people had in common is that the video did not provide a nuanced enough approach to the options they had. Using a maneuver that Remy learned from the courtroom video, he asked the prosecutor for a pre-trial intervention. His request was dismissed on a technicality; in Remy’s account, the prosecutor claimed that the program he asked for was intended for youth, a fact the video did not discuss. When asked whether he felt he had enough information, he said “No, not at all. Yeah. It doesn’t really prepare you for what you’re going in there to do...I wasn’t prepared at all to go in to talk to [the prosecutor] or any of that” (Interview 21).

The courtroom video is representative of a courtroom infrastructure that attempts to educate the public in the ways of interacting with the court – the capital necessary to participate. I observed this in a variety of mediums. Websites, brochures, printed sheets of paper duct taped to the doors of courtrooms, all attempted to give introductory lessons

to the basics of courtroom operation. Instead, this infrastructure ends up giving respondents a false sense of understanding that ends up being challenged or dismissed by the courtroom's actors. And when their understanding is challenged, respondents end up with a narrative around the dual knowledges at play in the courtroom. This encourages respondents to seek out advice from those who are directly involved in the courtroom organization.

Often, the people we spoke to who had not sought out legal knowledge prior to their first court appearance came into their first meaningful legal contact by attempting to reach out and explain their financial, personal, or professional situation directly to the judge, with varying consequences. Direct communication with the judge for legal knowledge takes many forms. For example, Jorge, a middle-aged Latinx man, tried to reach out to the judge for advice with his monetary sanctions during an initial hearing:

“I tried actually asking her, ‘Hey’, you know, ‘can I just pay in fees? I don't want to go to jail.’ And she said ‘no, you have to go through the whole system.’ And she basically threw me into the county jail annex.” (Interview 37)

Others have better luck isolating the judge. After an assigned public defender missed the fourth consecutive hearing for Guillermo's burglary charge, he claimed, “We didn't even go into court. We just talked to the judge outside” (Interview 51).

A determining factor in whether or not respondents felt positively about the judge was how much attention the judge was willing to give them outside the courtroom process or how slowly they explained the various legal options respondents were facing. George was so enthused to have a judge who took the time to explain the options on the table, he continually sung his praises during our interview. When asked why, George explains, “This is what the judge said: ‘This is how it's gonna work. If you sit in for trial...’ Ain't nobody gonna hardly tell you that” (Interview 10). George is expressing his surprise that a courtroom actor would walk him through the basics of interaction in the courtroom. His partner Brenda, who was also in court that week with the same judge for unpaid misdemeanor tickets, expressed similar satisfaction with the judge on the bench that day: “Basically, he just worked with us. You know?” (Interview 9). Cameron, a

middle-aged white man in court for a traffic ticket, expressed a similar sentiment: “They'll work with you if you get a reasonable judge,” he explains (Interview 17). Judges who take the time to explain the basics of courtroom interactions are lauded in the data.

Informal conversations with courtroom actors become the mechanism for knowledge legitimacy. As respondents described a court process that they felt unprepared for, having their individual circumstances recognized by a legal authority defined how respondents thought and felt about the information they were given. These types of informal interactions with legal stakeholders could have benefits in transmitting legal knowledge to low-resourced defendants. Some reported feeling safe after understanding that judges had discretion over their cases and that they were paired with a favorable judge. “However the judge want it to go,” Peyton, a middle-aged Black man, said to me with a smile, after describing how his reset got him reassigned to a judge who is perceived to be more favorable (Interview 60). Yet, judges are authority figures and their positions of authority distort the power relationship between courts and persons with a case, which could have negative effects. Cassandra looked down in shame when she told me, “I’m not educated enough to talk to a judge” (Interview 22).

Favorable feelings towards judges who took the time to explain the courtroom process make sense in the context of this study. When we asked respondents what resources they would like to have access to in order to prepare them for their court appearance, a basic understanding of their legal options was a central theme. Cameron illustrates this idea in depth:

“Offering just a little bit of legal advice in matters like that would, I think, help out a lot of people as far as the options that are really out there to help you take care of these tickets. I mean, I know in some cases where you can actually go pay a lawyer 50, 60 dollars and he will get your ticket taken care of. But in some instances, if you aren't aware or knowledgeable of that, and you go and speak to a prosecutor, they're going to try and get you for whatever, you know. The highest amount they can possibly squeeze out of you, they will do it.” (Interview 17)

Remy wishes he had some kind of advocate who could translate the process of the court. In the rest of his interview, he presented a distinction between having a lawyer to represent a case, versus an advocate, which communicates *how* the hearing takes place (Interview 21).

Respondents described assuming that they would receive some kind of advice on how to move through the system before anything consequential is done to their cases. But instead, many find what Remy describes as “walking in there and just getting blindsided” (Interview 21), or as Cristina, a middle-aged Latinx woman, says, “You don’t know exactly what’s going on” (Interview 42). Faced with the processual confusion, some respondents give up and give in. “I didn’t think I had an option other than to just pay it or do whatever they were asking,” Kimberley, a middle-aged Black woman, explained toward the end of our interview (Interview 4).

DISCUSSION

Identifying sources of legal knowledge in institutions helps explain why legal knowledge attained outside of traditional sources of professional expertise vary. The three sources of legal knowledge outlined in this article are all institutions with varying levels of inequality and which result in unequal distribution: There is inequality in access to resources, like in neighborhoods; inequality in representation, like in prisons; and inequality in social capital, like in courtrooms. The way these inequalities manifest themselves in the institutions which respondents rely on for legal knowledge contributes to growing knowledge inequality within the criminal legal system.

How does knowledge legitimacy differ by the source of legal knowledge and in what ways is it similar? In neighborhoods, legal knowledge is made legitimate when respondents see it at work in their everyday lives and those of their social ties. While incarcerated, people more likely trust legal knowledge when the source can demonstrate their experience with the system. And in the courts, legal knowledge is seen as legitimate when respondents feel that their individual circumstances are being taken into account. This happens by directly communicating with courtroom actors, such as the judge or the

prosecutor, rather than through one-size-fits-all videos and brochures. As such, legal knowledge is instrumental. The common thread in knowledge seen as legitimate by respondents is that *experience* is privileged over *expertise*; legal knowledge that is perceived to be legitimate by respondents is habituated knowledge, and not legal or rational expertise. The criminal legal system, like other routine organizations, habituates people to a particular type of knowledge that is indigenous to the system itself. Respondents who spoke to us believe the trusted way to know more about the functioning of the criminal legal apparatus is to know someone who has been through it.

Unpacking habituated knowledge in the courts builds on what already know about people's experiences with the criminal legal system. Many recent studies focus on questions of *how* individuals interact with the criminal courts (Clair 2020; Kohler-Hausmann 2018; Van Cleve 2016), which could help in explaining other quantitative outcomes of interest such as the explosion in fines and fees as a form of punishment (Dahaghi 2017). Research is beginning to shed light on the complex topics of how the intersection of lower-level courts and everyday life produces procedural hassles (Kohler-Hausmann 2013) and pressure points (Cadigan and Kirk 2020). While the curation of legal knowledge has been examined in the context of attorney-client relations (Clair 2020), this paper takes sources of legal knowledge as the unit of analysis and unpacks how similarities and differences between sources can be consequential.

A focus on habituated knowledge in municipal courts also adds to the literature on how marginalized populations navigate institutions, especially institutions which are foreign to them and designed between the twin logics of punishment and social control. We know that people from marginalized backgrounds are structurally disadvantaged because the capital necessary to navigate institutions is also unequally distributed. This study adds another case of the criminal legal system to that important literature. Lastly, seeing legitimate knowledge as habitual sheds light on the role of routine organizations in the formation of social ties. If routine organizations play a role in bringing people together, the data presented here shows that these organizations shape conditions of knowledge legitimacy within social networks.

What are the consequences of legal knowledge generated through neighborhoods, jails, and courts? When respondents are lacking in legal knowledge, a knowledge asymmetry is created. Many of the interview transcripts detailed moments where respondents tried to compare their own understandings of what they believed to be happening, to their own intellect, strategies, or cunningness, saying things like, “I’m smart just like them” (Interview 11), or “I know how the system works in that place” (Interview 24). When asked if he understood what was happening to him, Aguilar responded in stutters: “I mean, yeah, I know the basic stuff, which kind of sounds super bad, but yeah. I know the basic stuff. The basic process” (Interview 29).

Respondents believe they have unequal access. Delmy describes the moment when she tried to tell her story directly to the judge: “It’s like you don’t have a voice in it. Your voice is muted. Then, anything they say is the truth. They don’t even know your story, personally. They don’t seek to care or seek to understand” (Interview 61). Other interviewees used language suggesting removal or separation from where they were supposed to be, saying things like, “It’s almost an inside, and I’m on the outside” (Interview 39) or suggesting a conscious exclusion on the part of criminal justice actors – “They keep you out of the loop” (Interview 1).

Estrangement generated from the knowledge asymmetry is extrapolated into conclusions about the entire criminal legal system, with consequences for trust in public institutions. Samuel, not incorrectly, was adamant that access to material resources would have shifted his legal outcome: “If I was some little rich kid or whatever, I wouldn’t have even been in jail, man” (Interview 25). Lack of proper access to lawyers similarly propelled conversations about special access for those with legal representation. David said, “Lawyers and stuff, it’s all about connections, which is kind of life I guess, especially in our society” (Interview 34). Finally, cynicism spreads to include connotations regarding deliberate obscuring: “You guys are only letting us see what you want us to see” (Interview 3), or “The system really ain’t made for the ghetto” (Interview 26). Taylor, after identifying what he believes to be his failing characteristic, expresses hope: “I come from a very poor family, but I’m learning” (Interview 14).

It is beyond the scope of this paper to quantify *how* unequal the legal knowledge is, or to what extent it may definitively shape case outcomes of interest, such as length of sentences or fine and fee amounts. Perhaps future research could probe how legal knowledge shapes these outcomes. Rather, what I have attempted to do in this paper is to shed light on how legal knowledge is sourced from these institutions and the similar and different ways it is found legitimate by the respondents who encounter it.

CONCLUSION

When people are faced with legal questions and are unable to consult a lawyer, they gain legal knowledge from their neighborhoods, in jails, and through observing the courts in real time. And in cases where they perceive their lawyer as against them, they draw on informal sources of legal knowledge to challenge legal expertise with habituated knowledge. This paper shows that people do this because they privilege experience over expertise. Sources with experience navigating the system are perceived as more trustworthy than sources with expertise about the system. This is a structural and systemic challenge. The Sixth Amendment to the United States Constitution guarantees a right to a lawyer precisely because legal knowledge needs to be freely accessible for building a democratic society. This access is a fundamental part of being a *citizen* in a democracy, not a consumer or a debtor.

The lack of access to legal knowledge increases inequality and sustains social domination. A number of researchers have noted this discrepancy and have proposed a series of creative solutions in order to guarantee better access of legal information for people with business before the state. Rebecca Sandefur (2020) has proposed initiatives to include independent advisors and non-lawyer advocates into legal proceedings to give advice and teach people how to navigate complex legal bureaucracies. A number of states and municipalities have followed suit, such as New York City's legislation which guarantees a right to legal services for tenants facing eviction, historically known as the 'right to counsel' law. This paper shows why initiatives to bring independent advisors into the scenario are incredibly important as a way to expand and deepen our democratic

institutions by reducing inequality to access of legal knowledge in the criminal legal system.

Boomtown Poison: Political Culture Under the Shadow of Lead Poisoning in West Texas

INTRODUCTION

On a midsummer Texan day, sitting at a picnic table in the Waverly² city park, Rhonda Blue tells me how she met her husband: “I was lifeguarding, and he would come in every day to see me,” she says, looking off with a growing smirk. We sit beside the Waverly pool while I listen to her stories. “We started dating at 16 and we've been together ever since. High school sweethearts, I guess.” Her Aunt Vicky walks past, parting between the trees when Rhonda looks over, waves her arm, and checks in. Rhonda points down the street and, bouncing her finger in the air between us, shows me her aunt’s house, her grandmother’s house next door, and the highway that leads off to the lake where her family now spends these hot summer days. The pool, a local attraction which has been open since her grandfather settled in Waverly after serving in the Pacific Theater of the Second World War, did not open this season. The summer of 2017 is the first summer the pool stayed closed since its opening shortly after oil was discovered in Waverly in 1917. Today, it is a crater, the vinyl flooring withering in patches exposing the concrete beneath it, blue surface paint starting to chip under the beating sun. A three-foot breach in the floor slowly tears between two shallow puddles that hold the remaining water, the erosion taking its time. The park surrounding the pool is dotted with empty picnic tables, an unused swing set, and an overflowing trash can.

Waverly flourished during an oil boom started by the discovery of oil in 1917 and ended a mere three and a half years later. Its protracted deindustrialization and decline since that time has stripped the small town of its people, its material and immaterial resources, its networks and capital. The pool is the latest casualty to a broader fiscal crisis that has plagued the town for as long as anyone can remember. As extractive industry left Waverly with the collapse of the oil field in 1921, no new consistent source of revenue

² For confidentiality, the names of people and places in this paper are pseudonyms.

has replaced it. The loss of the tax base is seen, felt, and smelt in the town's infrastructure, most notably the municipal water supply system that is collapsing, breeched by bacterial contaminants and leaking lead into the water supply. These compounding fiscal and material crises are at the root of the distrust voiced among a population experiencing the stripping of jobs and livelihoods, as social infrastructure like libraries and schools lack funding and desperately require basic maintenance.

This paper takes the case of Waverly's contemporary water crisis and unpacks the diversity of opinions and beliefs that surround it. Understanding these opinions and beliefs helps us appreciate how residents cast blame when public infrastructure goes bad. Some residents blame bacterial infection while others cite lead corrosion. Some fault the municipal line while others blame individual homeowners' service pipes. Still, others question whether the water crisis is even happening, casting doubt on the experts, reports, and blood lead levels of the town's children as fabrications of desperate attention-seekers. This research seeks to contextualize the beliefs and narratives that residents of Waverly hold regarding the city's water crisis within a history of social and industrial decline.

How do residents of Waverly understand the town's water contamination, who (or what) do they blame for its condition, and why? By contrasting two collective images of the water crisis, first of individual homeowners who are experiencing contamination in their homes, and second of a failing public expenditure such as the Waverly city pool, I show that residents' beliefs about the water crisis are shaped by their opinions of their neighbors and their opinions of the town. These two categories of opinions—private and public culpability—are discussed as the problem with the pipes on the one hand, and the problem with the pool on the other. These opinions and beliefs go on to shape how residents organize to save the town pool and the town's response to residents' claims.

