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Dead Man's Switch: Disaster Rhetorics in a Posthuman Age

Daniel Patrick Richards
University of South Florida, danielpatrickrichards@gmail.com

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Dead Man’s Switch: Disaster Rhetorics in a Posthuman Age

by

Daniel Richards

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Department of English
College of Arts and Sciences
University of South Florida

Major Professor: Carl Herndl, Ph.D.
Joseph Moxley, Ph.D.
Meredith Zoetewey, Ph.D.
Marc Santos, Ph.D.
Ali Yalcin, Ph.D.

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Dedication

To my wife, Jes, my parents, and all the people and authors who have knowingly and unknowingly driven me to completion.
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Of course, this entire project would not have been completed without the kindness, encouragement, and mentorship of my dissertation committee. Dr. Moxley, you have been there from the beginning, always encouraging and pushing me to develop my capabilities as a scholar. Dr. Zoetewey, you have provided me with the intellectual and emotional strength not only to get through my toughest of times but to succeed on the other end of them. Dr. Santos, you have always been the ultimate refiner and motivator of my academic ideas. And, lastly, to Dr. Herndl, you have consistently been a guiding force in my evolution as a confident scholar. To my entire committee I say with deep appreciation and gratitude: thank you.

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Lastly: Go Leafs Go.
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Abstract

When a disaster the magnitude of the Deepwater Horizon blowout and oil spill takes place, is it natural for the news media stories, investigative reports, and public deliberation to focus almost exclusively on finding the person or group responsible for such a horrendous scene. Rhetorically speaking, the discourse surrounding the event can be characterized as a reductive form of praise and blame rhetoric (*epideixis*). However, these efforts, while well-intentioned, are troublesome because searches for the one technical cause and the sole personal culpability are thwarted by the sheer complexity of the ecological, technological, scientific, institutional, and communicative network required for such a disaster to take place. Thus, to demonstrate the insufficiency of extant models of disaster in a variety of fields, which tend to privilege human-centered approaches, *Dead Man’s Switch: Disaster Rhetorics in a Posthuman Age* explores the ontology, technical documentation, and rhetorical theory of disasters through a posthuman lens.

To find a more critical approach to understanding the nature of disasters in the twenty-first century, I ask the following questions: How do rhetoricians and technical communicators account more fully for the human and nonhuman forces at work in the precipitation of disaster? How do rhetoricians and technical communicators find an approach to ecological catastrophe that goes beyond the mere “environmentalist rhetoric” characterizing the public response? Through the application of several posthumanist theories, my project develops an approach to disaster that complicates traditional ways of approaching causality and blame.
I use accident reports, news media stories, and popular literature as data for this project. By examining these texts, my project has broad implications for technical communication, rhetorical theory, and philosophy of rhetoric.
Chapter 1. Rhetoric, Agency, and Disaster

Introduction

Not too long ago, I was out for an outdoor Sunday brunch with some acquaintances of mine in Sarasota, a beautiful town along the southwestern coast of Florida. It was the kind of restaurant where churchgoers flock decked in high quality, thin, oftentimes white, clothing, which only contributed more to my speculation of what it must have been like to live a privileged life in the south in the 1920s. Despite the high temperatures that spring morning, rounds of hot coffee brought about good conversation, which eventually led into their inquiring into the type of work I do as a teacher and scholar in the Department of English. After the usual back-and-forths about the state of literacy today and the group’s own personal predilections toward and experiences with English as a subject, they were pleasantly surprised to hear that my research project was dealing with a non-Shakespearean topic that actually hit relatively close to home: the “BP Oil Spill.”

One of my acquaintances, June, a well-traveled and intelligent woman who was modest about the fact that she attended high school with Hilary Clinton, was particularly intrigued by this revelation. Having lived in the Gulf coast region for most of her life—or at least long enough to be comfortable in slacks and a cardigan at this time of year—she had known many people with various degrees of proximity to the oil industry. One person she knew in particular actually

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1 I prefer the Deepwater Horizon blowout as a descriptor of the event but the descriptor used here is much more conversation friendly.
helped design the Deepwater Horizon rig, or did he help build it? Or ship it from Asia? She couldn’t remember. (This despite the fact that her occasional strained face and upward glances indicated to everyone how much she really wanted to.) She was visibly passionate about the topic and had much to say. My poor wife, having been the spectator in this exchange countless times, had resigned by this point to slightly lifting her head in a characteristically polite effort to maximize the amount of her neck exposed to the cool misting pipes outlining the outdoor ceiling. After excitedly asking me more about the nature of my project, June, two waiter visits later, with my wife still looking at the ceiling and with my sunglassed face now peering into my third cup of coffee, asked me a question in a manner not unlike a person eager to skip the preamble before a dose of bad news. “So,” she inquired, rather pointedly, “what really did in the rig: human error or faulty technology?”

The explosion of the Deepwater Horizon oil rig, along with the subsequent spilling of oil from the Macondo 252 well in the northern part of the Gulf of Mexico, some 40 miles southeast of the Louisiana shoreline, was confidently labeled by President Obama at the time as “the worst environmental disaster in U.S. history.” From the moment of the explosion minutes before 10:00 pm on the night of April 20th, 2010, to the 36 hours of ensuing fires on the rig causing the football field-sized rig to sink, to the free-flowing gushing from the deep water well, to the capping of the gushing well-head nearly three months later on July 15th, 2010, and to the continued relief and clean-up efforts driven by local, national, and international volunteers and the financial reparations levied on British Petroleum (BP), this “oil spill” can be best understood
as a totalizing event—and it will be labeled here as such. The Deepwater Horizon blowout includes the explosion stemming from a pressure gauge; the subsequent oil spill resulting from the opening of the oil well from said explosion; and the ecological impacts reverberated throughout the Gulf waters, shorelines, and beyond. And while the event is colloquially referred to as the BP Oil Spill, the name only paints part of the picture. BP in this instance leased the Deepwater Horizon rig from Transocean, one of the few rigs in the world large enough to meet the requirements necessary of drilling at unprecedented depths. Halliburton was contracted to complete cement jobs around the pipeline itself for reinforcement purposes. Cameron, a parts company, sold the blowout preventer (BOP), which would play a major role in the precipitation of the explosion, to Transocean. Save for Cameron, each of the companies—BP, Transocean, and Halliburton—had employees working side by side aboard the Deepwater Horizon rig that night.

Contextually speaking, the origin of the Deepwater Horizon blowout can be traced back to the middle of the twentieth century, when drilling for oil in the Gulf really expanded. Federal policies instituted in the later 1950s and early 1960s placed quotas on oil imports and provided relief and support for otherwise high-priced domestic oil extraction (Priest). In coordination with the discovery of deep water wells and an excelling in technological capacity, hundreds and thousands of workers “flocked” to the Gulf as 411 tracts of leased land were granted, matching the total number up to that date in history (Priest). Despite the risk of hurricanes and the unprecedented number of rigging operations, the Gulf Coast saw its biggest industrial boom, even to this day. Yet, despite the fact that government and corporations were working together, it
was not to ensure public safety and environmental protection. The industrial boom expanded quickly, and government regulations were reactionary, often instituted after rig failures (cf. Union Oil, Santa Barbara, January 1969; Chevron, Main Pass Block, February 1970) and not before their creation. It was not irregular for installations to be left uninspected, as “federal and state regulatory bodies were unfunded and understaffed.”\(^3\) so much so that in 1969 only 12 people were responsible for overseeing over 1500 platforms (National Commission Report). And, as one consultant noted in 1970, the supervisors and inspectors of these regulatory bodies lacked in experience and expertise and were even ordered on some occasions to “cut corners.” In that same interview, which is touched on in the 2010 National Commission report of the Deepwater Horizon blowout, the anonymous consultant relays his take of the precarious circumstances: “Each oil well has its own personality, is completely different than the next, and has it own problems. It takes good experienced personnel to understand the situation and to cope with it” (National Commission Report 28).