Water *pipes* are the infrastructure through which residents of the town experience the water crisis in private, within their homes, and neighborhood networks. Residents develop varying opinions and have different experiences with the water based on their physical location in the infrastructure grid, their socio-economic status, and material circumstances. Residents' physical location matters because the number of abandoned

homes on a street does affect the pressure and stagnation of water in the municipal line, contributing to higher lead levels. Their socio-economic status, too, is crucial because the poor are more at risk due to the condition of the housing stock where they live and whether or not they have resources to replace their existing house pipes.

There is substantial confusion about what exactly the water issue is, who should be addressing it, and who should be blamed. Water issues include problems of water quality, safety, and distribution, as well as suspicion of corruption in the administration and billing procedures. There are two main narratives respondents use to explain the water crisis: those who blame the city for embezzlement and corruption and those who hold other residents responsible for their moral and intellectual inferiority. These general narratives for understanding social and economic decline both inform and are informed by broader political opinion; however, these schemes of perception do not map neatly onto political opinions regarding national issues. Nor are they mutually exclusive. Some residents, for example, believe that the municipal corruption of the town is a result of the moral degradation of the residents.

The town *pool* is the public symbol where Waverly's water crisis is on full display, both as an eyesore where residents project their interpretations of the wider crisis and as a site of contestation where they focus their energy in trying to organize a movement to save their town. To get at this dual meaning of how the pool is at once the object and the subject of the water crisis, I present a relational account of the movement to save the Waverly city pool. Relational accounts within social science are qualitative narratives which showcase "dynamics that emerge between groups or agencies qualitatively different from, yet oriented toward and enmeshed with, one another" (Desmond 2014). I use a relational account to unpack the ways in which community activists and municipal authorities approach the question of saving the pool and how they understood their failure to do so. In the end, residents' understanding of environmental hazards and decision to either mobilize to counter those hazards or not, rests on whether they locate the hazard as a private or collective problem.

The paper proceeds as follows: First, I review the literature on how communities experience environmental contamination and how they organize against it. Next, I present the case study of Waverly and describe the golden memories that residents have of their town. I then present data showing the ways in which residents talk about the water and who they blame for the crisis. These narratives point to confusion surrounding the water crisis, variation in blame, and distrust that is sown in the community. I move to a relational account of the movement to save the Waverly pool. Using this relational account, I argue that collective efficacy is undermined by citizens' lack of trust in each other, their municipal and state authorities, and their propensity for enacting change through mobilization. By drawing a contrast between the pipes and the pool, or private or collective manifestations of the culpability of the crisis, I argue that toxicity negatively shapes collective efficacy: private understandings of the water crisis flourish, undermining the solidarity needed for a successful social movement.

LITERATURE REVIEW

How do communities experience water contamination, and who do they blame? The disintegration of public infrastructure; rising rates of toxicity, contamination, and environmental damage; and decreasing levels of public participation, social capital, collective efficacy, and social trust—these are phenomena which social scientists are beginning to understand in unison. In this literature review, I present and unpack these relations between ideas. Scholars have linked related processes through macrostructural frameworks of globalization, post industrialization, and neoliberalism in the Global North, as well as the expansion of extractive dead zones, postcoloniality, and marginalization in the Global South. The relationship between these global processes and environmental contamination are beginning to be uncovered by global comparative ethnography. However, the results are felt on the local level, as the processes that lead to contamination and toxicity intimately shape the body and its biological processes. As

such, studying how communities experience toxicity and its social and political effects is a literature that spans global economics to microbiology.

The causes and consequences of social decline have been analyzed through a variety of social scientific studies (for a recent review, see Strangleman and Rhodes 2014). From the publication of the groundbreaking work, *The Deindustrialization of America* (Bluestone and Harrison 1982), social scientists introduced the deindustrialization thesis: the shift from a manufacturing to a service economy during the late 20th century has profound impacts on life and labor in the United States. Following an economic policy of financial deregulation and a laissez-faire approach to markets, a regime commonly referred to as neoliberalism (Harvey 2007; Kentikelenis and Babb 2019), a similar process of deindustrialization and social decline has continued around the world (Fourcade-Gourinchas and Babb 2002). In its wake, social scientists are paying more attention to the cultural and social elements of decline (Cowie, Bluestone, and Heathcott 2003).

A topic of increasing interest is the role that environmental damage plays in the industrializing landscape, and the environmental toxicity that is left in industry's wake (Nading 2020). Environmental damage is evident from both sudden bursts of contamination such as industrial disasters (Petryna 2013), as well as the leaks, spills, and decay that make up slower processes of everyday contamination (Nixon 2011). This form of environmental decline also shapes memory and culture because of how it interacts with the physical landscape and the social organization and reproduction of communities and neighborhoods (Wylie 2018).

Postindustrial areas possess unique kinds of toxic damage from decomposing and degenerating industrial materials. Lead and contamination from other heavy metals exists in this postindustrial landscape because the process of deindustrialization takes away the productive manufacturing capacity of these areas, leaving their infrastructure to rot from lack of maintenance and investment (Coss-Corzo 2020; Warren 2001). And, the effects of lead and similar contaminants are not evenly distributed among demographic categories such as race, class, and space (Muller, Sampson, and Winter 2018; Sampson and Winter

2016). The way that people experience contamination is deeply intertwined with their social positions.

Given this inequality in risk to exposure, we are learning more about how people live and make sense of toxicity and contamination. Bodies, illnesses, and histories are shaped by toxicity (Hecht 2014). We are learning more about people's reasoning for why they stay in contaminated places (Hernandez 2019; Jerolmack and Walker 2018), when and how they decide to leave or are expelled (Sassen 2014), and why they choose to return (Harrison 2017). In sum, a robust literature is developing around how we live in a contaminated world and the unequal distributions of toxicity.

Space and place play a meaningful role in experiences of toxicity, specifically how our social networks which are embedded in physical landscapes and material infrastructures shape our understandings and engagement with toxic environments (Hernandez 2019). Yet, despite all our knowledge of the social determinants of contamination, people who bear the burden of the physical effects of toxicity are made to feel as though they are themselves to blame. While contamination is often individualized by the powerful, as in the case of asthma patients who are told to focus on personal responsibility (Kenner 2018), it is a socio-structural problem with environmental determinants. The sights and smells produced by toxicity and contamination are intricately linked to our understandings of home and being in the world (Auyero and Swistun 2008; Hernandez 2019). Our ways of understanding toxicity, as well as the uncertainty of what to do about it, are relational (Auyero and Swistun 2009).

As communities encounter the toxicity that results from industrial decline, an area of increasing scholarly interest has been the question of environmental mobilization. Much of the classical literature on environmental movements situates itself on questions of mobilization: whether and how people mobilize and what the circumstances for successful claims making are. This literature mirrors the wider literature on social movements, focusing case studies on explanations of resource mobilization, political processes (McAdam 1982), political opportunities (Mayer et al. 1996), and contentious

politics (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001) in the emergence of environmental justice movements.

But scholars have also explored the alternative cases, namely the ‘non-mobilization’ question. If people live in these communities that they discover to be contaminated or have always been toxic, why stay put? Some have pointed out that objective facts about the environmental situation are often shrouded in confusion (Auyero and Swistun 2008). Others stress that feelings of place and processes of placemaking override the concerns of contamination and that these emotions are important sites to understand environmental movements (Hernandez 2019). Still, other scholars show how some communities understand that industrial processes which result in contamination are sometimes in their interest, leading to mobilization in favor of contaminating mechanisms and an understanding of contamination through the social lenses of partisan identity (Jerolmack and Walker 2018).

Social movements that seek to challenge environmental degradation must deal with the fact that, as posited in the studies cited above, what constitutes toxicity worthy of contestation is a shared understanding embedded in social relations (Auyero, Hernandez, and Stitt 2017). Environmental contamination is not only an object of interest for social movements, but it also shapes the landscape that movements emerge from (Schlosberg 2013). In this study, for example, I find that the result of fiscal decline, Waverly’s pipes and pool, become objects of contestation in and of themselves in a social movement. Similarly, environmental mobilization is often hindered by lack of social capital or diminished collective efficacy in the face of contamination (Bell 2016). But how exactly does contamination create the conditions that reduce collective efficacy? Finally, social movements against toxicity are often shaped by the toxicity itself. It is not a priori – toxic constituencies are produced *by* the event (Petryna 2013). While much of this literature concentrates on the case of non-mobilization, the case of Waverly presents an opportunity to explore how and why toxicity makes mobilization unsuccessful.

This paper takes the case of saving the Waverly city pool as a way to understand how toxicity is understood and how people do and don’t mobilize. In doing so, I seek to

draw parallels between when and under what circumstances people either cast blame on individuals for the collapse of public infrastructure, or place collective blame. But what do pipes and pools have in common, and how can viewing them in unison help us unpack this ethnographic puzzle? I use the framework of social infrastructure to examine the ways that individual infrastructures like household pipes and collective infrastructures like public pools can shape a community and its public life. Social infrastructure is “the physical conditions that determine whether social capital develops” (Klinenberg 2018:5). It is the landscape behind our social networks that can sustain or diminish them. Social infrastructure could be understood as physical institutions such as libraries, schools, and other routine organizations (Small 2009) that encourage and discourage participation (Klinenberg 2002). And it also could be argued to be the physical and material infrastructure that makes society possible: the roads, bridges, wires, sockets, and pipes that bind, divide, categorize, and exclude (Star 1999).

Infrastructure shapes networks and spaces. The location of people and communities within infrastructure networks is political: infrastructure influences the claims people make and the way they are represented by a polity (Anand 2012). Water infrastructure in particular has a powerful influence on inequality and access in the modern world (Gandy 2008; McFarlane and Rutherford 2008). And the ruination of water infrastructure creates distinct relations and practices that shape people’s attitudes and beliefs about water, politics, and belonging (Coss-Corzo 2020). Toxicity thwarts efforts at collectively mobilizing through the distinct social relations that it produces (Auyero & Swistun 2009). In this paper, I unpack the social relations created in a small town by a water system that is eroding after years of neglect and post-industrialism, and the way these relations shape the social movement aimed at saving the town pool.

DATA & METHOD

The data for this paper comes from a qualitative case study of Waverly, TX conducted between June 2017 and May 2018. In a research collaboration with another student, we conducted interviews with a total of 37 Waverly residents. Interviews were conducted in residents' homes, places of work, public parks, or local restaurants depending on the interviewee's preference. Interviews lasted between one and three and a half hours; the average interview was an hour and a half. Interview topics focused on five main areas: everyday experiences, common worries, how they navigate water issues, political issues and interests, and hopes for the future. All of the interviews were conducted in English, tape recorded, and transcribed verbatim.

The interviews were conducted using a common interview protocol developed by the Red Observatory, a research initiative of the Urban Ethnography Lab at the University of Texas at Austin. The original research questions sought to use a qualitative toolkit of in-depth interviews and participant observation to understand political conservatism and alt-right populism after the 2016 U.S. presidential election in the context of people's everyday life. The initial project proposed that by studying the way residents of small towns and rural areas in Texas solved collective problems, and by observing the ways that their political culture was embedded in their everyday lives, we could learn a great deal about how conservative politics and support for alt-right populism operates in small town and rural Texas. Our research team split into five field sites. This paper is based on data produced in one of those field sites: Waverly, TX.

The first sample of interviewees was identified by response to a Facebook post in a local non-partisan Facebook group. The post was a call to join a team of researchers from the University of Texas at Austin³ in studying the history of the local community

³ Our affiliation with the University of Texas was important but viewed with suspicion. We used our affiliation to break the ice in making contact with community leaders. However, a number of residents made statements with regard to Austin, TX as a "liberal" town outside of their perception of what Texas is and/or should be.

and to answer questions about the challenges they face and how they work to solve those challenges. We were able to snowball sample from this initial sample of six and collected fifteen interviews. From there, we identified a second sample by contacting the leaders of various community organizations. We further snowballed from this second sample to come to thirty-seven total interviews.

Out of the 37 interviews, three residents worked for the city at the time of their interview and five had worked for the city in the last decade. This is an important aspect of “inconvenience sampling” (Duneier 2011:8), or including samples from cohorts which are designed to question narratives and discourses emerging in the wider data. When we began interviewing, a major concern of respondents was that the city was corrupt and was pocketing residents’ money for personal use. Thus, making sure we had interviews from those accused of these claims was the best way to arrive at the underlying motivations in these assertions.

To supplement the interview data, we conducted participant observation. As a major area of interest was the strategies residents use to navigate the water crisis, we sought to understand how the beliefs and opinions about water materialize into everyday practices. To this end, I spent a total of 20 days living with a family in Waverly. The family was composed of a married couple (ages 55 and 36), and their two children (ages 11 and 8). Interviews informed how I observed the ways that this family interacted with their water supply, and that observation informed later interviews. We also attended community-wide events, which included high-school and college-level sporting events, parades, block parties, county festivals, and live music events.

We supplemented these data with documents and records. We analyzed documents and records in the form of water bills, boil-water advisories, boil-water orders, public health disclosures, and infrastructure maintenance reports. We collected these data from residents who would show them to us during their interview. We analyzed historical data in the form of zoning and planning documents and oil company reports from two city museums. The archival and historical data should be understood as qualitative in

nature and their use was to provide greater context: there was no systematic data collection mechanism to the documents, records, or historical data.

CASE STUDY: WAVERLY, TX

After the discovery of oil in 1917, Waverly quickly blossomed into a boomtown with a population of 30,000 (Hinton and Olien 2002). Four years later, the boom went bust. According to Sherley Douglas, the leader of the local historical society, the Waverly History Corps, an exploratory wildcat well⁴ “started all of this” gesturing out the window of her office. She turns the palm of her left hand face up and passes it over an old wooden desk as she speaks, adding animation to a series of black and white photos pressed underneath a plexiglass frame.

Sherley is a transplant to Waverly but has always loved the place. Originally from coastal North Carolina, her husband is a Waverly local who decided to relocate his family back to his hometown in the 1980s. Her first memory is getting pulled over for not having her turn signal on, she explains: “They gave me a warning. That was real nice. It's just a nice place.” Since then, Sherley has established herself as the director of the Waverly History Corps, giving her authority over approving plaques, signing off on written historical narratives, and liaising with the state government about events commemorating the city's past. Nothing is written about Waverly without Sherley's approval.

We focus on one photo of the MacMahon oil well, the source of Waverly's historic prosperity. The black and white photograph shows two men walking in the shadow of an iron pump towering dozens of feet above them outside the frame of the photograph. The men are in white button up shirts with their sleeves rolled up, black trouser pants, and long brimmed hats. With their backs to the viewer, they appear to be

⁴ An exploration well that is drilled in an area not previously known to be an oilfield.

walking towards the left edge of the photograph, as if exiting the scene after establishing the font that would go on to shape the trajectory of the town.

Among Sherley's many responsibilities is organizing the yearly parade which celebrates the discovery of oil in 1917, a time when, she claims, the world knew about Waverly and its contribution to global history. It could be true; some historians have referred to Waverly as the 'first' boomtown (Hinton and Olien 2002). And among the residents we spoke to, the well is believed to be responsible for supplying a final shipment of oil to the Allied forces during the First World War, ensuring an Allied victory. Only 850 residents lived in Waverly before the discovery of oil, formerly one of many small encampments of Texas Rangers during the Comanche Wars of colonization during the 19th century. After the railroad was built to facilitate the oil boom, everything changed.

"The boom came, and then all of a sudden, just overnight, it was just like, 'Man! Look at the people,'" Sherley tells me, narrating the oral histories of early settlers. In three years, Waverly grew to a population of 30,000 residents. Freshly laid tracks and newly corporatized private train companies crisscrossed Waverly multiple times a day as West Texas became a fertile ground for oil and gas exploration and discovery. Historical documents show city leaders at the time expected even more growth, forecasting population figures of up to 50,000. Many of the city's new residents lived in used U.S. army tents. Others found rooms to rent in hog houses with local farmers. And the city's dirt roads were notorious during the rainy season for being impossible to cross on foot. Residents would pay \$0.25 to be transported by horse carriage through the muck (Bloom 1981).

Yet soon after the 1917 boom, petroleum fountains dried up, the result of the same reckless greed that fueled Waverly's growth. The 400 wells that had been financed and constructed after the discovery of the MacMahon well drove the pressure of the field to zero. While much oil remained in the ground, far more than had been extracted, the speed and force by which it was originally pumped destroyed the ability to extract what

remained. Many oil experts have tried since the well's final closure and capping in 1930. None have been successful (Bloom 1981).

Bank failures in the 1920s ravaged the local real estate market, and Waverly began its decline, limping through the 20th century to the turn of the millennium. In 1930, its post-boom population was sliced to approximately 6,000 residents, the result of broader economic trends during the Great Depression. Save from a meager uptick midway through its depopulation—likely the result of a small expansion in goat farming across the county—the community shrank to its current size of approximately 2,500 residents. Sherley looked off: “Like I said, all booms, from what I have read and seen, are very short-lived.”

A Golden Past

Iris, an 83-year-old woman living alone on the edge of Waverly, remembers what Main Street used to look like:

We had a Montgomery company. JC Penny. There was Joseph's department store. We had two jewelry stores. Had a big bus station. Down here was a Greyhound Bus and all come in. And we had two, three, four grocery stores, I think it was. When I was a kid, we only got to come to town once a week...

I find her stories striking. Today, Main Street in Waverly is a collection of dilapidated buildings, fading “For Sale” signs, and police tape. The red Thurber Brick roads, characteristic of the old West, are left unfilled with gaps that expose the dirt underneath. Two months after my first visit to Waverly, one of the larger buildings on Main Street caved in and collapsed. Through the broken windows, a large pile of snapped cement, corroded wood, and old electrical wires capped the trees and weeds growing up through the cracks in the concrete floor.

I try to reconcile the descriptions of economic plenty and decline with historical facts. While it is clear that the 1917 boom and bust sent massive shockwaves through the town, it is unclear what economic activity sustained the development that Iris describes, perhaps Waverly's position in a regional rail network.

Iris's house is a collection of memories. She sits on a faded La-Z-Boy across from the television set, behind a wooden fold-out table where her half-filled crossword rests. This is where she spends most of her day, eating "TV dinners or something that I stick in the microwave. I don't eat that much, and I never want nothin' to eat." The walls on all sides are filled, top to bottom, with pieces of her life: photo albums, a worn American flag, magazines and newspaper clippings, and dusty boxes. Even her home, which she has lived in since 1975, is built on the leftovers of the town. "This place here, it used to be the old teepee oiltown...back in the old days...they say there was little shacks put up everywhere, and there was a whole mess of tents...there was so many people here," she recalled.

Her grandfather, who she calls "Daddy," arrived in 1920. "Mama," her grandmother, arrived the year after. When I ask her why her grandparents made the move, she says, "The oil field, I guess. It was something, it was better work." Iris can't remember when the oil companies started shutting down their operations: "I wasn't even thought of at that time, I don't think." After the oil companies closed, Iris tells me, Daddy moved out to the countryside. Outside the city limits of Waverly, he practiced subsistence farming raising peanuts, plums, peaches, apricots, grapes, pears, and apples. In the garden along the side of the house, the family grew red beans, green beans, and black-eyed peas.

She mentions her mother in quick passing, and only to say that she visited her in California infrequently. Economic migration feels like a generational fact of life as her story is interrupted by her grandson, Branden. "I'm fixing on headed to Snyder [another oil town], gotta make that money." Iris laughs as they hug and say goodbye. Iris's favorite memories of Waverly are from her childhood, riding into town on Daddy's flatbed truck on a Saturday afternoon. "I got to get me some orange soda pop, and one of those packages of peanuts where I put in my soda pop... That was my big deal when we got to come to town."

The Water Problem

While Iris recounts her life story, I am reminded of the Waverly water crisis after spotting boxes of gallons of water stacked by her back door. The water crisis takes up many of the conversations I have been having with residents. It is complex and layered. At best, it is confusing. At worst, it is sadistically punishing to Waverly's most vulnerable. Independent of the narratives we received from residents about what they *thought* was wrong with the water, we *saw* (in the form of municipal notices and records) and *heard* (in the form of interviews with members of the municipal and county water supply) pieces of primary evidence which identify a number of different parts of the Waverly water system with problems. There are various potential sources of contamination, none of which provide a full explanation and some of which are individualized, meaning each resident's experience with the water could be quite different from their neighbors'. These sources of contamination are: contamination from the county supply which Waverly purchases from the county seat next door; contamination from municipal pipes which break and introduce endogenous contaminants; contamination from the materials used to fix the municipal pipes; contaminants that are introduced into residents' pipes because of abandoned homes that are connected to their extension line and no longer using their share of water; and contaminants which are introduced into the water through lead service lines in individual homes.

Water tested for lead in various spouts in Waverly has frequently come up positive. In one public housing complex, a tested faucet had 28 times the federal limit of lead (Ungar and Nichols 2016). Children in town receive notices from the state when their blood tests show elevated lead levels. And residents receive boil-water orders when bacterial contaminants breach the pipes, an almost weekly occurrence. The water crisis shapes the community and its social infrastructure. According to Courtney, a resident and local activist, "There were several times when they have to flush the water and

everything, so we are without water in the town.” The public school has yet to develop a contingency plan. She continues,

There've been a couple of times where they just shut down the school, but I guess it became so frequent... the kids would come home and say, 'I didn't have water, we didn't have water today.' You could bring bottled water, but, I noticed, we went up there to pick up the kids, and the water fountain had trash bags and tape just so no one used them.

Water shapes access to public spaces: Waverly's students are hampered from their education because of the water crisis.

Water shapes the experience of residents in their homes and with their families. “When my kids come home, I say, please don't drink the water,” Nina, the Waverly librarian, walks me through how she negotiates with her son-in-law when he brings her grandchildren to her home for a visit. She continues: “We have boil notices often, and a lot of people don't know it, you know because how do you keep up, but within five days there was like three breaks in the lines...” The frequent leaks and breaks in the Waverly municipal pipes allow dirt and bacteria to come into the water supply, which affects all homes attached to the municipal pipe. Yet household-level variation exists because older houses in town were all built with lead pipes. If those pipes have not been replaced, those households may have lead contamination in addition to contamination from the municipal supply.

Jordan, a professor of natural sciences at the Waverly County Community College, moved to Waverly from North Texas in the 1980s. He and his partner, Melinda, bought a fixer-upper and rebuilt the whole house, one floorboard at a time. When they were rebuilding their house, they were careful to replace all of the pipes with brand new PVC, and no soldering, a major source of lead contamination. I ask Jordan what the old pipes looked like:

They were absolutely terrible. Some of them were copper and the sewer lines had the old asbestos kind of fiber pipe that they used back in the 1930s. And the clay tile, and then the cast iron, and then some PVC. When I was taking the old stuff out [water and gas pipes], it crumbled in my hand. I mean, that's an explosion waiting to happen.

Unlike Nina, Jordan has the means and skills to replace the pipes in his home. It became clear that, while the municipal pipes could be prone to increased levels of contamination due to corrosion of the pipe and the cast iron sockets used to repair leaks, danger also existed within the home. This creates a complex variation of risk that began to map onto other existing social categories and divisions like social class and neighborhood. Those who do not replace their pipes have their lead risk exponentially amplified.

What makes water complicated yet sociologically fascinating is that it could be contaminated through all of the things listed above. Instead of trying to figure out exactly what risk group each individual resident is subject to (of all the various potential contaminants), in what follows I seek to understand the discourses of how residents themselves understand the water crisis, how they use their understanding to cast blame, and how that blame forms their desire to engage in a social movement and to what effect.

What's the problem? How residents talk about 'the water'

Clint was born in Waverly in 1950 and left town right after high school. He joined thousands of others on the booming oil fields of West Texas, driving an oil truck and working on wells. Since then, he's lived in five other small towns across the South and Midwest, taking his trucking trade with him and growing an appreciation for the politics and social organization of small-town America. But when he found the opportunity, he moved back to Waverly. He wanted to be near his parents and found an opening where he says he would be doing the same job. But he mentions conflicting feelings about his birthplace. On the one hand, he says the people who live in Waverly don't realize how

good they have it. “You can leave your vehicles unlocked, you can leave your house unlocked, and you can expect nothing to be stolen,” he tells me, noting that “It ain't like that other places.” On the other hand, Waverly has changed in ways that make it unrecognizable.

He chalks up the change to a few things. The first on his list are the people of the town. He explains, alluding to problems in contemporary national political culture, “People have changed...you wonder why people are so bad, you wonder why kids are taking guns in school and shooting each other.” After commenting that his graduating class had 50 students while today’s graduating class has diminished to 20, he says, “Populations went down, the crime has gone up. And the freedom is gone, you don't have near the freedom you had back then, and we got a whole lot more crime, so you just say, something's going on.” It is not lost on me that he is contradicting what he said twenty minutes ago, but his ideas of ‘freedom’ are complex.

Most recently, Clint stopped drinking the water. He mentions that he stopped after hearing about bad water reports in town and then seeing the evidence in his glass.

I grew up here and drank the water, but now, you could smell it in the glass. And you think, 'Ah, that smells like it's nasty well water or something like that.' I'm like, OK, I'm not drinking that crap anymore. And the rust, you just get a glass of water and it's red with the rust color in it, and I'm not putting that in my coffee maker anymore. These days Clint factors in \$150 per month for bottled water, and he claims his water bill increased by \$80 a month.

It’s clear that there is a problem with the water. But what the problem is, who people blame, and how they propose to fix the water are social understandings. While some may admit to the problem, there is no clear connection between recognition and action. At best, it is an ideologically contradictory puzzle of belief systems, personal experiences, and water infrastructure. These are belief systems because residents factor the water crisis into other understandings that they have about the town and its politics. Personal experiences matter because water stories are a dime a dozen and residents did not tend to become animated about the issue unless it was something that affected them

directly. Lastly, water infrastructure matters because of how the actual pipes shape the risk by which a resident is exposed to contamination and lead. Still, every resident we spoke to had something to say about the water during our interviews, mostly unprompted. While they had many different opinions, everyone recognized the water is an issue worth discussing in the context of the neighborhood and its challenges.

Residents talk about the water in three key categories: stressing that it is tainted, that it is expensive, or that there are no challenges and that it is blown out of proportion. The first category of residents thinks about the water from the perspective of contamination. They call the water “discolored” (Interview 4), “tainted” (Interview 5), “rusty” (Interview 11), and “bad quality” (Interview 22). During our interview, Nina tells us that her co-worker’s father died young while quickly mentioning that he drank the water. Similarly, Jeremy claims his wife developed Alzheimer’s and later died from drinking the water.

Jeremy: My wife, was a firm believer in drinking lots of water. She drank six glasses of water a day, at least. And she wound up getting Alzheimer's.

Interviewer: Do you think it's from the water?

Jeremy: I would think it was from the water.

Among this group of residents, many illnesses and general suffering in the town are casually attributed to the water in our conversations. And not just among the human population. During an informal conversation outside the town diner after ending our interview, Spencer, a transplant from Denver, told me that his four goats were getting sick from the water.

The second category of residents thinks about the water from the perspective of their financial position. They talk about their incomes in relation to rising water bills. For example, Clint’s water bill recently increased from \$160 to \$240 a month, even as the water remains unsafe to drink. Jordan had to replace all the water filters in his house because “there was mud coming out of them.” And Cindi, a resident who works at a local

church charity, says one of the most popular programs is a fund that helps community members pay their water bills.

This expense is especially poignant when it comes to the bad service and when factoring in the monthly cost of bottled water. Ida has been living in town since 1997 on a fixed income of \$900 a month. She tells me she's not supposed to drink the water due to her cancer diagnosis, but she does anyway because they cannot afford bottled water. "I've asked the city, can you supply us with water until you get this mess straightened out, and he [the Mayor] just told me, 'Move if you don't like it.'" She has ruled out bathing and tries to only take quick showers. She shudders remembering the day she filled up an above ground pool and the next day, "it was black."

A number of residents are convinced that there is financial retaliation from the town when it comes to complaining about the water, or anything bad about the town at all. When discussing how he stopped pushing to help the municipal government write grants to the state and other nonprofit foundations which could make investments to improve water quality, Spencer told me, "I don't want the retaliation from other board members, so I'll be quiet." Iris told me how, in her perception, the water is used as a cudgel by the municipal government to silence criticism: "Anytime you go to complain about something, somehow it seems like that water bill jumps \$30 a month, y'know, that hurts people. And there's a lot of people around here that can't afford that."

Regardless of their explanation or description of the water, every resident has developed different strategies for dealing with the water. Naomi, a self-identified old timer who has lived in town since 1952, makes her morning coffee from bottled water and keeps a Poland Spring gallon on her kitchen counter for boiling pasta. But she'll use the city water for washing clothes because "that much residue's not going to make that much difference." She does bathe in city water, but clarifies, "If I was raising a baby, I would not even bathe the baby in that water."

Rhonda's strategy was to make sure to replace the pipes in her house when she was renovating her fixer upper. She has a filter that she trusts to filter out the contaminants.

A third category of residents dismisses the water crisis because of the people making the claims. Kurt, a lifetime Waverly resident, stresses that those who are claiming the water is bad are suspect and therefore shouldn't be listened to or taken seriously. "It kind of takes a certain level of ignorance and stupidity to maintain these grudges. And they let that affect their ability to think about what's going on around them." Yet others stress how the water problem is individualized because of the presence of lead pipes in individual's homes, which they are confusing for a municipal problem. As Jessica points out, lead service lines are the homeowner's responsibility to fix. "One person's got a lead issue, the whole town's got a lead issue. One person's got busted clay pipes, the whole town's got busted clay pipes." Still, for some, the whole question is null. "I think that the last I understood was the water situation had been taken care of. When I first came here, the water, to me, tasted really good," Sherley says. But the people who believe this are also connected in some way to the city government.