Getting the experienced personnel necessary to understand the singular problems of the Deepwater Horizon rig did not take long. When the National Commission on the BP Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill and Offshore Drilling released its Final Report (herein referred to as NCR) to the President on January 11th, 2011, it was understood that the prestigious collection of engineers, scientists, and politicians who published the report would outline the event in high detail, culminating into a discourse of “blaming” characterized by singular technical causality. The expectation of accident reports is that experts and engineers would work tirelessly to diagnose, deduce, and attribute the causes of the spill to one instance, one fault that acted as the

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trigger to the deaths and destruction of so much, one artifact that did not live up to its expected performance so as to assign culpability for this injustice.

What the report inculcates in our understanding of the Deepwater Horizon blowout is that, like many other “accidents” or “incidents,” there were a networked series of actions—or inactions—that precipitated the event: the drilling fluid designed to detect gas in the muddy reservoirs under the ocean floor that was not used in testing procedures; the Deepwater Horizon oil rig itself, which was leased by BP from Transocean and that replaced a previous rig damaged by a minor hurricane and that which was continually understaffed; the underwater cement that only works when the drill is perfectly centered within the well opening, a setting that Deepwater operators overseen by BP supervisors ignored (Lustgarten 46); the muddy oil streaming from the Macondo well that was more potent, more concentrated with higher levels of gaseous hydrocarbons because of its 18,000-foot-deep living quarters; the decision to forego that testing of “mud” (or slurry) that was pre-approved by the U.S. Interior Department’s Minerals Management Service (MMS); the congressional standards of operability passed a few years before 2010 that kept the gap between industry-specific minimal practices and best practices quite cavernous; quality tests were not performed; gas pressures via mud removal from the Macondo well were not tested; and even the design of the drill itself—a singular tube, as opposed to a double-enforced one—all complicate the expectation that investigative accident reports should work reductively to assign causality to one technical factor.

Despite the complexity of disasters, industry experts (like those involved in the NCR report discussed above), courts, and news media outlets are tasked with identifying the responsible party, or at worst the most responsible party. Waters need to be cleaned, ecosystems
need to be recovered, small business need to be repaid, state tourist reputations need to be salvaged, and families of the victims who died on the rig need to be assuaged of their pain, both through judicial and monetary means. Someone needs to pay. These efforts of doling out responsibility take place within a variety of contexts important to technical communicators and rhetoricians. Governmental, non-profit, and corporate investigative commissions use industry experts to crack open the black box of the events and identify, within the genre of accident reports, the primary technical cause. State supreme court cases use forensic rhetoric to sort out eye-witness accounts and first-hand testimony. News media outlets do their best to reflect the public outrage, engaging in a mode of epideictic rhetoric. Regardless of the context, the post-disaster rhetorics are all in one way or another couched rather haphazardly within a negotiative mode of inquiry that must acknowledge the daunting complexity of technical causality while still upholding the moral and/or ethical responsibility to identify and direct blame. This type of inquiry, manifest in many forms and genres, essentially grapples with a question that for some time now technical communication theorists and practitioners have found themselves seeking to answer: how can we better understand capacity for and scope of human agency within increasingly nonhuman collectives of technology and ecology?

Now, the NCR does assign causality to one technical factor to an extent: it does identify the failed batteries of the blowout preventer (BOP) as the “primary cause” of the blowout. Identification of the primary technical cause is the obligation of industry specialists; such an identification plays a crucial role in the litigation following the disaster as the judicial proceedings seek to find culpability with the party “most responsible” for the single technical failure. The scope of human agency in the NCR is related inextricably to the technical failure of
the BOP, essentially ensuring a conflation of blame (human will) with causality (technological efficiency). For example, it was found that BP was criminally negligent because the specific tasks on ensuring energized batteries and conducting pressure tests after the Halliburton cement job fell upon their senior rig operator’s checklist. The way causality is framed in technical reports by the various stakeholders has a profound impact on the trajectory of legal proceedings and ultimately the state of the culpable corporation and the ecosystems affected as well as the policies resulting from the event (Sauer “The Dynamics of Disaster”).

How can technical communicators more aptly account for the emergent material forces at work in a multidimensional (technological, ecological, political) disaster? How can technical communicators balance the seemingly indistinguishable actions of humans and nonhuman objects? What is the role of the technical communicator in terms of articulating “degrees of agency” in terms of the causal forces precipitating the disaster? Much in the vein of the work of Slack, Miller, and Doak (1993), which reaffirmed the organizational authority of the technical author, these questions are posed under the assumption that technical communicators in the context of disaster have the potential to make a significant impact in the way agency is understood in the larger public context. While technical communicators find themselves in a variety of roles serving a variety of masters in a variety of organizational milieux, this project casts technical communicators as facilitating a certain scientific prudence or phronesis in the way publics coalesce around disaster. While many theories have been established in the rhetoric of science, this project adopts a complex theoretical lens to analyze the rhetoric about science, specifically the science of disasters. The way past disasters are articulated frames the ability to

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4 This heuristic is loosely modeled after Carolyn Miller’s tripartite distinction among the three possible foci of study: the rhetoric with science and technology, rhetoric within science and technology, and rhetoric about science and technology.
prevent future ones. As such, technical communicators play a key role in many ad hoc efforts to investigate and understand “what went wrong.” This dissertation acknowledges this power and argues that careful attention to the distinction between material conditions and moralizing blame can provide more productive pathways for action in saving any one shareholder from being unfairly villainized, influencing legal proceedings, and educate stakeholders in ways that ultimately shapes public policy.

The Problem

This dissertation then approaches the Deepwater Horizon blowout as a fundamentally rhetorical problem. This is not to say that the millions of gallons of oil in the Gulf of Mexico are harmfully percolating through countless ecosystems because of organizational communicative lapses, but rather that the current rhetorical approaches to avoiding such catastrophes are clearly insufficient. To echo the sentiment of disaster and risk communication specialist Beverly Sauer (2003), we keep having these problems. The publics affected by the disaster consistently misunderstand the nature of disaster, consistently misunderstand how to talk about and thus regulate disasters.

It is my belief that these failures stem from a consistent reductiveness in the way the relationships between human and nonhuman agency and causality and blame are depicted. This reductiveness is a symptom of a much more ubiquitous approach to ecological issues that resembles a modernist iteration of environmentalism. While there are myriad types and instantiations of environmentalism (Hay 32-33), one of the most defining characteristics of environmentalist discourse in North American culture is the ontological split between nature and
culture, locating the vast majority of agency and responsibility in humans as stewards and protectors of “the natural environment.” Again, while impossible to define broadly, environmentalist approaches oftentimes lack the pragmatic potential to enact real social change by choosing to disregard the deeply embedded material infrastructure already in place in favor of a humanistic ideal of ecologically-centered consciousness. Environmentalists who protest and who vouch for boycotting BP are being reductive by conflating technical causality with moralizing blame. Boycotting a single oil company resembles a single hit in a Whac-A-Mole game rather than a fundamental dismantling of the game itself. Or, more intellectually, “[even] the best-intentioned reformer who uses an impoverished and debased language to recommend renewal, by his [or her] adoption of the insidious mode of categorization and the bad philosophy it conceals, strengthens the very power of the established order he [or she] is trying to break” (Horkheimer and Adorno xiv). So long as objects of blame are identified, so long as single corporate entities are singled out and vilified for the consequence of an ever and always emerging collective of human and nonhuman forces, the underlying material infrastructure will not change.