The municipal government takes the position that the water crisis is blown out of proportion and that residents are misunderstanding the issue. We interviewed the current water utility clerk, Jamie, as well as the previous water utility clerk. According to both of them, the municipality had conducted an investigation which led them to discover that the source of the water at the county level was falsifying documents about water quality, which lead to the initial reports about lead in the municipal supply. From there, the narrative has taken on a life of its own. "If you work for the City, it's all your fault," Jamie says. "They just don't get that. They automatically think that it's bad and it's not bad. All our samples, we've come back good. We've passed every sample." And although the Mayor would not meet with us, in the past he's made statements that drinking the city water is safe and healthy.

Who's to Blame? How residents talk about culpability

It is almost metaphorically fitting that Clint's day job is as an oil truck driver shuffling back and forth between a broken-down stretch of Texan pipeline. He explains how his labor is cheaper than the oil company making an investment and repairing the forty miles of pipeline that he drives between, loading at one site and dumping in another. And when talking about the problems wrapped up in Waverly's water, he uses his job as a comparison case. "The guys that made the line... they figured in 50 years we'd be living in floating cities and driving flying cars, they had no idea we'd be drinking rusty water out of the pipes that our grandfathers laid." In particular, Clint cites the low water pressure. When he called the city to complain, they told him they could not increase it because it would blow what was left of the pipe that connected his street to the main. Residents cast blame on many different sources including the old pipes, the corrupt municipal government, or the changing town in a changing United States. These blame discourses can be analyzed as two distinct yet overlapping groups: the city and the neighbors. The people they blame speak to some of the paradox of how they think about toxicity and contamination.

Sherley, the local historian, tells us the waterlines were laid in 1919, and were made out of cast iron. During our conversation, she even took an old piece of the original iron pipe and put it on the table for us to observe. According to the 'Old Pipe' narrative, the water is bad because the pipes are old and are either flaking off into the water or frequently break which allows other bacterial contaminants into the water supply. This is evidenced by the myriad boil notices that residents receive, which we witnessed during our time in Waverly. But there is a shroud of conspiracy with talk about PVC pipes that aren't being used and grant money being "funneled" (unclear where) into places to pay for them where it does not belong. The only thing we could confirm is the boil notice. But perhaps more important than discovering whether or not the city's pipes are made from iron or PVC is how the residents use what they believe the city's pipes are made of to fuel their beliefs about the water crisis and the city more broadly.

Clint relates this back to how the city solves problems. When Waverly received funds through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, colloquially known as the

stimulus package former President Barack Obama passed during the Great Recession of 2008, the water seemed to get in the way:

Now they're [the roads] nice and smooth going, 'Wow, can you believe this road is this nice?' And it wasn't a month and the city had backhoes over there digging the road up to fix the water leaks under it [laughing]. And then you can go down those roads, and they're torn, and dug up, because of the water leaks underneath. And we buy clamps to fix the water lines by the truck load, we're putting clamps on them instead of replacing the line.

Clint isn't the only one who uses the evidence of the city's mismanagement of the road infrastructure to make inferences about who is to blame for the water crisis. A number of residents related similar stories of seeing workers digging up old looking lines and failing to perform the work necessary to solve the problem.

A variant of this group of residents blames the financial condition of the city, specifically the city's inability to raise the revenue necessary to build the infrastructure to fix the pipes. Naomi tells me that the city's tax base is too limited to fund the replacement of municipal and individual lines to reduce contamination. In her reading, it is because the federal government requires too many forms and the people that have to fill out those forms must be paid at a decent level which is unaffordable at scale. Wesley, a municipal worker, tells me the city doesn't have enough to fund the basics, likening the municipal budget to "a household budget; there are things that have to be paid for, that have to be bought."

These blame discourses are rooted in narratives that understand the water crisis through Waverly's decline. A major factor in this narrative is discussing corruption and mismanagement, both historic and contemporary. Wesley tells me that his father was witness to a scheme where PVC pipes were received with government funds and buried all around the city in different stashes. Iris explains current organized crime that operates in the town by referencing various police raids on drug stash houses and claiming that the municipal government must be involved in the illicit enterprise. Many of my nights of participant observation in the town are filled with stories of the fantastical: UFO

sightings, secret reptilian hiding spots in the fields that surround the city, intermingled with documented stories of corrupt police officers, bureaucrats, and oil tycoons in the town's hundred-year history.

These stories remind me that Waverly *feels* like a faraway place. We are one hour, driving, from the nearest city of more than 100,000 residents, and three hours from a multi-million-person metropolis. But the spaces in-between towns feel vast as well. The nearest town beyond the end of the Waverly city line is 25 minutes through pitch black night with no public lighting. In spaces like these, political narratives grounded in fear and paranoia are commonplace. National level conspiracy theories such as FEMA concentration camps being built beyond the city limits are spoken with the same amount of factual legitimacy as local weather patterns. While many in town rely on the gas station as their main source of groceries, narratives of self-reliance are prevalent. Individuals are usually perceived as culpable for collective problems, and violence—both government-sponsored and vigilante—is seen as a legitimate means to punishment.

The second group blames the people of the town. These narratives are grounded in Waverly's exceptionalism; the water is seen as representative of a once great tasting commodity that has declined like everything else around. "When I first came here, the water, to me, tasted really good," Sherley tells me, but, she continues, given the long history of the town, "some of these things are bound to be corroded." Sherley tells me her house has been replumbed and insinuates that it is only certain people in town who complain about the water: "A lot of people call me for different things, but I've never had anybody call me and ask me about the water." It is worth noting that for a number of people, Sherley, a known local power broker, is a central character in their stories of city corruption.

Similarly, Clint tells me that the water was better in his youth, when life seemed more optimistic. "I grew up here and drank the water, but now, you could smell it in the glass." By centering the town's decline in how they cast blame for the water crisis, this group of narratives relies on residents blaming neighbors for their own misdeeds and

mishaps. These narratives then take on a larger scale in discussing how the declining water is reminiscent of a town that used to be great.

Some people I spoke to explicitly referenced the poverty of Waverly's residents. Naomi, for example, argues that the water is bad because homes have lead pipes, and the responsibility to replace them is on the homeowner. Similarly, Wesley describes that the percentage of lead service lines varies by individuals' homes and entire neighborhoods, meaning that individuals are affected to different degrees. Lastly, Jamie, who distributes the water bills, adds a personal element in critiquing the poor. "I know people, I know that people say, 'I can't pay my water bill.' I just seen you partying this weekend, I know you can pay it." Residents also talk about other neighbors that live in the city's history rather than its present. "You know, this town does have a lot of potential. It really does." Ida says to me reassuringly, "But, they [the residents] live more in the history than in the future..." she says disapprovingly of the residents who use the perceived exceptionalism of their town's history to excuse away its current predicaments.

What do we do about it? How residents channel a social movement

While residents have many understandings of the water crisis and blame their neighbors, homeowners, and municipal corruption, a movement to save the Waverly city pool took place over an adjacent period to my fieldwork over the summer of 2016. After residents organized a grassroots movement to save the pool, the city eventually followed through with its plans to close the pool early. The pool remained closed through the summer of 2017. However, I use this account to unpack how residents think about what went wrong with the movement and to figure out why residents organized to save the pool while failing to organize around the broader water crisis.

I find that residents' understanding of the movement are analogous to the way they think about what is wrong with the water crisis and the management of Waverly as a city. Every resident I spoke to brought up the pool's closing in relation to the city and its challenges and they each had their own rendition of the relations of contention that

shaped the movement. Therefore, the relational account of the movement to save the Waverly city pool is necessary to understand other problems like the water crisis, because it is a lesson Waverly residents use in understanding their own efficacy.

“Humans follow just like the world does with entropy,” Pat, a local pastor, states, as he introduces the history of the movement. “Unless the force acts [of the Holy Spirit], you tend towards disaster.” After a successful opening, the city of Waverly announced that due to a lack of funds they would have to close the pool early. Waverly lurched; the pool is one of the only things in town for kids to do when schools are closed for summer vacation. The residents started to organize. For many, it was their first time in a local community-based movement. The feeling was contagious. Violet, a resident who told me she purposefully did not involve herself in community affairs, described how everyone from long-established neighborhood associations down to small pairs of concerned residents had set up some kind of fundraising for the community.

Nina took it to the city council: “I saw people upset, and then people working together to get it open.” Residents were pooling together what they could afford, \$100, \$200. Some people contributed even more, with some donations topping \$1000. There were bake sales, small business donations, charity walks, and door-to-door organizing. The wealthier residents of Waverly made sure to match contributions made by more modest households. For those that weren’t able to attend events in person, they organized residents on Facebook. Waverly and the surrounding municipalities have a variety of community pages on the platform that residents rely on for hometown news after the local papers started downsizing and closing up. A crowdsourcing link was shared around which included a video made by residents. The video shows a group of children describing their favorite memories of the pool and the emotions they felt upon hearing of its closing. A slideshow of photos plays behind an audio track describing the many benefits of having a town pool. “It added up to about \$9,000, and it was enough, in a two-week period, to open it up,” Nina said, “and it was just regular people.”

But then problems began. The city officials gave mixed messages over whether they would even accept the donations and were not forthcoming about the pool’s

structural issues. Spencer offered to help by writing grants and pitching in with manual labor. He has grant writing experience from working for years in the technology department of a major metropolitan school district. And his time spent as a pool boy to put himself through college gave his know-how a practical dimension. “I will tell you, it does not matter the name brand of the chemical, as long as you’re properly using it,” he tells me as he recounts his struggle with the municipal authorities during the early days of the Save the Waverly Pool movement. “So, they’re full of shit.” Rumors began to spread on Facebook that neighboring towns had offered to donate various supplies and chemicals, but Waverly city officials were refusing.

The residents became increasingly agitated, the city found new ways to justify the pool closure, and the movement began to splinter. Perhaps most devastating was how the residents’ vision of the movement changed. Looking back, Spencer thinks that Waverly residents could have been more serious and better organized. “They’re just a handful of friends that just kinda got together. I mean, I don’t even know if they filed for tax exempt status as a 503c.” Eventually their organic, grassroots, and community driven momentum was their Achilles heel. “They’re just such loosely knit groups, that just kind of spring up,” Spencer lamented; “There was no structure to them.”

The movement disappeared almost as quickly as it arrived. City officials announced that, even with the money raised, the pool would still close for the remainder of the summer. “So, we did it. We busted our butt and we raised more than enough money for chemicals. And they were like ‘Well, okay, we’re gonna shut it down anyway,’” Violet said. “Even after all that effort it was only open for about two months,” Nina tells me as we are sitting in the library. I ask her how people felt, and she puts on a positive spin with a smile. “I think mostly people were gratified that it opened at all, I think it showed a power of the people. That it even opened when there had been no planning for it.”

The pool haunted the residents I spoke to. Everyone had their own conflicting understanding of the events leading to the closure and what the town had said to justify it. Some stressed the finances of an operation as complex as a large pool for a small town.

Most residents, seeing the crack in the empty shell, blamed a leak. “It’s actually really sad,” Rhonda told me when I first saw the pool, “there’s lots of issues with it and our town’s poor, so they’re having a hard time getting it fixed because it leaks so much water during the summer and it costs a lot.” Pastor Pat went down there himself to see how deep the leak was: “You can walk in there and look at the cracks and go, ‘Yep, water’s getting out of here.’” Jessica, a resident and local business owner, engaged in a debate with herself over whether the pool should have been making a profit or whether it had a right to exist as a public service. “If you’re in a business and you run a business, you’ve got to make money,” she explains to me. But most residents knew that their community’s poverty played a role. “It’s a lot of money,” Cindi told me when I first arrived in town, “And as you can see, Waverly doesn’t really have a lot of money.”

In the summer of 2017, during our fieldwork, the pool remained closed. The empty blue shell in the center of town forced Waverly residents to collectively confront the future they saw for themselves in Waverly. That’s when the cynicism started to spread: “I think we had last year to seeing, the lay of the land,” Nina explains, “how difficult it was, how expensive it was, and what a burden it was, and how it’s only like a two-month thing, and probably \$45,000.” She concluded that residents just didn’t have the fight in them this year. Talking about the city’s political leaders in frustration, Violet tells me, “They know what’s wrong with that pool, they’ve known what’s wrong with it for years, but all they’ve ever done is band-aid fix it.” It’s clear that the pool is just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to perceived economic and financial mismanagement in the community and this wasn’t the first time I would hear the theme of tying the mismanagement of the pool to the mismanagement of the town. “It doesn’t make them money, it makes them pay out money, and they don’t want to do that. But then again, they can’t fix the pool and they can’t fix the roads.” Eventually frustration with the community’s leaders turned to blatant anger and accusations of incompetence and corruption. “A brand-new pool, costs what, 40, \$50,000. For a brand-new pool. You mean to tell me that you can’t have a leak fixed for what you had budgeted?,” Spencer asks me rhetorically.

The following week I sat with Sally and Jeremy Banner in their living room in a residential neighborhood of Waverly. Sally brought up the pool as an example of the city leaders' inability to perform basic services. "We can't repair the pool, because there's no money. I don't understand that. There's no money for the water pipes, no money for the streets." Nodding his head in agreement, Jeremy went on to claim that the mismanagement was a result of corruption, with the city's leaders pocketing the funds raised for the pool for other projects. "We went and bought a bunch of new police cars, which we didn't need. I think we bought four or five. We didn't need them. We had older cars. We don't need to be out on the highway chasing people."

The consequences of this cynicism are despair and disempowerment in the community. When Violet reflects on the failed campaign to save the pool, her contempt for the power brokers and political leaders of the city shines through. "The people that are there, they just don't want new faces, because we tried. My best friend and I tried last year, we got on the Save the Pool bandwagon and we tried." Violet's story strikes me because when we first met, she was adamant about not being involved in the community. It is only after spending time in Waverly, talking to many residents, that I learn Violet was once engaged, but left in disgust.

"I can say I'm sad all day long," Nina tells me in the public library, which sits at the eastern end of Waverly city park. Looking outside the window gives a clear shot of the empty pool. "I want the kids to have it, I love it to hear the kids scream, I love to hear them jumping in, I can hear it through the window. I can hear them going off the diving board and screaming, and I like it."

DISCUSSION

Postindustrial decline, subsequent economic and financial crises, and more recent problems of drought, wildfire, and climate change have shown that Texas has a notoriously underfunded infrastructure. Who is to blame when this infrastructure inevitably fails? How do people understand infrastructural failure? And how do people's

understanding and their approach to solving it vary in relation to social status?