In addition to unproductively conflating blame and causality, environmentalist discourses also tend to promote the modernist division between human agency and natural conditions. For example, disaster analyst Professor Andrew Hopkins recently released a book *Disastrous Decisions* (2012). In the book, Hopkins argues that what really matters in disaster accounts is knowing why they did it, why the decision-makers involved thought they were making the “right” choices when, in reality, they were taking the rig closer to the “brink of disaster.” Hopkins attempts to “get inside the heads” of decision-makers involved in the precipitation of
the blowout and subsequent spill. Hopkins reflects the form of environmentalist discourse that pervades such ecological disasters. His work contributes to the notion that technological and ecological disasters are the result of a mishandling of nature and a failure to master technology. He is contributing to the mythos that disasters are ineluctably linked to the failure of human reason or conscience and thus theorizes disaster primarily in terms of morality: greed and efficiency as human dispositions result in catastrophe.

Undoubtedly, poor decisions by humans (that includes politicians and rig workers) played a role in the Deepwater Horizon blowout, and Hopkins does qualify his work by stating clearly that humans and organizations are merely a portion of the causes involved in the events. However, consistently locating the majority of meaning in disaster within the confines of Man’s reason and conscience too narrowly delimits the external, material agents involved not only in the initial blowout but also in the seemingly interminable summer of risk and cleanup that resulted.

The issue with environmentalist discourse is that, while it does reveal a genuine concern to improve our relations with “nature” and “the environment,” it does so within the larger framework of modernist thought (Hay 2002). While environmentalism does stem from an ethics of care and responsibility, it continually re-instantiates anthropocentric ontologies that heighten the impact humans have had on the world (MacDonald 8); further, the act of naming the “environment” as such creates an inevitable divide between people and the natural world (cf. Morton 4), implying that there is a way to separate the three ecologies\(^5\) that constitute this world. The ethics driving environmentalist discourse decries our failure as care-takers rather than

\(^5\) Guattari’s *The Three Ecologies* (1986), in an effort to fight against the notion that “nature” is in decay, puts forth the idea that the issue resides deeply in all three “ecological registers”: the environmental, the social, and the mental.
resisting the self-centeredness of human positioning, without recognizing, as Jane Bennett (2010) puts it, just how foreign we are. Environmentalist discourse gets located in the same arena as other ideologically-driven “causes,” casting itself as a philosophy for nature as opposed to a philosophy of nature. As Jeffrey E. Foss (2009) notes,

Environmentalism is a movement that has sprung up spontaneously from the soil of human concern and conviction, so it suffers from the weaknesses that afflict popular ideologies. It is not a system of thought, but a loose collection of putative facts, questionable creeds, and hastily conceived calls for action—fortified throughout with plain truths, worthy ideals, and sound plans. (8)

Current instantiations of environmentalist discourse are ill-equipped to provide any longterm avenues for change in terms the oil industry because it engages in reductivist rhetoric and maintains a deep ontological division, somewhat paradoxically, between its adherents and the stuff they so long to protect.

Let’s return to June’s question from the opening anecdote of this chapter: “So, what really did in the rig: human error or faulty technology?” We see now that it is indeed a fair one, of course. But it’s much more than that. The reductive formulation of the question represents the human desire for clear-cut answers. The “or” represents on a much deeper level an ingrained ontological divide between human agency and technological or ecological determinism that so often characterizes and even at times caricatures the understanding of disasters, particularly in terms of causality. The Deepwater Horizon blowout and subsequent oil spill is, relative to other disasters investigated by the field of technical communication, one of the most multitudinous in

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6 See, for example, Challenger shuttle explosion, Air Midwest commercial airline crash (Zoetewey and Staggers), and mining collapses (Sauer).
terms of its political, industrial, financial, ecological, and technoscientific \(^7\) impetuses and thus by its sheer complexity resists any sort of reductive approach that seeks to tease out where human action and culpability ends and where ecological risk and technological (dys)functionality begins. To do so would be akin to asking any of these impossible questions: Who’s responsible for the industry standard technology being overmatched by millions of years old hydrocarbons teeming with upward pressure below an uncertain and near-seismic topography? Which senior rig operator overseeing the cement job to secure the pipeline hours before the blowout should shoulder the burden of a century-old cutthroat competition between oil distributors? Which president’s reputation should be tarnished for his well-intentioned deregulation of industry safety protocols in favor of the continued extraction and championing of domestic oil? How many years should then British Petroleum (BP) CEO Tony Hayward spend in jail for the failed batteries in the all-important blowout preventer (BOP)? Adopting an either/or approach to the Deepwater Horizon blowout implies that one can easily distinguish between intent and action, that one is able to clearly identify the scope and degree of agency by analyzing human will and technical failure separately. The study of disaster requires a more complex lens through which to account for the overlapping and connected forces involved in an event of such magnitude.

*Agency in the Posthuman Age*

This question of human agency within larger material networks and organizations, according to Andrew Mara and Byron Hawk (2009) in a recent special issue in *Technical Communication Quarterly*, is a distinctly posthuman one. Posthumanism for Mara and Hawk “is

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\(^7\) This project uses Latour’s definition of technoscience since the distinction between technology and science in the context of the oil industry is rather weak. I also use this term because it gets at the larger apparatuses involved in its execution.
a general category for the theories and methodologies that situate acts and texts in the complex interplays among human intentions, organizational discourses, biological trajectories, and technological possibilities” (3). Technical communication as a field finds a certain symmetry with N. Katherine Hayles’ (1999) assertion that “we have always been posthuman” (209), especially when considering that Carolyn Miller’s (1984) early groundbreaking work in the development of the field was essentially “trying to come to grips with the complex systems a writer, text, and reader encounter, affect, and live in” (Mara and Hawk 2-3). Hayles’ assertion resonates still as technical communication theory and practice continues to situate individuals in larger organizational (Spinuzzi, Hart-Davidson, and Zachry 2003; Zachry and Thralls 2007), methodological (Wysocki, Johnson-Eilola, Selfe, and Sirc 2004; Selber 2004), institutional (Hawk and Reider 2002; Knievel 2006), technological (Johnson-Eilola 2005; Wardrip-Fruin and Montfort 2003), pedagogical (Hart-Davidson and Grice 2002; Hawk 2004; Mara 2006), and communicational (Mirel 2003; Albers 2004) networks. By consistently extending the rhetorical situation beyond the mere sender and receiver to include the organizational and technological contexts in its triangle (Slack, Miller, and Doak 1993), technical communication is “perfectly situated” to adopt theoretical approaches that “counter theories that see human action and production from either the perspective of individual intention or the dominance of larger human discourses and mechanical structures” (Mara and Hawk 3, emphasis added). In this purview, disasters are not so much “caused” so much as they “emerge.” In terms of this project, a posthumanist approach to disaster creates a new task: to move beyond reductive human-centered notions of agency by exploring the ways in which nonhuman elements of the blowout exert themselves upon those involved.
Posthumanism, however, is an umbrella term and not a standalone “theory” readymade for rhetorical analysis. Beyond that, posthumanism, as defined by Mara and Hawk, does not go as far as other theories that also question the monopoly humans have on agency. Speculative Realism (Bryant et al.), Speculative Materialism (Meillassoux), Alien Phenomenology (Bogost), New Materialism (Braidotti and DeLanda; Coole and Frost), Object-Oriented Philosophy (Harman), and Actor-Network Theory (Latour) are all concerted efforts to move beyond human-centered models of science and philosophy towards investigations and articulations about how individual nonhuman things actually have their own portion of agency through some variation of transactions. In the context of the Deepwater Horizon blowout, one can clearly see how significant the singular object of the blowout preventer (BOP) is in the post-disaster inquiries and subsequent deliberations. As stated above, it was BP’s proximity and relationship to the BOP that ultimately led to charges of criminal negligence and manslaughter. In the materialist, specifically Latourian sense, the BOP is granted some degree of agency because it contributed to the formation of a new actant: in the technical and judicial proceedings, BP was actively transformed by its association with the BOP from an oil company to a murderous group of careless, greedy individuals. Within the scope of posthumanism, a materialist reading of the Deepwater Horizon blowout encourages us to see how certain human groups and individuals are significantly affected by their relations to material objects. This reading makes it known that granting any one object that much power in an event as complex as this one is problematic at best. It also leads me to my driving research questions: How does the acknowledgement of the role of nonhuman objects in inquiry and deliberation affect or change our methods for communicating disaster?
And, further, how can this acknowledgement lead to real future change in the form of legal decisions and policy changes?