The Waverly water crisis is complex because there are a number of elements that are potential sources of contamination: pipes, bacteria, lead service lines, or low-density neighborhoods which include many abandoned houses. However, residents take this variation in risk and understand it through lenses shaped by their social networks and neighborhoods. Their ways of talking about the water overlap with the ways which they experience decline. Hence, Clint introduces the changing taste in the water in the same sentence as lamenting on changing social and political organization in the town.

Residents also experience the water differently, based on their geography, position in the infrastructure network, and socio-economic status. This variation in experience with contamination undermines a collective sense of a shared reality and breeds distrust among neighbors and neighborhoods. |

While there are many ways of understanding and talking about the water crisis, there are an equally variant number of ways of blaming the crisis. However, two trends stick out: blaming the city and blaming one's neighbors. These structures of blame are informed by wider political orientations: local conservative politics seem to go hand in hand with a former extractive economy which used natural resource wealth to fuel a large swath of development. That wealth has since dried up, leaving a belief system reinforced by perceived grievance rather than ideological purity. At odds in making a clearer political argument are a number of conservative residents who expressed voting for Donald Trump while also condemning the state for not investing in better water infrastructure or monitoring the municipal activities or their local elected representatives. This behavior is seemingly contradictory to contemporary understandings of conservative belief in the role of government or the scale at which it most successfully operates.

Residents' thoughts about contamination—and their perceptions of those responsible—shapes the way they think about their own movement efficacy. This circular logic buttresses residents' understandings of their situation and how they mobilize towards a solution. Ultimately, the way residents think about contamination is influenced

by their social networks (in the ways they understand the water crisis) and their social infrastructure (in the ways they understand the movement to save the city pool). How residents think and feel about the contamination that results from social decline lies between the pipes and the pool.

Residents' multiple understandings of the pipes leads to characterizations of those responsible for the water crisis. Those deemed responsible ultimately become figures in how residents understand their conundrum with the pool. The data presented in the relational account are just a snapshot of the ways in which movement efficacy was prefigured by past experience with the water crisis, the multiple conflicting explanations for the water crisis, and the actors and institutions to blame for the crisis.

Communities experience toxicity as distrust and confusion. Whether through a coordinated misinformation program or through their own generalized misunderstandings, the data above outline how an already confusing scenario becomes distorted through a mix of belief systems, social networks, and partisan identities. In this paper, I contribute to the literature on environmental mobilization by unpacking how toxicity shapes movement efficacy. When communities organize against contamination, the literature points to cases of mobilization and non-mobilization. Few, however, account for the failed mobilization question, namely how residents' experiences with contamination shape the way that they understand the efficacy of their collective action. This paper adds a case to the environmental movements literature by showcasing how residents' experiences with of toxicity shapes their understandings of how their social movement failed and highlighting the role of social infrastructure in the meaning making process. The interplay between socioeconomic transformation, narratives used to explain local phenomenon, social position, and toxicity undermine movement efficacy by casting collective problems as easily solvable by individuals and obfuscating the social causes of individual suffering.

CONCLUSION

How do residents of Waverly understand the town's water contamination, who (or what) do they blame for its condition, and why? Residents of Waverly understand the water crisis through an overlap of the confusion generated by their social networks, neighborhoods, and social infrastructure. By contrasting collective images, narratives, and explanations of the pipes and the pool, I show how the private manifestations of toxicity—residents' individual experiences with a particular contaminant—undermine the way that they organize against it through breeding distrust and confusion within the community. By lacking in reliable information about the infrastructure, or a reliable shared experience with the water, residents lack trust in each other and their leaders. This lack of trust negatively shapes movement efficacy and reduces solidarity.

Waverly could be a whole host of cities, towns, and regions across the industrialized and industrializing world. While much has been written about the process of industrialization and the resultant process of industrial decline, this paper presents data on how decline, through environmental contamination, shapes social understanding of toxicity and prefigures the claims making process. These general narratives for understanding social and economic decline both inform and are informed by broader political opinion; however, these schemes of perception do not map neatly onto political opinions regarding national issues, nor do they create a clear framework for understanding the variety of enthusiastic, reluctant, rational, and at times remorseful supporters of populist leaders.

Community Politics and Perceptions of Disaster Relief in the Texas Panhandle⁵

INTRODUCTION

Somewhere in the northern region of Texas lies a trail of burnt wooden fence posts, looming over an unkempt sea of bluegrass. In intervals of ten to twenty feet, the trail stretches from Miles Creek⁶ on to the Oklahoma border. Most of the posts are charcoal black; others still have the golden and red tinge characteristic of mountain cedar. Some have been broken by violent gusts of wind. Others, devoured by fire, remain hidden amidst flowers and spikelets.

Jonathan Tyler, a college rodeo champion turned cattle rancher, is taking us on a walk around his property. “It’s been a good season,” he says with a smile across his face, “there’s been plenty of rain.” You can tell by the fresh earthy scent of the soil. This is extraordinary considering that just a few months before, these pastures were nothing more than a charred landscape. The flowers, the trees, the bushes, the horses, the cows, even the prairie dogs that once roamed these lands were all gone with what has been one of the most devastating fires in Texas history. Looming in the air that grim Tuesday afternoon, residents recall, was only weighted black dust. We keep on walking across the grasses, tufting and waving.

The fires began just sixty miles northeast from Jonathan’s property. It was the spring of 2017. Local authorities suspect that the collision of two power lines caused a spark which must have landed on the dry prairie, but nobody is certain. At this point, nobody seems to care. It was a warm, windy day. With speeds of up to 70 mph, the fire stretched over several counties in less than five hours. Four cowboys died, 12,000 head of cattle were lost, around 482,000 acres were burned, and millions of dollars have been

⁵ This article was co-authored with Alejandro Ponce de León. Alejandro contributed preliminary drafts of the historical subsections of the Findings section.

⁶ To protect privacy, all names of individual respondents are pseudonyms. In a few cases, identifying details about interviewees, unrelated to the arguments pursued here, were altered. The names of cities, towns, and identifying landmarks are also pseudonyms; however, in the balance between accurately describing a natural disaster and how those disasters exist in space, regional and state names could not be changed.

required for re-fencing purposes. In a national news article that came out a couple weeks after the tragedy, a rancher from a nearby town succinctly described the episode as ‘our Hurricane Katrina.’

Jonathan pauses a couple of steps ahead of us. The heels of his boots are now buried deep in the mud. His baseball cap, pulled a little too far down, hides his expression. A herd of cows sense our presence and cautiously walk in our direction. They are not amused. We are told that these are the few animals that Jonathan was able to save from the disaster. For the last six years Jonathan has been renting grazing land from his grandfather but after the fires he decided to keep the animals close to freshwater wetlands. “At least for now.” They look at us warily. You can only imagine their sense of helplessness, the shock of all of it. Jonathan doesn’t want to risk losing the animals once again, not until he is able to pay for all the repair costs which, ideally, will happen at some point next year.

American farmers face a long road to recovery after natural disasters, especially in times of climatic uncertainties. Scholars have shown that the causes of contemporary wildfires are deeply entrenched in the way our socio-natural worlds have been composed (Simon 2016). As the recent Australian (2020) and Californian (2018) megafires have shown, wildfires are rendering untenable the very concept of projection and prevention (Petryna 2018), particularly in those sites where society’s imprint has radically transformed the landscape. A few months after the 2017 Texas fires, we visited Miles City hoping to speak to ranchers, landowners, and political and civic leaders about the aftermath. Given its nature and magnitude, we were interested in understanding how this small rural community gave meaning and acted upon the entangled effects of ecological depletion and rapid climate change.

Ethnographic accounts of the aftermath of natural disasters have been emphatic in portraying the sense of helplessness, abandonment, and vulnerability that communities experience (Barrios 2011; Oliver-Smith and Hoffman 2019; Revet 2019). In Miles City, we were expecting to find similar stories of despair and loss. To our surprise, when we sat and talked with locals, asking them to retrace the aftermath of the fires, they often told

us that rebuilding was their “favorite part of the story.” Further, in talking about the wildfires, we encountered accounts of how rapid response was prompted by effective strategies of community organizing: a group of people quickly coming together to provide aid, shelter, resources, and relief, helping each other out in times of need. It was the archetypical American story of charity grounded in the historical development of the country (Kaufman 2003).

But implicit to the local understanding of how disaster recovery took place – how their community organized and implemented disaster relief – we noticed a particular pattern of emphasis. Local narratives of disaster relief distribution were different from the financial data being produced by the federal government; the ways in which community members gave meaning to the aftermath of the tragedy did not necessarily correspond to other *ways of seeing* from state and federal bodies. The narratives we encountered show a distinction between local and federal understandings of how disaster relief happens, reminiscent of documented dissonance regarding ‘welfare’ (Edin & Lein 1997), ideology (Lane 1962), or inequality (Campbell et al. 1960)

To understand this puzzle, we read these *disaster recovery narratives* alongside the regional history of Miles City. We will show how community politics, which we understand as the communal ways of laying credit and blame as well as modes of articulating and solving collective problems, are central in cognitively organizing the actors and events that led to, ignited, and shaped the fires and their consequences. This history highlights how certain political relations are made visible while others are not. The argument is threefold. First, we present the narrativized history of Miles City as a frontier town in the new West. We think through how this history of booms and busts, integration and exclusion, has informed local understandings of state-society relations. We also introduce an example of an old family to illustrate how social and historical forces gave rise to the responsibility of powerful old families in the provision of resources to more impoverished workers. The charitable giving of such families is credited with helping Miles City weather a century of economic downturns and precariousness in the budding livestock and future oil and gas markets.

Second, we focus on how residents talk about the disaster and its recovery. Central to their narratives are how the wildfires deepened their sense of marginalization by the national community, and a sense of dependence on local forms of voluntary organization to make ends meet. The narratives reveal a pattern of voluntary donations that came from “everyday” residents, organized predominately via social media between other rural and Christian communities. Third, we attempt to explain why residents developed a decentralized, local, and Christian-centric narrative around recovery, and describe how *sources* of disaster relief shape the way people think and feel about them. We unpack and analyze what locals call the *cowboy way of life*, a disposition to charity that finds its roots in the values of the old West acquired from the community members’ rural and working-class upbringings⁷. In conclusion, by engaging in a thick description of the case of the fires, we illuminate how community politics shapes experiences and perceptions of disaster recovery.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Informal Institutions and Disaster

As we tried to make sense of the disaster recovery narratives in the community politics of Miles City, we found a social system dominated by old families. Once newcomers, these old families have since cemented their roots by becoming landowners and striking oil and natural gas in the middle of the twentieth century. Similar local patrons in the American heartland have been documented by contemporary community scholars. In Josh Pacewicz's (2016) comparative study of two Iowa cities, for example, the old families are shown to be central in the “public imagination” of residents in Prairieville. The presence of these old families divided municipal politics into distinct camps which “structured how they [residents of Prairieville] thought about politics” (2016:33). Old families, both in Prairieville and Miles City, provide an economic backbone to a community, leading

⁷ For similar work on the cultural and political dispositions of white working-class men in small town and rural America, see Desmond (2008) and Shapira (2017).

residents to understand their financial circumstances and futures through the fortunes, gifts, and exchanges of the old families. What we saw in Miles City could be described as a system of ‘everyday politics,’ an “understanding of politics as a form of solving daily private and public problems [...] that is highly personalized” (Auyero and Benzecry 2017:182).

We view the old families of Miles City as an informal institution. According to Helmke and Levitsky (2004), informal institutions are “socially shared rules, usually unwritten, that are created, communicated, and enforced outside of officially sanctioned channels” (727) that shape political life. Informal institutions, such as the political influence of the old families of Miles City, are important to everyday politics because they fill-in during scenarios where the state is not (or cannot) be present to solve problems. While our data cannot answer how many old families there are in town, the interviews we conducted demonstrate that these families hold considerable sway in how residents think about their town. In what follows, we trace the origins of this type of hyper-local politics to the founding of Miles City as a frontier settlement which struggled through decades of economic precarity.

Importantly, informal institutions should not be understood as being antagonistic to public expenditure at the federal level. Indeed, much of the activity in the case of Miles City shows how the social action coordinated by informal institutions are complementary to state goals, such as disaster recovery. Informal institutions exist alongside formal institutions, such as when the historical networks established by the old families were used in the provision of resources during the aftermath of the fires.

These old families, and the everyday political processes that they fund and produce, are products of the political, economic, and historical characteristics of Miles City itself. As we outline in the next section, the tradition and character of places are produced over time in physical and social processes. Space and place have become central concepts within cultural sociology for two interrelated reasons. First, in Gieryn’s (2000) reading, physical space becomes a place when actors attach meaning to space above and beyond its physical characteristic. And second, the confluence of history, local

environment, and the emotional and subjective power of place, structures the possibilities for action in the present by sponsoring local culture and institutions.

In sketching this dual meaning of place within social theory, Molotch et al. (2000) argue that places hold these distinctions through two empirically definable concepts: character and tradition. By character, they refer to the confluence of spatial features and inputs that make places memorable; by tradition, they refer to how character moves and changes across time. These two concepts structure how actors orient themselves towards and within places: action is not only structured by major distinctions in place but also through subtle qualities such as meanings, emotions, and memories (Paulsen 2004). Research shows that political actors play a large role in creating these subtle qualities, referred to as idio-cultural repertoires (Kaufman and Kaliner 2011; Smiley et al. 2016). The current study contributes to this literature by demonstrating how informal political actors also play roles in contributing to the idio-cultural repertoires of place.

Finally, much empirical research has shown that social networks are vital in disaster preparedness and recovery (Aldrich 2012; Aldrich and Meyer 2015). Because of their capacity to transmit resources and information in a timely manner, strong networks successfully organize residents before disasters (Reininger et al. 2013) and shape disaster recovery (Chamlee-Wright 2010). In this article, we analyze the evolution of a relief network through interviews with twelve key members to roots in a complementary informal institution (Helmke and Levitsky 2004), that is, a set of rules that shape the way the path of recovery outside of formal channels. We consider the effects of the informal institution on the disaster recovery narratives that are offered by the relief network, which obscures the role of the state and privileges local understandings of community in disaster relief. We find that the place character of the Old West and Old Families model, as an informal institution, structures residents' actions around disaster. It took a disaster to empower these networks, and the way that residents talked about the disaster recovery centered the types of relationships and reciprocity that the place tradition which centered these old families included.

In sum, the way residents of Miles City narrated their solidarity after the fires serves to reproduce everyday understandings of politics. Rather than talking about the state, and the millions of dollars of disaster aid funding that has historically buttressed the community against catastrophe, residents chose to highlight the role of their local community in helping each other. Thus, we theorize that *disaster recovery narratives* are themselves sites to understand everyday notions of politics.