This dissertation argues that posthumanist, specifically materialist approaches are better equipped to grapple with the situatedness of human action in technological and scientific landscapes because their scope of agency extends beyond the human and thus offers an opportunity for disaster rhetorics to move beyond the unreasonable blame game and the reductivist approaches to causality. The conflation of blame and causality is a vicious cycle, as the public urge for blame encourages reductive inquiries into causality and reductive inquiries into causality in turn limit the scope of responsibility doled out by the courts and news media, further stifling a pathway for large-scale improvement and change.

Chapter Overviews

Due to the magnitude of the Deepwater Horizon blowout and the weaving\(^8\) of several complex theoretical approaches, this first chapter has served as an “agency roadmap” of sorts. Within the cacophony of technical jargon and moral outrage surrounding the Deepwater Horizon blowout is the problematic configuration of agency that this project seeks to challenge: the conflation of blame with causality. In understanding agency as a rhetorical function and also as the driving force behind the judicial, epideictic, and technical inquiries into disaster, this chapter has laid out the complexity of the event and discussed the question of agency as it relates to rhetoric.

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\(^8\) Perhaps Spinuzzi’s posthumanist move away from the metaphor of weaving and towards the metaphor of splicing would work here.
The next four chapters of my dissertation are organized according to discipline, but all pertain inextricably to investigating the presence and/or impact of nonhuman agency in the context of disaster. Threaded throughout is Mara and Hawk’s notion that “[a]s organizations become more complex, technologies more pervasive, and rhetorical intent more diverse, it is no longer tenable to divide the world into human choice and technological or environmental determinism” (3). As a whole, my dissertation structure reflects such multivalent inquiries of the disaster.

Complex events require complex theories, and chapter two does most of the theoretical heavy lifting. Having laid the groundwork in chapter one by showing the sheer complexity of the Deepwater Horizon blowout, this chapter challenges the theoretical underpinnings of environmental rhetoric by extending the rhetorical situation to include nonhuman agents with a thorough discussion and application of posthumanist methodologies. Modernist environmentalist discourses, further covered in chapter two, are unable to provide the necessary theoretical grounds for teasing out the distinction between blame and causality and fail to avoid the moralizing of technoscientific endeavors. This chapter, in the same vein as Timothy Morton’s concept of “ecology without nature,” explores the possibility of approaching ecological disaster without a predisposed environmentalist moral disposition. Further, and more importantly, this chapter provides this dissertation with the theoretical groundwork necessary to make subsequent arguments in the next three chapters.

Chapter three builds off of theory covered in chapter two by using nonmodern ontology to help fill a gap in the field of technical communication. This chapter examines the accident reports of the major stakeholders involved, specifically the National Commission Report and the
BP Report. Understood as rhetorical documents that promote a certain narrative and thus ontology about disaster, these reports are analyzed from a posthuman standpoint. I posit that framing disaster reports as posthumanist documentation provides an avenue for risk communication to further bridge what I am calling its “third divide,” that is, the divide between humans and nonhumans. My work complicates current theories and practices of stakeholder communication by exploring the notion of nonhuman, non-living entities as viable stakeholders in the event of disaster. In doing so, chapter three provides technical communication with a new understanding of accident reports, a genre that directly impacts public policies (Rude; Miller).

Disasters, by very definition statistical anomalies, provide glimpses into cultural values by serving as exigencies for those affected to attribute causality to the event. Disasters—be they “natural” or “non-natural,” distinctions clarified later—provide opportunities for those involved or affected to trace the forces at work in the political ecologies also and always involved. Claims of attribution and causality, as discussed in chapters two and three, are normative ontological propositions in that they argue for a certain way of seeing the world. In chapter four, I turn the reader’s attention from technical communication to rhetorical theory, specifically Aristotle’s more neglected branch of rhetoric: epideictic. The epideictic genre, characterized as discourses of praise and blame that shape and maintain cultural values, has been applied to internal forms of scientific communication (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca; Sullivan) but not, as of yet, external, more public-oriented forms of scientific communication. Couched in a rereading of Gorgias’ seminal *epideixis, Encomium of Helen*, and using popular literature and news media as the field of analysis, this chapter posits understanding the epideictic genre as a rhetoric of agency. In doing so, rhetoricians can expand the rather limited understanding of the loosely
defined epideictic genre and also move towards a more complex, less reductive, anthropocentric approach to causality and blame in the midst of ecological disasters. Epideictic rhetorics are so closely wedded to the notion of causality that a disruption or more accurately an expanding of the very notion of causality would necessitate a reassessment of how we assign praise and blame, specifically in the midst of disaster. Chapter four thus provides rhetorical theory with a contemporary rereading of a classical text and a new account of epideictic rhetoric as a rhetoric about science that seeks to maintain cultural ideologies in the midst of disaster.

This fifth and final chapter explores what it means to integrate nonhuman entities more fully and meaningfully into political deliberation about and social action towards technoscientific problems in what Ulrich Beck calls a “world risk society.” This integration of nonhuman entities into the formation and circulation of publics sets better conditions for communication and thus for the development or productive democratic habits (phronesis).

**Conclusion**

Disasters are complicated. Disruptions in systems, be they systems of air travel, architecture, public safety, or natural resource extraction, have a tendency to reveal the inner complex workings more than the consistent functionality of systems tends to reveal. As I write this dissertation, BP is coping with the recent news that it has been charged with 11 counts of manslaughter and will pay upwards of $4.5B in settlement funds. This reality is based largely on our ideas of causality and how closely it is related to blame. Since accident reports, composed by technical communicators, play integral roles in the handing down of verdicts (Rude), we must be careful in our attempt to construct causality.
Chapter 2. (Re)Inventing Disaster

“My hypothesis is that the ecology movements have sought to position themselves on the political chessboard without redrawing its squares, without redefining the rules of the game, without redesigning the pawns.”

Introduction

Deepwater Horizon’s roots can be traced back to the middle of the twentieth century, when drilling for oil in the Gulf really expanded. Federal policies instituted in the later 1950s and early 1960s placed quotas on oil imports and provided relief and support for otherwise high-priced domestic oil extraction (Priest). In coordination with the discovery of deepwater wells and an excelling in technological capacity, hundreds and thousands of workers “flocked” to the Gulf as 411 tracts of leased land were granted, matching the total number up to that date in history (Priest). Despite the risk of hurricanes and the unprecedented number of rigging operations, the Gulf Coast saw its biggest industrial boom, even to this day. Yet, despite the fact that government and corporations were working together, it was not to ensure public safety and environmental protection. The industrial boom expanded quickly, and government regulations were reactionary, often instituted after rig failures (cf. Union Oil, Santa Barbara, January 1969; Chevron, Main Pass Block, February 1970) and not before their creation. It was not irregular for installations to be left uninspected, as “federal and state regulatory bodies were unfunded and understaffed,”¹ so much so that in 1969 only 12 people were responsible for overseeing over 1500 platforms

And, as one consultant noted in 1970, the supervisors and inspectors of these regulatory bodies lacked in experience and expertise and were even ordered on some occasions to “cut corners.” In that same interview, which is touched on in the 2010 National Commission report of the Deepwater Horizon blowout, the anonymous consultant relays his take of the precarious circumstances: “Each oil well has its own personality, is completely different than the next, and has it own problems. It takes good experienced personnel to understand the situation and to cope with it” (National Commission Report 28).