DATA & METHOD

How do community politics shape experiences and perceptions of disaster recovery? The 2017 fires brought together hundreds of actors for a short period of time. This event offered a unique opportunity to study not only political culture and local governance in action but also the social network that helped carry out the distribution of disaster relief as such. This article presents the results of an ethnographic case study on the local understandings and logics of disaster relief using a varied toolkit to document and analyze what took place in a three-month snapshot of post-disaster recovery. The data are assembled from historical, qualitative, and quantitative sources. Given the time constraints that envelope our ethnographic object (Bourdieu, Chamboredon, and Passeron 1991), we build our analytic depth and rigor through a triangulation of these methods.

Our qualitative data is drawn from the accounts of the events as offered by twelve key actors in the informal relief network. Our interview sample contains a wide range of ages and an equal number of men and women. It also includes a diverse array of political opinions: self-identified Republicans, Democrats, and Independents, as well as those who classify themselves as either conservative or liberal. We also spoke to at least one member among the main religious factions of the community. We further organized a focus group with community members and follow up interviews to validate the narratives from the interviews. As part of our observational data collection, we lived alongside and participated in the everyday lives of residents of Miles City. We attended public gatherings, toured cattle ranches, visited in residents' homes, and shared meals at local diners and cafés. Our observation brought us to various church services, relief

distribution functions, neighboring towns and cities in the Panhandle, and an annual county fair. In all, our observations total one hundred and twenty hours.

For historical context, we studied archived collections of newspapers in the county museum and state archives. We accessed Acts of Congress, Supreme Court rulings, and records regarding the Southern Kansas Railway Company publicly available on the internet. To understand voting trends and campaign donations, we also analyzed publicly available information gathered from the Federal Election Commission dataset. We further accessed data from the United States Department of Agriculture to understand the role of agricultural subsidies in the production and extension of the panhandle ranching community. Finally, we added publicly available datasets from the Federal Emergency Management Agency that helped illuminate how federal disaster aid has historically buttressed the community against disaster.

The analysis of each source of data opened up the next set of questions. For example, we analyzed our interviews and field notes by reading them multiple times for narrative themes and patterns relevant to the research questions pursued here. Doing so required consulting federal statistics in order to understand community-based sources of credit and blame for disaster recovery resources. Through these statistics, we were able to strategically consult and construct the historical record in order to understand the emergence of concentrated wealth and powerful families in the region. We completed our analysis by connecting these different sources of data into structures which contextualize the observations of the community and the narratives of our interviewees, what Geertz (1973) refers to as “thick description.”

FINDINGS

Miles City is home to a community of no more than three thousand people. Residents generally describe it as tight-knit, ideal for raising a family. They say it has safe parks, little traffic, and low crime rates. There are job opportunities for manual laborers in the ranching and petroleum sectors and for higher skilled workers in the engineering, mechanical, and robotic operations of those sectors. The biggest employer is

the currently expanding school district; ranch hands are always in demand in the big ranches and when oil prices are high, companies hire people to work the rigs. According to the local Chamber of Commerce, there are approximately eighty registered businesses in operation—and a few more opening as we finished data collection. Miles City is also described as a very conservative town. The town is the county seat of one of six dry counties remaining in Texas and was counted among the ten most strongly solid Republican counties in the 2016 presidential election. It is a community grounded in values and traditions which celebrate both hard work and the fruitfulness of the land. City Manager Clark Landry says, “It’s a diamond in the rough.”

Families in Miles City have been here for five generations. By the end of the 19th century, communities uprooted by the Civil War found a lucrative trade in moving cattle from Texas to the slaughterhouses of Chicago (Lehman 2018). As the demand for red meat in the Midwest and the West Coast rose, Northern Texas became a prime destination for buffalo hunters and stimulated the migration of ranchers who were beginning to clear the high grasses for pasture. As a strategy to guarantee the expansion of American farmland, State authorities committed ethnic cleansing of the Comanche, Kiowa, Southern Cheyenne, and Arapaho peoples in the region, who were pushed towards Indian Territory in present-day Oklahoma by the U.S. military, settling what we know today as the Texas Panhandle. This removal marked the beginning of the ongoing colonial project of westward expansion.

From Austin, it is now an almost eight-hour drive to Miles City, nine if you stop for breakfast in Abilene. Most of our investigation was carried out in several weeklong visits. Every visit was planned significantly ahead of time as they were in themselves events. It is ironic how Miles City feels distant and inaccessible for an Austin-based research team, given that its growth and development was deeply tied to the broader history of economic and regional integration of Texas into the United States. In the search of alternate routes to California through New Mexico, the U.S. military began surveilling the Indian trails that crossed Fire County in the late 1860s. By 1886, Kansas businessmen and political leaders who had seen the market and business potential in this

beef and farm region began laying track through Indian Territory towards Amarillo, following these trails. Miles City, located in a shallow crossing spot in the Fire River, was designated as the midway point of two smaller lines. Around it, a townsite began to spawn.

Building a railroad across Indian Territory was not an easy endeavor. After Congressional approval, the company received governmental assistance in the form of land grants both at the state and federal levels. Similarly, the company began issuing bonds to townships that were exchanged for railroad stock and a promise that the company would build their own way. Businesspeople and civic leaders in Fire County, interested in exploiting the vast cattle and agricultural prospects of the plains, made sure through the acquisition of these bonds that the rail passed through the more fertile country. This practice had a significant impact on the local structure of land ownership. If open range ranching in public-domain lands had dominated the area in the early 1880s, the sale of bonds and state lands brought the emergence of smaller, privately owned and fenced ranching operations by the turn of the century.

It was a desolate country in those days. Life in Miles City was no different from the Wild West depictions as made famous by John Wayne with all its tumbleweeds, sandstorms, and mirages. At the municipal level, this relative state of isolation led civic organizations to serve as the primary local political institutions providing education, health, and social services to the community and intervening in the process of decision making. While numerous, these civic organizations were all organized by a growing land-owning elite concerned with the development of their community. The local chapter of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, one of the earliest political organizations in the region, donated the local public library that is still in use today. Their enduring influence has kept Fire a dry county until today. Similarly, it was the Presbyterian Church which provided guidance and resources, both human and financial, for the development of Fire County throughout most of the 20th century. "We're a small town, we're not a city," Kelly, a cow woman in her fifties, asserts as she explains to us why she is not applying for government assistance. "We just take care of ourselves."

The expansion of the train line further west encouraged migration, while the connection to new markets incentivized the development of local cattle ranches. With time, the rails also created demand for more urban luxuries such as a saloon, a fine diner, a mercantile store, a press, a barbershop, a blacksmith, and a hardware store, turning Miles City into a prominent social and commercial center. However, like many other boom towns at the time, the economy of Miles City was deeply sensitive to fluctuations. During the 1930s, the Dust Bowl devastated cattle production in the Great Plains, followed by the Great Depression and the collapse of regional livestock markets (Kreidler 2008). In 1951, a train engine suffered a boiler explosion and Miles City's roundhouse was consumed by fire. The Panhandle and Santa Fe Railway Company, who by then owned this line, decided that instead of rebuilding they would relocate the terminal to Amarillo, where in 1954 the company had constructed a new fourteen-story office building. This drove trade posts, stores, and restaurants to go out of business, transforming the community.

A regional newspaper declared Miles City “the next ghost town.” Nancy Alexander, a self-identified cattlegirl now in her eighties, was a high school senior back then. As we talk to her, she wistfully remembers seeing the empty house where Abby, her childhood friend, used to live. Throughout the following decade, the local population saw a decrease of almost 20%. Only those who could afford it stayed. These were critical times for the community, Nancy recalled. It was also turning into a conservative town: If in the 1948 presidential election, 17% of the votes went to the Republican candidate, by 1956 it was 60%. However, this crisis also tightened the community relationships of sociability and interdependence. Several of the older residents of the town remember this period through dinners and fundraisers, celebrations and bazaars. To keep morale up, for example, Miles City mayor Noah Accola installed mercury-vapor lamps around the town, so that people could go out or stay up all night. “If we are going to be a ghost town,” Mayor Accola's son Eli, who we introduce in the next section, remembers him saying, “We'll be the best-lit ghost town in the United States.”

Seventy years later, and against all the odds, Miles City's economy is thriving. Residents say this can be attributed to the fortuitous discovery of oil in Fire County in 1955. By the summer of 1957, the first oil well was drilled and operating. As we continue with her recollection, Nancy confesses: "If the oil had not come in about that same time, we might have died." But finding oil not only reactivated the local economy, it also took it in new directions. With coffers full of oil money, the community was able to invest in the development of its public infrastructure, such as a high school and an elementary school, a county hospital, the YMCA, and the football stadium. Then came the natural gas. In 1978, oil production reached the 1,800,000-barrel mark, turning several old families into millionaires in no time. There was money in town, and everyone felt it. Bryce Cavalier, whose family has been in Fire County since the early days, remembers the 1980s quite vividly: his father, for the first time in his life, had enough money to buy a tractor. By 2019, there are more than 2,400 producing wells in Fire County, making it one of the largest gas producers in the nation and one of Texas' wealthiest counties per capita.

When you're hot, you're hot

This wealth does not mean Miles City is a posh community. If you walk around Miles City on a Sunday, you will mostly find regular cowboys driving around their decade-old trucks or grabbing lunch at the small mom n' pop diner after service. There are not many visible signs of affluence here, much less extravagance. At church, the sermon focuses on financial stability, while parishioners frequent the local café which offers special prices and discounts to regulars. Economic historians have suggested that the expansion of the American frontier was one of the factors which undergirded the United States as one of the most egalitarian societies in the 18th and 19th centuries (Lindert and Williamson 2016). In 1835, Alexis de Tocqueville had observed that granting property rights to white men regardless of nobility was the root of the American ideal of democratic equality. But there is compelling evidence suggesting that in the early

20th century, the increase of land concentration had adverse effects on several markers of economic inequality (Ramcharan 2010; Smith forthcoming). Contemporary rural America is undoubtedly not the Tocquevillean country, but one noticeably divided between those who own and those who don't—and this has political consequences.

Concentrations of wealth and power make their own geography. As one continues through Miles City you will find Main Street, an impeccably kept brick road surrounded on both sides by Victorian houses as well as republican buildings. It is believed that the first rodeo in Texas was held here. Unlike other parts of town, there is no litter, the walls are unvandalized, and no door is sun-bleached, chipped, or scratched. There are plenty of trees and streetlamps too. Behind Main Street lays the riverbank and the plains, the edge of town. The colors of autumn are beginning to show on the persimmon, soapberry, and Cottonwood trees that light up the landscape of the lower parries. It's quite scenic. Residents tend to describe this place as “sophisticated,” “respectable,” or “stylish.” It also feels like one of those small towns you would see on TV shows where everything is vibrant, everyone waves at you, and where people cares for one another.

At the end of Main, there is a two-story house guarded by a couple of Confederate cannons. This is Eli and Martha Accola's home. Everybody we've met in town talks about them with great respect and admiration, attributing the beauty of this town to the couple. Not only has the Accola family been involved in local politics for decades, but the community credits them with providing the economic backbone that Miles City needed to weather the forces that turned so many of its neighbors into ghost towns. “They've invested their dollars in the community,” says Andy Shoulders, a local banker. “That wasn't for profit. It was to keep the community as a really good place to come and live.”

We had scheduled an appointment with Eli and Martha days in advance. It is a Saturday morning. Eli opens the door for us, followed by a warm “howdy.” He is wearing a perfectly ironed flower-patterned shirt, vibrant as the day it was purchased. He is himself: a character with a flamboyant demeanor, the type you wouldn't expect to meet in a town like this. He invites us in to visit with him in the living room. Everything here

is a piece of art. The big pieces have a tag under them, referring to the date and the author. The smaller ones, like the sugar canister or the curtains, are pointed out by our host.

Eli's grandfather, Luca Accola, originally came from a small Swiss village and made a living as a door-to-door salesman during white settlement of the panhandle. In 1913, Luca moved to Miles City, where he converted to the Presbyterian Church, married into a landed family, and opened a department store known in the region for its quality goods. Luca's son, Noah, followed his footsteps and got himself involved in a variety of business ventures in agriculture where he developed the family's property. Noah, Eli says, was so brilliant in business that he could make complex calculations in his head. Unexpectedly, it was the land and not its fruits which led him to make a fortune in oil and gas holdings. And it was his wealth that also turned him into a regional public figure, leading him to serve for two terms in the Texas House of Representatives as a Republican in the 1960s—a time when the chamber had a Democratic majority.

The couple takes us out for lunch to a small cafeteria downtown. Our talk is littered with smiles and remarks about how generous a man Noah was. Or about how he established endowment funds in many regional universities in North Texas. Or the story when Martha, being mayor of the town at the time, donated trees, with her own money, to anyone who needed one. There ended up being more than three thousand. The couple related stories about how Eli is close to the Bush family, or about the apartment he owned in Trump Tower in New York City, where he saw time and time again, "Daddy Trump." It is common knowledge in town that the Accolas vote Republican. They have also been the most significant contributors to the Republican campaigns in Fire County for the past three decades⁸. These generous five-digit contributions have bought them access to some of the most intimate circles of many politicians, and have solidified relationships, as seen from the recurrence of the Accolas contributions to their campaigns over decades. People

⁸ This is based on publicly available information gathered from the Federal Election Commission dataset on January 2019. This dataset represents federal electoral campaign donations in the United States. The data are available to the public on the FEC website in several files in varying formats.

from neighboring towns say that if they had the Accolas, they wouldn't have declined. "It's not like we have more money than other people," Eli claims, "[some people] with all these [properties] right there" just don't have their "vision about what needs to be done [...] and a lot of them wouldn't give a dime to starving orphans."

Service is what would encapsulate Eli's life, or how he accounts for it. The couple portrays themselves as doers, people who do what is best for their communities because they think that it is only through collective growth that a real impact in the world can be made. "We thought, well, if we can make this town beautiful and interesting quality and everything then young people will want to raise their dogs and kids in Miles City." And Miles City is undoubtedly what they have dreamed about. As Eli recalls Noah's legacy, he evokes one of his famous dictums: "Money is like manure. If you spread it around, it does a lot of good. But if you pile it up, it just stinks." This dictum nicely captures the Accolas' relationship to Miles City. As one of the "old families" of the town, the Accolas find themselves as central nodes of a local social system geared towards generosity and reciprocation to hold the town together in trying economic times. According to those we spoke to, old families like theirs were once the foundation of social life in small-town America. In a context of increased income inequality and land accumulation, however, what were once horizontal relations of reciprocity acquire an entirely different tone and character. As Pacewicz (2016:33) describes, these types of relations are powerful ties that shape "the city's economy, voluntary associations, municipal decision-making bodies, and Republican politics." These material relations, we will see, generate the symbolic bonds that come to life as the citizens of Miles City confront the fires and distribute aid.