What would it mean and look like to take the consultant’s words quite literally: to interact with the materiality around us in more “personable” ways? The consultant’s attempt to anthropomorphize oil rigs, to understand each rig as its own unique assemblage of parts and affective histories and locations makes a move in a meaningful direction—a direction that echoes Jane Bennett’s work on what she calls “vital materialism,”2 which is a version of posthumanist theory that emphasizes a more increased attunement to the active participation of nonhuman forces in events (2010). The consultant’s words, and Bennett’s work, question traditional conceptions of agency—conceptions that I think are highly rhetorical in nature. They call into question well-established notions of what it means to be a human agent in the context of a much larger assemblage of nonhuman (both technological and ecological) forces. To what extent do we as human agents exert control over our surroundings and to what extent do our surroundings exert “control” over us? Both questions are for Bennett equally difficult to answer as understanding the human, let alone the nonhuman, capacity for agency is always elusive: “No one really knows what human agency is, or what humans are doing when they are said to

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2 This idea to see the potential agency imbued in material objects as an endeavor that has “virtues” is borrowed from Bennett’s articulation of the blackout that wiped the power grids for a few days in the northeastern parts of North America in August 2003.
perform as agents. In the face of every analysis, human agency remains something of a mystery
[...] If we do not know just how it is that human agency operates, how can we be so sure that the
processes though which nonhumans make their marks are qualitatively different?” (34). One
might, in the context of this discussion, even pose the question: How culpable or responsible is
the Deepwater Horizon oil rig itself in relation to the engineers who were allegedly so careless in
their execution of protocol? I’m not entirely sure what the answers to these questions are, and
I’m not sure anyone else can be sure either. How workers and writers negotiate the delicate
balances between human and nonhuman agency, difficult enough in even the most simple of all
events let alone a disaster residing at the intersection of technological, ecological, political, and
organizational realms, is the framework for this dissertation. The theories that in my mind get us
closest to approaching these questions adequately are discussed in this chapter.

More than just a philosophical excursus into posthumanist theory, this chapter focuses on
the rhetorical nature of agency, particularly how agency is discussed and constructed in disaster
discourse after the fact. This chapter lays the theoretical groundwork for the remainder of the
dissertation by claiming that a significant problem with disasters, specifically in the oil industry,
is actually one of rhetorical invention, or the lack thereof. This invention, I argue, has been
restricted by mainstream or culturally dominant environmentalist taxonomies (Hay 2002),
relegating the *topoi* used to anthropocentric approaches to accounting for disaster, and also by
traditional understandings of the rhetorical situation. Aside from serving as the theoretical
backdrop for the remainder of the dissertation, the purpose of this chapter is to show how
disaster specialist Beverly Sauer’s articulation of the role of the rhetorician in risk and disaster
(as one who invents and “makes visible” the marginalized forces of disaster) can be applied to the material, nonhuman masses constituting and impinging upon the various rhetorics of disaster.

This chapter is in essence broken up into two parts. The first part introduces the concept of disaster rhetorics (through the lens of narrative) and discusses the environmentalist and disaster studies taxonomies and categorizations that restrict rhetorical invention. The second part uses Sauer’s call as a springboard and outlines the theories that provide the necessary *topoi* of invention to discuss disaster from a posthumanist standpoint. The second part ends with a brief example of how Jenny Edbauer’s notion of rhetorical ecologies can help frame disasters as rhetorical events, as fundamentally rhetoric problems. Constructing disasters as rhetorical events is a necessary move before the in-depth analysis of the event begins in earnest in chapters three, four, and five.

*Post-Disaster Narratives*

In the aftermath of disasters there arise certain communicative patterns. These patterns are closely linked to what we as a culture think is important (Zoetewey and Staggers 2004):

What single technical failure caused the disaster? Who is to blame for it? How can we prevent it?

Will justice be served appropriately? There is a responsibility and thus a pressure by those investigating and covering the event to provide answers to these questions that are so deeply human but also highly political. By choosing to answer some questions over others, however, these parties are selectively framing the reality of the event. For example, Sauer (2002) notes that in her study of mining accidents the hardline inquiry into single technical cause relegates other “extenuating” but important factors in the accident such as communication practices to the
category of “unrelated” (130). It has been shown that risk is a public construct (Grabill and Simmons), so it follows that disastrous events—their causes, their impacts—are also constructs, delimited by certain teleological and ideological belief systems. This notion is also affirmed by Russell and Babrow (“Risk in the Making”) and their contention that news media narratives have the ability to construct a narrowly-focused view of risk and disaster:

In narrative formulations of risk, we selectively construct our sense of the way that reality is structured in relation to our values, the forces that threaten our cherished values, and the way we will live in the world as we have come to understand it. Telling a story in a particular way by forming its temporal and configurational meanings constructs our sense of the real and the good, thereby setting the boundaries of our expectations, desires, and action. (Russell and Babrow 256)

Since this dissertation is being written over three years after the blowout and spill, there is the benefit of hindsight, of being able to look back and identify patterns and the ebb and flow of post-disaster discourse. Take, for example, an article written in The New York Times, on May 8, 2010, about three weeks after the blowout and right during the midst of the continued leaking of oil from the main Macondo well. The lead reads:

As Congress prepares to hold hearings into the April 20 explosion that sank the Deepwater Horizon oil rig, a billion-dollar question is bobbing on the oil-slicked waves: Whose fault is it? (Zeller Jr. 2010, emphasis added)

The article, titled “Is BP at Fault for the Deepwater Horizon Spill”?, discusses the fact that while BP was in most of the “spotlight” immediately following the disaster, mainly because of their shoddy track record, other companies involved (Transocean, Halliburton, and Cameron) may
have played a significant role in the faulty cement jobs, the failure of the blowout preventer (BOP), and the general operation of the extraction pipe and casing. While the level of uncertainty is understandably high, given that full-scale investigations had not been conducted at that time, the article does help narrow the public focus on blame solely at the major corporations involved in the Deepwater Horizon operations. To use the terminology of Russell and Babrow, the article constructs our realities and values about ecological disasters, specifically that oil spills result from human irresponsibility and that the most productive mode of public action is to direct as soon as possible legal and political claims of blame at those most irresponsible.

For rhetoricians and philosophers alike, such social constructions of events are understood as truisms, as echoing Jean-François Lyotard’s well-established articulation of grand narratives in helping describe how cultures make sense of their histories. In applying a similar approach, it can be understood that there are distinct patterns and narratives that arise in the midst of disasters, there are indeed “rhetorics of disaster.” Mainstream rhetorics of disasters are, in the case of Deepwater Horizon, delimiting and focus on the human mastering of technology to solve ecological situations. Since what our culture values are corporations that act responsibility with the great power given to them, the narrativization of something like an oil spill frames it as an issue of blame on the select individuals involved who the public sees as shirking their responsibility to take care of the ecosystems entrusted to them by the government, and thus, the
people. And while there are other variations of rhetorics of disaster, the features outlined above are part of a certain rhetoric of disaster, one that can be described as “Modern environmentalist” for its linear account of technical causality and its over-attribution of responsibility to individuals’ wills and senses of morality.

Environmentalist Taxonomies

These post-disaster narratives that dominate so much of the news media and investigative technical inquiries are framed and constrained by much larger, perhaps hegemonic views on environmental philosophy that permeate Western culture. In his seminal and comprehensive book *Main Currents in Western Environmental Thought* (2002), Peter Hay outlines what he identifies as the most influential taxonomy of environmentalist thought. The taxonomy was created by Warwick Fox (1992), and was developed from the more original taxonomy created by Rodman (1995), and includes four categories organized from least satisfactory to most satisfactory (explanations adapted from Hay 32-34):

3 The attribution of causality and subsequent doling out of praise and blame is a characteristic of a certain type of narrative or rhetoric of disaster, one that falls in stark contrast to Michael Bernard-Donals’s (2009) rhetoric of disaster that is “founded on a displacement of knowledge rather than its production” (74). For Bernard-Donals, disaster rhetorics can be characterized in terms of the psychological blind spots that disaster (read: trauma) has on an individual’s memory or a cultural psyche. In the personalization of disaster, there remains a gap in experience, a suppressed exchange that is either displaced or threatening to re-emerge. Bernard-Donals’s work speaks to the difficulty individuals and groups face when they are asked to write an unreachable experience (i.e., the Holocaust). While my posthuman approach to disaster here contrasts to the psychological approach taken by Bernard-Donals, we are yoked in the belief that our rhetorics of disaster present difficult ethical challenges (for Bernard-Donals, trying to write the Shoah presents “impossible ethics” [74]) and in our focus on locating the rhetorical situation of disaster rhetorics in the post-event discourse concerned with retroactively framing what happened as it relates to public impact.

4 It is useful here to frame the public discussions and understanding of the Deepwater Horizon blowout in a way that draws on political theorist Jane Bennett’s distinct between “environmentalism” and her newly-coined term “vibrant materiality.” Jane Bennett’s work contributes to a much larger, concerted effort toward the democratization of science. In many ways, Bennett is seeking to influence the public understanding of science. Her primary way of doing this is by distancing herself from the overly-simplistic and thus inadequate discourses of environmentalism, which “leads the call for the protection and wise management of an ecosystem that surrounds us” (111), and instead proposing an engagement in the discourses of vital materialism, “which suggests that the task is to engage more strategically with a trenchant materialism that is us as it vies with us in agentic assemblages” (111).
1) *Unrestrained Exploitation and Expansionism*: there is only value in the nonhuman realm when it is physically transformed by human agency into economic resource for human consumption.

2) *Resource Conservation and Development*: resides firmly in the anthropocentric tradition that only human interests count, and that value only enters the natural world at the point of its transformation into product for human consumption. Unlike the first category, this category does concede that nature is not inexhaustible.

3) *Resource Preservation*: This is a stance which does not seek grounds for preservation of the non-human world, but which stays within the assumption adopted in the two previous positions: right and appropriate action is deemed to be right and appropriate from the standpoint of human interest.

4) *Deep Ecology*: Promoting an ecological self as opposed to an individual with a consciously appended code of values, this perspective, infused with beliefs of intrinsic value, sees sentience—or internal self-direction (Rodman 88)—in all natural beings and this respects the interests of each.⁵

While Fox only finds the fourth and final category even remotely sufficient in terms of ecological responsibility and sustainability, he does concede that the first three are the most predominant and that they fall under the larger heading of “Anthropocentric Approaches” and “Instrumental Value Theory.” These larger utilitarian philosophies of nature are the frameworks

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⁵ These are not new ideas, however, as many seeking to distribute agency across ecologies draw on 17th-century writer Baruch Spinoza. Spinoza is largely thought of as the first writer to think about ecology, well, ecologically. That is, all things in this world are from the same material substance, not being positioned as either subjects or objects but rather as “modes” of much larger *Deus sive Nature*, which translates to “God or Nature.” Writing when he was during the middle of the seventeenth century, Spinoza’s work is definitely imbued with a spiritualized form of naturalism; despite this, contemporary posthumanists and materialists hearken back to Spinoza as really the first thinker to attempt to legitimately attempt to move away from anthropocentric epistemologies of N/nature and toward an ontological-oriented approach to—in borrowing his frame—the mosaic of individual things and thus theorizing how things, or “modes,” relate and by what means are they driven.
within which the “vast majority of environmental discussion[s] [are] couched” (Fox 2) and serve as the underwritten Modern template for contemporary discussions about human agency in relation to ecological resources.

The Deepwater Horizon blowout is no exception, as both the judicial and media rhetorics around the disaster focused on the notion of human negligence of the environment. As per the National Commission Report and a wide variety of other reports, BP was implicated in seven federal regulation violations, the foremost being the failure to “protect...the environment” (Cressey 2011). Despite the fact that public stakeholders and the federal government allow the drilling of oil at such extreme depths, and with such lax regulations, and despite the admission of the high degree of difficulty by hydrogeologists in terms of the Macondo well, BP was still and continually publicly castigated as “reckless” (“Gulf spill trial” 2013), as putting personal economic gains before employee safety and ecological protection, as failing to “take care” of the environment it was “granted” in good faith.

Those entering the post-disaster parlor then are constrained by the overarching federal regulations and Western philosophies of nature that continually assert and reassert corporate ethics in terms of human mastery over the complex environments within which they operate. Despite the fact that deepwater oil extraction—itself an intrusive process—is not only condoned but encouraged by the American government, the smaller operants involved in this large industry become the targets of inevitable blame because of their proximity to the incident, because of the more explicit connection between a single senior rig operator and a single industrial technology (BOP). Due to the fact that the anthropocentric, instrumental theories of value in environmental philosophy position humans as the “preservers” of nature, those seeking justice or answers or
accountability—whatever the case may be—find themselves operating in a framework that sees the humans with the highest apparent degree of agency in a given event (BP) as the most and sometimes only responsible entity in an ecological catastrophe.

Disaster Studies Proper

Further constraining the topoi of post-disaster discourse are the divisive schisms that continually separate the human from the nonhuman in terms of defining what exactly disasters are. Disaster studies, as a distinct field of interdisciplinary study, has tried to remedy its difficulty in agreeing on a definition of disaster with unproductive categorizations.

Relatively speaking, the “official” study of disasters can be traced to the beginning of the twentieth century. In 1920 a graduate student at Columbia University, Samuel Prince, published a dissertation about the variety of responses from public and social organizations to an explosion of an ammunition ship in Halifax, Nova Scotia in 1917, in what is speculated to be the first academic study in what would later be called “disaster studies” (Price). This investigative area of study would make major academic and political advances in the 1950s, with foundational research conducted by members of the National Opinion Research Center (NORC), and the Committee on Disaster Studies (CDS) and the Disaster Research group (DRG), the latter two of which were both part of the broader National Academy of Sciences-National Research Council (Price 6). Each organization sought to analyze the phenomenon of disasters from different perspectives, revealing their intellectual concerns: the NORC placed victims as the subjects of
their analysis, seeking social psychological data; the DRG limited their scope to group behavior during the disaster itself; and the CDS measured and analyzed the responses of a variety of social organizations during the rapid onset of disasters, taking up Samuel Prince’s original ideas on the Halifax explosion. Following the interview and observation-based research efforts of these organizations in the 1950s, attempts were made in the 1960s to summarize these findings, to make more generalizable frameworks for how society approaches, grapples with, and recovers from disasters. George W. Baker and Dwight W. Chapman’s *Man and Society in Disaster* (1962) tried to draw meaningful connections between what was known about responses to disasters and the then-current theories on mental health, seeking a more integrated approach between the “natural” and the “human.” Many other attempts were made at this time to codify both institutional and personal responses to disasters, (Fritz 1961; Barton 1969) mainly with an attunement to the sociological.