Down into the deepest fire

Residents say Miles City has always been a windy place. On our walk back to our motel room, we hear it sweeping through Main Street; the leaves dancing, being blown away. On the morning of March 6th, 2017, winds coming from the Rocky Mountains reached the southern Great Plains at speeds of up to 50 miles an hour. It was a hot and

dry day in Miles City, with temperatures around 80 degrees with relative humidity in the single digits. Given the conditions, fires were expected to happen anytime. The National Weather Service had been issuing warnings about the potential for wildfires since March 4th. Forest Service officials, anticipating the emergency, ordered a team of their best firefighters to travel to the Panhandle. Dozens of spot fires were seen in Oklahoma and Kansas that morning. By 2:00 p.m., they were already being reported in Texas.

Residents also say that everything happened fast that day. Really fast. Some of them are still trying to put the pieces together in their heads. First, the fires hit the grasslands northeast of Miles City. The local fire departments sent their teams to work on it. By 5:30 p.m., it seemed like they had everything under control until the direction of the wind inexplicably shifted. Instead of blowing straight out from the west, it came from the north. The firefighters were caught off guard. Big gusts of wind, up to 40 and 50 miles an hour, blew the fire across the county line in minutes.

The fire was jumping over the firebreaks. A “fire tornado,” it was exceptional. Jonathan, who was working on some refencing that day, was one of the first to see the smoke as it came into Fire County. The wind was blowing severely, he says, drawing dirt with it so one could hardly see the smoke cloud. He got into his truck and drove towards the site to see if the firefighters could use some help. Everyone here knows that the Panhandle burns; this land has been devoured by fire several times in the past. “They just keep coming,” says Jonathan, “so you already know what to do.” Electric companies, children, the chains dragging behind pick-up trucks; everything can start a fire. This time, however, was unique in its scale and speed. “You could tell it was totally out of control.”

As he was cruising down the old dirt road in his silver Ford truck, Jonathan must have passed by Bryce Cavalier’s ranch. We met Bryce on his ranch on a rainy evening four months after the fire. Bryce is a six-foot tall man in his mid-60s, a practicing Methodist and registered Republican. On the afternoon of the fires, he was sitting next to his daughter, watching the smoke through the windowpane of his family's living room. The extent of the cloud was alarming, so they decided to get a little cattle sprayer ready

just in case the fires came any closer. Once they were outside, they heard the wind howling “like some horror movie,” foretelling that the worst was still ahead.

He began moving the cattle, taking them to his sister’s property on higher ground. The animals were scattered, trying to find their own way out. By 9:00 p.m., he had only moved about a hundred head. Hundreds more remained, but the unfettered flames had already reached the property. It was something Bryce had never seen before, something for which he didn’t have words to describe. It was going so fast, and the blazes were so high that at that moment he could do little else than stand there, paralyzed, and watch how in just a few minutes half of his herd, his little sprayer, and the truck were devoured by the glowing red flames. “Everything happened fast,” he repeats to us in confusion.

Nancy Alexander, another neighbor of Fire County, had been running errands that day. By the time everything was happening at the Cavalier’s ranch, she was at home more than ten miles away. She had planned on doing taxes that night, spreading her paperwork out on the dining room table, but her daughter Dusty called and told her what was going on. She already knew about the fires, Nancy says. She heard about them on Main Street earlier that day. But she hadn’t realized how bad they were until she peeked out the kitchen window and noticed the glowing embers and sensed the woody smell of smoke as the fires pushed towards her property. Dusty arrived an hour later. She got her mom, the dog, and the cat inside the car and left immediately. They drove south without any direction, cutting fences all along the way. There was not much more they could do, Nancy tells us. She remembers people everywhere they went. Many people. Some she had never seen before. All their neighbors, on the roads, not really knowing what to do or where to go, standing mute before the flames.

Imagining all these pastures on fire is not easy. From Bryce’s living room where we now stand, all you can see these days is an expanse of thick grass, rustling in steady waves with each gust of wind. Like many other grasslands in Fire County, the forage here consists of bluestem grasses. Bluestem is drought-resistant, easy-care, native grass that plays an integral part in erosion control. They are also known to be highly flammable. The abundance of bluestem grasses is tied to the development of the Reagan-era

Conservation Reserve Program, by which farmers enrolled in a 15-year program to remove environmentally sensitive land from agricultural production in exchange for rental payments. Many residents in Fire County participated in the CRP, which means that many of their properties have been covered in a sea of bluestem grass for decades. While 2011 was a drought year, the years that followed brought abundant rainfall and “a lot of extra grass.” But the first few weeks of 2017 were dry, Bryce tells us, which turned the bluestem grasses into what he calls “standing gasoline.” The signs were there. “When you've got the fuel standing there just waiting to be ignited,” Bryce now reflects, “and then you add wind to that, you've got a recipe for disaster.”

If you're going through Hell – Keep on going

Cattle were the first reported casualties of the tragedy. Thousands of them. Every person we talked to carried images of dead cows on their phones. Charred bodies and blackened bones could also be found all over social media. The morning after the fires, Bryce went back to the ranch, “just to see what was left.” It was early. With smoke in his face, he couldn't clearly grasp the magnitude of the situation. First, he found some of his remaining animals, just standing there, looking at him. “They were in shock,” he says. They didn't know what to do, and there was nothing for them to eat. Just barren soil and ash fallout. As the sun rose, the “war zone” was revealed: all dead animals. They were scattered everywhere. Some stuck in the fences. Some lying dead next to the railroad tracks. What was once soft and bright was now dry and dull. Bryce decided to immediately pile up the carcasses.

Catherine Duke, a ranch-hand for the Accola family, was there that morning on the ground while her patrons were on a helicopter examining the effects of the fires. Her accounts of the day begin with one word: “devastating.” She first tried to find some of the surviving animals, but, amidst the confusion, she could only find tragedy. “I mean, to see a big old 2,400-pound bull laying out in the middle of the pasture, in pain. [It was] just heartbreaking.” Then, with a gun in her hand, she decided it would be better to put down

the animals that were severely scorched. “It was sickening, I was in tears...we are not cruel people.”

But this was not the only option. Brenda McCook, one of Bryce’s neighbors, opted for other ways to deal with her wounded animals. Several of Brenda’s cows, with their hooves burned and bloody, could not walk. To those, she administered morphine, one by one. While most of the calves survived, several of her “momma cows” had their udders burned off. To these “babes,” Brenda ended up bottle feeding until she could find them a new home.

To understand the severity of the loss, we had to practice ethnographic reflexivity and interrogate our urban bias which regards cattle as commodities to instead see them as living beings entangled in social, cultural, and affective relations. Cattle herds in ranching communities are the collective patrimony of several generations who have made a living this way. They are what organize communities, the product of a legacy, a history, an accumulation of family ties and efforts. They are friends, pets, and companions. They are the outcome of years of ranching, of genetic compositions, of breeding and matching, which produced some of the best animals we will never see again. “It was hard to even describe something like a bad nightmare,” admits Catherine as she remembers in pain. “People in this area stayed in shock for weeks. I mean, those images just wouldn't go away.”

Animals were not the only casualties. By noon, more shocking news began to spread: four members of the community were found dead. Three of them, ranch-hands, were located on the now-sandy estate they worked in. They were devoured by the flames as they were trying to move heifers out of place. Their four-wheeler was found tangled in a barbed-wire fence. The fourth one, the clerk of the hardware store on Main Street, suffocated as he was driving back home. A friend with whom he last spoke warned him against driving 26 miles back home, as the officers were closing the highway. “I have a wife and baby, and I have the only car,” he is said to have answered, “I need to get to my family.” The car was found on the highway the following morning. His body, around midnight, was found close to a pond. He was probably trying to escape the flames.

From the testimonies we collected, the feelings from the days after the fires were that of mourning. Numerous silences haunt the narratives we encountered. There was always someone ready to help, they tell us, or someone who could use an extra hand. Something to fix. Something to do. People gathered around Main Street that week, where the city manager and his team were providing food and shelter. There, the Presbyterian Church opened an improvised kitchen, and many of their members volunteered both at cooking and serving.

And in the way people described the disaster recovery process, we also began to see a pattern take shape. Certain sources of aid were credited with providing valiant service for the community, while others were barely mentioned, left as footnotes, blamed for disorganization that was only saved by the steadfastness of local organization. In the sections that follow, we explore how feelings of neglect from the national community and feelings of empowerment from the local community shaped the experience of disaster recovery.

Because you're mine, I walk the line

Johanna Prater, an Iraq war veteran who now works at a local museum, texted her relatives in Oklahoma the week after the fires. To her surprise, they had no idea about what had happened. “I don't know if there was something more interesting that day or that week. I don't know.” It is not common to see Fire County on national TV if it has nothing to do with high school football. Most people here say they don't really watch much TV these days, either. There used to be a local station in Miles City, with their own news, but then a storm hit the dish tower out and the company decided to move out instead. People prefer listening to the radio and, like in many other homes across contemporary America, Fox News is part of the domestic soundscape. But no one we talked to recalls seeing any coverage about the fires there either.

The lives that were lost, the homes and property destroyed, all felt close to home. It was the first time this community really needed help, and no one seemed to be

bothered. This is a point they stressed to us in a complex narrative of alienation and marginalization. Some residents do remember seeing an NBC reporter during the third week. Then, some journalists came by the end of the month. But that's about it. Residents wanted the nation to hear about their tragedy. Many were curious as to why the president didn't tweet about it, although the area was declared a state of emergency. The lack of coverage, some think, was due to the fires taking place in the Panhandle and not in a "liberal" town: "California burns 5,000 acres, it's on national news, [but] we burned 150,000 acres in one night, and it was two weeks before anyone heard about it." Johanna concludes with an eerie statement: "You know, they may notice a difference in their beef prices because a lot of cattle died."

But in some accounts, the word was indeed spreading, and a disaster recovery narrative began to take hold. In the nail salons and coffee shops of the region, people were talking about what was missing from national television. "Many rumors that so and so lost their house, so and so lost their barns, [or that] they lost everything." People from nearby towns began showing up, first as spectators, then as participants. Fences needed to be repaired. Pens, barns, and much of the livestock infrastructure that supports the local economy needed to be rebuilt. Pictures began to be shared all over social media. Some grotesque, others bizarre.

As the second week progressed, the hashtags #PrayForPanhandle and #PrayForTexas also began to be used by residents to raise awareness about the tragedy that was afflicting the entire community. The news about the fires became so prominent in the livestock and Christian communities that many of their members decided to come up and help to the best of their ability.

Like many other community pastors, Jason Barton had a busy schedule the week after the fires. He was called upon to perform the memorial service of some of the victims as well as to support their families in their time of need. He was driving all around the county, from ranch to ranch, town to town, wherever he was needed. While his own family and animals were not affected by the fires, his grasslands were: he lost about eight miles of fence and several acres of pastures. The problem was that no one in

his household could take care of this situation, and he had no time to do it either. He had to wait for things to cool down and pray that the losses would not multiply due to his negligence. But things unexpectedly changed for the Barton family. Here is Pastor Jason's recollection:

There was a friend, he wasn't a friend at that time, [...] I didn't even know the guy. Was driving through Dallas [...], and he went to feeling like the Lord had led him to help us a deal. He wanted to put together a deal to get some fencing supplies and to come and do it. And through that process of him doing it, there were seven different cowboy churches come together [...] They gathered up eight miles of fencing material, brand new. They brought it up here to me and then had a date set, and they come and stayed for ten days and put up a fence on my place.

Most of the people we talked to agree that the unsung heroes of this tragedy were these volunteers. The people who nobody knew, but who helped with any form of donation. Some say it is the "ranch mentality," others the "Christian mentality." The fact is that many people came in their time of need. People from Austin or Houston, from Alabama, Florida, and Illinois. Children and older residents. Men and women. No one really knew who they were or where they came from, but they just did. At times they would come with convoys of semi-trucks filled with fencing materials, tractors, cattle, skid loaders, hay, and feed. Three Christian congregations canceled their youth trip and came out to Miles City to build fences. Other times it would be girl scouts selling cookies and sending back the money. Some were able to pray or stop by to help somebody clean their homes while they were out in the fields. People came together in every capacity to help their fellow ranchers. Similarly minded residents from across America felt the weight of the times, solving problems through community-building rather than waiting for the State. "Trump says, 'Let's make America great again.' Well, I think God said 'I want my church to be known again,' because that's exactly what I saw," Pastor Jason reflects. "[...] and I say that's the miracle." Many months after the events, they still kept coming.

DISCUSSION

Things are gonna be the way they were before

But this is only one half of the story. Or rather, this is how the story is seen by those who were on the ground. The other side of the story cannot be told without considering the role of the State. Amid the aftermath, civil and political leaders in the community came together multiple times to coordinate relief distribution. By various accounts, we know that Accola's elder son was not only involved in the organizing but provided technical infrastructure—the family helicopter— and personnel to assist the community. We also know that just two days after the fires, Texas Governor Greg Abbott declared six Panhandle counties disaster areas. In his statement, Abbott even asked the U.S. Department of Agriculture for a disaster designation to activate the agency's emergency loan program, a request granted a few days later that same week. How it all happened so fast and effectively? This is something that is still up in the air.

The Farm Service Agency under the USDA made the four programs available to those affected the week after the fires. While this decision undoubtedly facilitated the coordination and distribution of the urgent relief funds, the programs were not new to the region. For the past three decades, the majority of the beneficiaries from the USDA livestock subsidies have been ranchers in the Great Plains. Even more, between the years 1995 – 2019, ranchers in Texas alone received more than \$1,900,000,000—around 17% of the total share⁹. Producers in Fire County, specifically, received around \$700,000 in livestock subsidies in 2016, the year immediately before the fires. While no emergency was declared, that sum was 25% of the total transferred to Castro County which, afflicted by a severe flood, was the biggest beneficiary that same year in Texas.

According to the USDA, more than \$250,000 was transferred to Fire County in 2017 in the form of commodity subsidy, namely, hay rolls. And in 2018, another

⁹ To put this value in perspective: this is even more than what Nebraska, Kansas, and California received altogether in the same period.

\$200,000 were transferred in the form of disaster subsidies. But by the third week after the fires, the problem was not how to get the word out there, but what to do with all the help and attention received. As a matter of public interest, the city council decided to open the old train warehouse and turn it into a donation center. The hay, on the other hand, was stored in the empty lots owned by the municipality. At this point in the story, it was not the city manager or the city judge but individual citizens who were becoming the points of contact in the community during the emergency.

One of these key figures was Brent Mitchell, a regional program manager. Brent was in charge of overseeing the day-to-day operation of the Livestock Supply Point, unloading all the trucks, and holding daily meetings over the phone with multiple State agencies. But back in the day, Brent used to sell cattle for a living and had many contacts in the cattle business. He is not a “big Facebook guy,” but at the time of the tragedy he felt it was necessary to reach out to some of his friends and tell them what was going on. And, indeed, many old colleagues responded. Some even reposted his pictures, which led to more and more people recognizing his name and sending donations. “I just did my job. I did what I thought was right and worked hard at it, and did the best I could. [...] God still had a plan for those contacts to be used”.