The first truly multidisciplinary effort that brought researchers and practitioners together was in July of 1984 when the University of Colorado began housing the National Hazards Research and Applications Information Center. However, the attempt to integrate variegated approaches and perspectives (the geological, the psychological, the sociological, the geographical, and the meteorological), while solidifying the existence of disaster studies, made it even more difficult to “draw themes and conclusions about ‘disasters,’” (Price 7) in large part because a fully integrated definition of disaster that meets the needs of all perspectives remained elusive. The most often cited definition of disaster, in disaster studies, reads then as:

> An event, concentrated in time and space, in which a society, or a relatively self-sufficient subdivision of society, undergoes severe danger (damage) and incurs such losses to its
members and physical appurtenances that the social structure is disrupted and the fulfillment of all or some of the essential functions of society is prevented. (Fritz 655)

Aside from the utter abstractness and relativity of several of the terms in this definition, the notion of disaster is unabashedly sociologically-oriented (read: anthropocentric), as opposed to say, ecologically-oriented. Disasters are only rendered such because they create a temporary malfunction in the machine of society, placing humans and the relevance of their subsistence at the center of disaster studies. Anything that does not impinge upon the well-oiled machinations of society is not necessarily a disaster in the nominal sense. This definition, while oft-cited and widely circulated during the emergence of disaster studies, has been rendered insufficient by those within its own parliament as progress in using this definition has not been made. Quarantelli (1982) blasted his own field in writing that something is amiss with “a field of study which attempts to delineate the characteristics of something, tries to depict the conditions leading to that something, and gropes to show the consequences of that something, without having a relatively clear conception of what is the something” (ctd. in Aday and Ito 19-20).

The nominal stalemate in terms of coherent definition contributes to the need for typologies. And categories. And then sub-categories. Kreps (1989) for example uses two main categories: “natural” disasters (e.g., floods, hurricanes) and “human-made” disasters (e.g., structural failures, nuclear radiation). These can then be cross-referenced by comparing them to event magnitude expressed in absolute numbers (Rubin, Yezer, Hussain, and Webb 1986), or to the normative contexts of the events (Geipel 1982), or even psychic trauma (Lifton and Olson 1976). For these authors, the various measurement methodologies of the impact of disaster are contingent upon specific valuations of social make-up. Dynes (1978) has suggested that disasters
should be scaled according to the absence or presence of nine features: frequency, predictability, controllability, cause, speed of onset, length of possible forewarning, duration, scope of impact, and destructive potential (Price 9). Hewett (1983), no doubt tired of definitional heuristics like this, argued that disaster definitions predicated on the notion that they are unexpected or unmanageable are problematic because they ignore the predictive capacities and material protections of the “real” world. While the act of and consensus toward definition might seem like a non-sequitur academic exercise, it is actually an inherently political activity as many groups, agencies, and parties involved in a disaster evoke the term for political ends: accruement of federal resources, media coverage, and the formation of narratives. Whether or not something—say, an earthquake or a nuclear meltdown—is qualified politically as a natural or human-made “disaster” means a significant amount for victims awaiting aid and geographic regions awaiting resources and attention. Grappling with what disasters are and how to theorize them after they happen is an inherently political, methodological, and thus rhetorical endeavor that is replete with differing views on ontology and values.

Much work in disaster studies, demonstrated from just the definition example alone, consists of various disciplines bringing their respective methodologies, ontologies, and value sets to the table. Disaster studies as an entity is the accumulation of an assortment of interdisciplinary authors contributing theories from their own field (e.g., psychic trauma) to relate the public significance of disaster. Despite the disciplinary differences, stark distinctions between “natural” and “non-natural” disasters remain. Because disasters are typically placed under categorization, each category has its own conventions of communication and inquiry. However, these categories are not always neatly defined (Price 8). For example, if a plane crashes as the result of both pilot
error and stormy conditions (see, for example, Air France crash of 2009 over the Atlantic—
further discussed in chapter four), the categorization between human and natural causation
becomes blurred. The inquiry into causation and singular blame to satiate either a moralistic
public demand for justice or the source of reparations for the victimized parties in such events is
not necessarily a direct one and can lengthen the public, scientific, and corporate inquiries into
singular causality indefinitely (Air France crash is still under review). While a disastrous
happenstance that is not clearly defined under any disaster category is frustrating in regards to
the movement towards a concretized and digestible public understanding, incidents like the
Deepwater Horizon blowout are productive rhetorically because it is through the sparks of
categories rubbing against each other that the fire of exigency is started. Where for example
would the Deepwater Horizon blowout fit into the extant disaster studies typologies? How does
one separate the rig explosion from the subsequent oil spill? How does one trace the “public”
impact of the blowout when the ecological impacts were nearly as traumatic and long-lasting?

The consultant’s words at the beginning of the chapter—how each oil rig has its own
personality—can be construed as more than just mere anthropomorphizing. His words represent
a need to move beyond the stifling environmental philosophies and disaster typologies that
restrict the rhetorical invention in post-disaster discourse. In Bennett’s use of the power grid
failure of 2003 (the “North American blackout”) as an exemplar, she notes that
anthropomorphizing material objects (specifically technological ones) “gesture[s] toward the
inadequacy of understanding the grid simply as a machine or a tool, that is, a series of fixed parts
organized from without that serves an external purpose” (25). Bennett continues, saying that, to
the vital materialist,
the electric grid is better understood as a volatile mix of coal, sweat, electromagnetic fields, computer programs, electronic streams, profit motives, heat, lifestyles, nuclear fuel, plastic, fantasies of mastery, static, legislation, water, economic theory, wire, and wood -- to name just some of the actants. (25)

The political theorist’s terminology is borrowed from Bruno Latour’s (2004) work on political ecologies: that the “natural” and the “social” are non-distinct, un-contained milieux and that a better, more posthuman ontology that considers all objects\(^6\) as agents within a collection of assemblages is a more productive, more nuanced and accurate depiction and articulation of our ways of relating. What Bennett wants of us is a more public, ethical, ecologically sound politics. This is done, for her, through moving away from discourses of environmentalism that reinforce traditional ontologies of the natural and the social and towards seeing events in all of their vitality: the vibrant, material connections between individual ideas, technologies, people, and ecologies and how close attention to these assemblages—how they’re formed, how they operate—reveal more distributive models of agency that displace mere individual subjects as the effectual causes of events in favor of an understanding of events as the intersection of mutual agencies constituting an “array of bodies” (Bennett 31). This move is more than just a matter of ecophilosophy and ontology: it is a matter of rhetorical invention.

*Disaster Rhetorics: A Matter of Visibility*

In this light, the story of the Deepwater Horizon began hundreds of thousands of years ago. The ancient hydrocarbons that so powerfully rose to the surface and killed 11 workers were

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\(^6\) Bennett’s indiscriminate listing in the block quote above is quite accurately reflective of what Latour would deem objects.
merely acting upon the energies bestowed upon them by the movement of plates and the heat of the Earth’s core. The moment the drill head punctured the Macondo well, a new rhetorical relationship was formed: that between the most modern technology in deepwater oil drilling and the most ancient of underwater natural forces. For the first time, these hydrocarbons were left to deal with an alien, modern technological force that disrupted and altered their natural patterns of action. The pressure of the well was altered and another possible direction for the hydrocarbons to exert themselves was granted in the form of a 9-3/4” exit from their ancient habitat below the seafloor.