“Those affected by the wildfires have a long road ahead in rebuilding their lives and property, and this assistance will aid significantly in that effort,” Governor Abbott had said in his statement about the disaster. “In true Texas fashion, I have no doubt that the Panhandle community will come out of this stronger than before.” While this was true via the State-sponsored grassroots disaster relief network that was taking shape, a different problem emerged: no one wanted to receive the donations. Or at least no one wanted to be the first to do so. Brent met with us in the privacy of his office to recount this story. He begins by describing how his father died of cancer a couple of years earlier. “My dad never, ever once complained, not once.” However, Brent learned fast that his dad had code words to express his suffering. When he asked his dad how he was feeling, and he responded “pretty good,” Brent learned that that meant that he wasn’t feeling well at all. “Well, these ranchers were speaking in code words.”

What Brent was describing is a set of disposition towards charitable giving and receiving that we call the *cowboy way of life*. Grounded in theories of everyday politics and patronage, the cowboy way of life is a historical way in which cowboys, ranchers, and migrant workers in Miles City related to their bosses, landowners, and landlords. At the center of the cowboy way of life is an ethic of self-reliance and, when necessary, a preference for local resources and organizations—the State, as the archetypal outsider, is not recognized. We saw the cowboy way of life at play as we connected the financial role of old families with the stoic character of the cowboys, a patron-client tie in which those with resources implicitly knew how to communicate with their ‘clients.’ It was a community network of patron-client relations that was reignited by the grassroots organization, even though the resources were coming from different places.

Take for example, Pastor Jason, who had plenty of his grassland burned. Brent recounted how he called Pastor Jason the Saturday morning after the fires. “Jason, we're getting hay in here like crazy,” He said, “We've got plenty. What do you need?” And, like everybody else, Pastor Jason responded, “Oh, I'm doing okay. Just make sure my neighbor gets some first.” At first, Brent accepted this answer and went on to the next person. However, after hearing it so many times from so many ranchers, by the third week, he had realized that this was really code for: Yes, I'm hurting, and I need help too.

“You know, pride gets in the way” he says as he looks up at us from his desk. According to Brent, he called Jason the next morning. Instead of asking if he needed hay, he asked “how much?” “Well, I could use a load” Jason said, in Brent’s recounting. But Brent decided right then that he was going to send him three loads. That experience helped Brent and his team develop a strategy with the rest of the ranches. If they asked for one load, they sent three. If they asked for two, they sent them five. Brent stressed it was not about feeding the cows that day. The cowboys and the ranchers were going to have to feed the cows the next day, and the following day, and the day after that. If the team wanted to restore and sustain the community, they had to distribute all the help and resources as soon as possible, while doing it on their own terms.

CONCLUSION

Our day will come – if it takes a lifetime

As we look through the window and into the ocean that his prairies compose, we ask Bryce if the EPA has ever said anything about the hazards of bluestem grasses. “I didn't really hear anything about them,” he says, “[...] it's a big joke. They aren't doing them any good, but they're coming and taking over in my opinion.” Every time the State was brought up in our conversation, it was responded with a reproach. Residents “wanted them to stay away.” Last time we talked to Bryce, he was planning to buy some firefighting equipment because on the day of the fires, the fire department didn't come to help him out. Not even the following day. Or the next week. They didn't come at all. He can only count on a group of Christian missionaries from Idaho, who he now calls his lifelong friends.

In his 1838 *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville argued that through the emergence of puritan Christian moral communities all across the US, democracy was able to become a governing principle of the then nascent nation. Being that the township was the prime space for these communities to manifest, de Tocqueville said, “local institutions are to liberty what elementary schools are to knowledge.” (2004:68) He also argued that while politics in America were part of everyday conversations, politics here usually meant local and regional politics—conversations over national politics, with little to no impact in their daily lives, were quite uncommon. Much has changed since the early 19th century. However, Miles City is a contemporary representation of the ideal-typical communities that de Tocqueville studied: ones with strong bonds between the members of the community, where everyone takes care of each other, in their bests, and in their worst. And it is these bonds that were able to channel the relief necessary, to speak the cowboys' language.

It is not that the State presence was not there; it was just that it is not registered as seen. The history of local power relations privileged the emergence of specific patron-client ties that prefigures how politics and care are registered as possible. These ties are

based on a relationship between capital and labor that is grounded in mutually beneficial charity and protection. We find this articulation in the cowboy way of life, a disposition towards charitable giving that refused to ask for help but needed a tie which knew how and when to help, an unspoken code. As such, when the donations came through, this historical network of charitable giving was reactivated. In a competition among givers, or sources of disaster relief, we find that some were able to communicate in the language necessary for the cowboys, and others were not. This is then reflected in how the community credits the sources of aid that did well and blames the sources that were unable to communicate in the local language. It is in this moment that the state is cast as unhelpful, regardless of whether or not the data gathered reveals the opposite.

Wildfires severely affected the states of Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas in the year 2017. “It has been a very unusual year for us,” state forester George Geissler manifested, “this year we also had to bring in personnel from 34 different states, in different capacities, to address the fires” (Wallace 2017). While the story of the residents in Miles City shows the power of community in times of crisis, it is essential to keep in mind that this is only a story of a complex yet effective political articulation of several invisible actors. As climate change becomes more evident and impactful, drought conditions will get worse, and more forms of social suffering will begin to unfold. The politics of visibility then becomes a crucial question in these precarious times. If, for example, the year 2018 will be remembered as the year when the Camp Fire broke out in northern California and burned around 153,000 acres, many in the nation probably are not aware of the Mallard fires that burned 75,530 acres in the Texas Panhandle in late May. Much less about the other nine hundred wildfires that occurred all over Texas that year. Like the Fire County fires, there was little to no national press coverage of these incidents. However, fire behavior analysts from the Forest Service agree that “Here in Texas, 2018 is the biggest fire year since 2011.”

As fires are going to be more common in the plains, they will be putting more and more people in danger of losing their livelihoods, homes, and lives—not to mention regional food security. These circumstances will determine many things for future

generations, such as where people will be able to live, where and what commodities can be produced, and how the government should allocate its resources. Narratives of disaster recovery are essential sites to study the complexity and articulations in which politics takes place. Through these narratives, we see how people cast praise and blame, who they trust and who they support, and how they see or not see those forces and presences in their lives. Data shows that there were plenty of volunteers and plenty of public support. But narratives of neglect from national authorities and preference for Christian understandings of volunteers dominate; recovery is a social process that is historically contextual. As climate change increasingly ravages our rural landscapes, scholars need to pay closer attention to how people frame who they blame for the disaster, and most importantly, who is to be credited for the recovery.

Conclusion

This dissertation attempted to shed light on a broad question: How do people weigh legitimacy in lay knowledge that they use to access resources and solve local political problems? In the process of answering this question through three case studies, I have had the opportunity to reflect on how we, as social scientists, make our own claims to knowledge legitimacy, validity, and reliability. In what follows, I reflect on how the central themes of this dissertation are drawn out of data that was produced through imperfect mechanisms, and how these limitations shape the claims that can be made. First, these data were produced from research studies designed and guided by different research questions, which makes it difficult to comport findings across research designs. Second, these data come from imperfect population samples which center some types of voices while excluding others, and which ultimately shape the way claims are made within the data. Lastly, these data are a snapshot in time, while social life and the knowledge that we make of it marches onward. I expand on these three limitations to the arguments that make up this dissertation below.

The theme of these chapters focusses on how people know what they know. In Chapter 1, I looked at the topic of legal knowledge. Without access to a lawyer, where do people receive legal knowledge and how do they consider it legitimate? In Chapter 2, I asked, how do residents of Waverly understand the town's water contamination, who (or what) do they blame for its condition, and why? How do those understandings of culpability shape people's ability to collectively solve problems? And in Chapter 3, I asked, how do community politics shape experiences and perceptions of disaster

recovery? While these questions are similar in that their answers come from common understandings of local questions, the strengths and weaknesses of the cases, and my ability to effectively rule out alternative explanations, are different across cases.

The data that makes up Chapter 1, “Seeing Like a Court,” comes from 62 interviews with people who have business before the court. While the study did collect observational data in the courtrooms, this dataset was not used to understand the sources of legal knowledge I document in my paper. While observing the courtrooms, it was rare that a defendant would say publicly that their knowledge came from a particular source that was not a lawyer. In the event of an extended back and forth between defendants and court officials, it was even rarer for the defendant to speak enough words for me to be able to consistently deduce what they were saying and the claims they were making. These exchanges were instead documented through field notes, which were summaries of conversations rather than verbatim transcriptions.

Given this lack of observational data, my study is limited in the claims that can be made. In this scenario, I find it useful to think about the difference between what the data from an interview tells us versus what the data from an ethnographic observation could tell us. Interviews get at attitudes, beliefs, preferences, and thoughts. Observations, on the other hand, uncover behaviors, practices, and routines.

A lack of observational data is why I ultimately decided to ask the follow up question: how do people consider the legal knowledge they receive from various informal sources to be legitimate? While I cannot say that I was there at the moment they received that knowledge, I can make a claim for how they *thought* about the quality of that

knowledge and why. Similarly, I cannot make a claim as to whether the legal knowledge gleaned was consequential to their cases, because I was unable to match up respondent interviews with observations of cases and how the outcome of those cases matches against a more objective set of data that lists the source of legal knowledge.

One way to fix this – and consequently to get at the question of how people work the informal knowledge they receive into their daily lives – is by following around a few key informants in a participant-observational study. Including participant observation in the daily life of study respondents would give me windows into a few social worlds which would contextualize sources and outcomes of legal knowledge.

First, I could better understand *whether* and *how* a lack of institutional knowledge exists in the lives of study respondents. Being alongside the participant for an extended period of time gives an opportunity to observe what sorts of knowledge is being produced, and what sorts of institutional expertise exists alongside it. Observation would also allow theorization of whether and how institutional expertise is inaccessible, for reasons of capital, geography, access, etc.

Second, a longitudinal participant observation study would give me a front row seat into how legal knowledge is produced and why. I would be able to see, for example, how people interact with others in their social networks, neighborhoods, places of work, and criminal legal institutions. While courtroom observation data is accessible, as mentioned above, following around a key informant on their activities before and after the court, i.e., focusing on the informant, rather than the courtroom, as the unit of

analysis, would provide a new window into that experience which would be consequential to the study at hand.

Chapter 1 could greatly benefit from two additional sources of data to back up the claims being made: data on case outcomes to match sources of legal knowledge with their consequences, and ethnographic observational data in order to contextualize how and why sources of legal knowledge exist in relation to institutional expertise. In the next section, I trace out how Chapter 2 would benefit from similar methodological expansions and different types of data.

Chapter 2, “Boomtown Poison,” is ultimately about local politics; however, the way that residents of Waverly define politics is already rife with preconditional beliefs. Interviews with residents were not representative of a variety of political opinions because the self-selection of residents in the town already privileged a certain set of ideas and discourses, specifically conservative political beliefs and ideas. People believe in these discourses, which more often than not are held in common, because they are omnipresent; much of political life passes by in Waverly without critical thought on how to problematize the ways residents know what they know or how their preconceived notions might be the source of those thoughts and feelings.

One way to deal with bias in the data is through the introduction and strategic use of negative cases. Negative cases are used in qualitative research to dive deep into an individual respondent or event which goes against the dominant theory that is emerging from a majority of observations, in order to draw out ways that the trend is preconceived. Some residents I spoke to in Waverly were self-identified Trump supporters, and some

were not. Others mentioned their “conservative” politics, and a small few were self-identified liberals. The conclusion of chapter 2 argues that grievances about the water do not map onto political ideologies for this very reason: my selection of Waverly as a case prevents me from making a wider statement about whether or not political leanings in the county were to blame for the ways that residents think about the water. Residents might not talk about party politics because everybody in the county is a Republican, and this particular political leaning comes with a certain set of preconceived discourses about hard work, self-reliance, and public infrastructure. A way to get at this is to do comparative case study, and to see whether majority Democratic counties and majority Republican counties deal with their problems in similar or different ways.

Chapter 2 makes a series of claims that are unable to effectively rule out alternative explanations because the selection of Waverly as a case was designed for a study with a different set of research questions. Ultimately, a comparative case would be needed in order to understand how hegemonic beliefs shape the observations and discourses of residents.

In terms of the limitations of the sample selection, Chapter 3 is about how a community handles a wildfire and how their narratives about community politics shape the way that they experience that wildfire. My interview sample is small: 12 in-depth interviews and 2 focus groups. A high ratio of these interviews (n=5) came from elites, which shapes the representativeness of my sample since the population of Fire County had far fewer elites than 5 out of 12. This sampling bias prevented me from more accurately representing voices from marginalized communities in the sample.

While I did collect two interviews with working ranch hands, I was not able to gain access to the Latinx population of Fire County. Doing so could have significantly shaped my findings and the claims I am able to make with my data. I tried to compensate for this by gathering a diverse array of voices across confessional lines – I found that religious groups are a latent way in which socio-economic and ethnic differences were pronounced in the community. However, given the over representation of elites within my sample, I am not able to rule out alternative explanations such as my data was representing a pro-elite discourse within the population.

This matters when trying to address questions such as how people understand their community's response to a natural disaster. The argument I make from the data I have access to claims that the history of the community in Fire County, and the way that they understand and practice patronage politics set up by old families in the historical frontier, shapes their understandings concerning their recovery from devastating wildfire. This account of their community privileges certain forms of social action and organization over others: namely, people do not talk about the role of the federal government and the millions of dollars in disaster aid that the federal government has distributed over the years. Instead, people I interviewed focus on the agency and power of their local organization in building the resiliency that emerged after the fires when it came to resource distribution.

Several studies note that when disasters strike, there is a breach in the way the community understands itself. I did not see this in my data, possibly because of the high ratio of elites I have within my interview sample and my lack of a wide enough selection

of respondents to really understand the way that residents' narratives of the town break down in the context of a disaster. Designing a longitudinal study would help document how residents' beliefs change over time and whether the natural disaster caused a breach in the ideological discourse of disaster recovery. Of course, no one can predict the timing of a natural disaster, but being in the field for a year would give more context and opportunities for sample expansion, alongside the chance that I could observe a similar type of event.

In sum, there are methodological limitations and ontological realities that emerge from the access that I had. I attempted to keep the claims of my research squarely within the lines of what an interview-based study could provide backing to. These data limitations shaped how I made claims about participants' thoughts and feelings, the opinions residents had of different events, and how those were shaped by opinions they had about other things: legitimacy of knowledge, opinions of the town and their neighbors, and opinions of different forms of community organization in a disaster relief network. Of course, what people say is different from what they do, and that is a large weakness of the claims I am and am not able to make in the preceding chapters.

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