But how can we begin to openly discuss nonhuman agency in intelligent ways if disaster studies and (predominant) environmentalist discourses do not have the language, so to speak? This issue is a matter of invention, of moving beyond the extant and constraining *topoi*. This approach operates under disaster specialist Beverly Sauer’s articulation of the role of the rhetorician in the context of risk and disaster:

For rhetoricians, the problem of invention is not to make visible the already conventionalized and schematized categories of neo-Aristotelian theory within documents whose governing assumptions are derived from those categories, but rather [...] to make visible those marginalized forms of representation that might not be visible with conventional methods of analysis. (6)

Technical communication, for the most part, has dealt with how communication is involved in current risk construction and perhaps even how communication contributed to actual disasters. These cover the “geographies” of the sites of disaster themselves. This is what Beverly Sauer’s work focuses on. In her book *The Rhetoric of Risk: Technical Documentation in Hazardous*
Environments, Sauer analyzes how communication strategies and practices function in the precipitation of disaster. In focusing on the integral role of writing in both determining policies and accounting for disasters, she heightens the ethical responsibility of rhetoricians and technical communicators in the context of large industry risk contexts (specifically the mining industry). A significant component to Sauer’s work in the mining industry is to think about how rhetoricians can help in the context of technical communication better account for these “invisible forces” that serve as a mode of risk communication and structure relations between and among the mining workers. In one particular example, Sauer examines the role of embodied communication between mine workers. Physical gestures, almost impossible to document in accident reports and other technical genres, play a significant role in providing safety to workers in a mining environment as they use them to communicate messages in the mine itself. This falls under the category Sauer describes as “that which is lost when we rely solely on written documentation alone.”

Sauer’s inclusion of embodied rhetorics in her account of risk communication is couched within the Aristotelian method of invention in the defining of rhetoric as the “art of finding out the available means of persuasion” (Aristotle 37). Because of Aristotle’s acknowledgement of uncertainty in deliberative matters, he was concerned with how individuals [...] employ a theoretical framework to discover arguments that might be effective in public deliberation (Aristotle 1991, qtd, in Sauer 3). Aristotle’s approach to rhetoric, not unfamiliar in the rhetoric of science, technology, and risk, allowed Sauer to construct the physical gestures, the embodied

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7 In Geographies of Writing, for example, Nedra Reynolds argues that it is important “to understand geographies as embodied, and how the process of social construction of space occurs at the level of the body, not just at the level of the city or street or nation” (143).

8 See Dombrowski (1992); Herndl, Fennell, and Miller (1991); Miller (1989); Miller (1994); Miller (1998).
risk communication utilized by the mine workers as more “available means.” While Sauer is speaking specifically to the bodily gestures used by miners that are left unaccounted for in technical documents, or at least reduced to general “gestures,” this also applies to nonhuman entities as well, to those marginalized—what Latour would call “missing”—masses that are already always impinging upon our rhetorical interactions. And of course this is no different for those involved in framing and attributing certain ideas post-disaster.

How can rhetoric help make more visible the materiality constituting disasters? What does this look like? How can rhetoric help better understand disasters, specifically the Deepwater Horizon blowout? These matters are I contend a matter of rhetorical invention, of extending the topoi of disasters to be more inclusive of nonhuman forces in accounting for what happened. To extend the available means in posthuman accounts of disaster then, rhetoricians and technical communicators must move beyond the over-simplistic iterations of “the rhetorical situation.” What follows is a discussion of these available means.

Extending the Situation

Of course, in the field of rhetoric, so closely wedded to sophistic principles, practices, and politics, it can be troubling to concede that a giant whose shoulders we stand so mightily upon in Protagoras may have himself been standing in the wrong corner of the agora. The pre-Socratic rhetor’s claim that “man is the measure of all things” is troubled by contemporary surges that situate rhetorical theory and practice squarely in the complex interactions of human and nonhuman actors, indeed that seek to displace humans from the top of the rhetorical
These surges, which I identify as posthuman, complicate previous rhetorical instantiations of agency.

Complicated is Kenneth Burke’s near-ubiquitous uptake of the rhetor as agent, as being able to understand humans as self-willed actors in the dramatistic milieux of their lived experiences. Burke’s pentad is often used as a heuristic in basic forms of rhetorical analysis: “Men have talked about things in many ways, but the pentad offers a synoptic way to talk about their talk-about” (Grammar 56). It imports along with it an assumption (fair or unfair) in the primacy of human agency as the agent traverses from scene to scene. That being said, Burke was concerned with the “rhetoric of substance” (51) and did show a concerted effort to contextualize, oftentimes in very material ways (cf. McGee) the processes of rhetorical action. Stark in his opposition to Hegelian idealism, which “constructed” substance in thought, Burke saw discourse as having essential properties in the sense of us having the ability to empirically observe the active ability of language to structure reality in real “substantial ways: for to utter is to either distance or make consubstantial” (51). Burke, while casting human creativity and discourse as symbolic and representational, did believe in the material presence of language:

The design on a piece of primitive pottery may be wholly symbolic or allegorical. But a drawing that accurately reproduces this design in a scientific treatise would not be symbolic or allegorical, but realistic. And similarly, even when statements about the nature of the world are abstractly metaphysical, statement about the nature of these statements can be as empirical as the statement, “This is Mr. Smith,” made when introducing Mr. Smith in the accepted manner. (Grammar 58)

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9 This move to define posthumanism contra Protagoras mirrors the move made by Mara and Hawk (2).
In terms of this project, Burke did bring language to the material but did not entirely bring materials to the rhetorical, reinforcing our idea of him as a humanist, albeit a pragmatic one. Burke was concerned with identifying the internal versus the external loci of motives, with identifying the substantive, essential quality that drives motive and action to an end. “Since agents require placement in scenes, humanism gets its scenic counterpart from naturalism” (50).

Burke uses Baruch Spinoza and John Dewey to frame his work in this instance, mainly in an effort to move away from agency imbued by the supernatural. Spinoza’s anti-metaphysical definition of substance as *causa sui* (“the cause of itself”) and early Dewey’s formulation of the foundationalism of man and nature lead Burke to understand agency as intrinsic to people or derivative from nature, respectively. Speaking in terms of Fox’s taxonomy, Burke could be placed in the categorizations of nature as having intrinsic as opposed to mere utilitarian purposes.

The “derivative motives” humans receive from nature, however, is an admitted blind spot for Burke, or is, at least, shrouded in uncertainty. Like Aristotle, Burke was comfortable with the uncertain, as “the ambiguity of substance affords, as one might expect, a major resource for rhetoric” (*Grammar* 51); he was less comfortable with people claiming certainty over nonhuman processes. Quoting Locke, Burke goes on: “and that the *thing* they pretend to know and talk of, is what they have no distinct idea of at all, and so are perfectly ignorant of it, and in the dark” (51).

In the dark, unable to access the intrinsic motivational force inherent in the things populating the naturalistic scene, Burke locates rhetorical motive and agency in what Quentin Meillassoux would coin a “correlationist” framework. Correlationism is the unstated assumption, especially prevalent among Continental philosophers, that humans and world cannot be conceived in isolation from one other—a ‘correlationist’ is any philosopher who insists that the human-world
correlate is philosophy’s sole legitimate concern (Meillassoux 5). Burke must have a naturalistic scene within which to locate his humanistic actor, and it is the relationship manifest through this interaction that characterized Burke’s philosophy, his rhetoric. Burke is not concerned to understand the world outside of human access (Meillassoux 10) and is certainly not concerned with assigning motivation or rhetorical agency (regardless of how materialist his linguistic formulations are) to the nonhuman beyond the mysterious “derivative” forces found therein.

Those challenging such an anthropocentric view of rhetoric would, to use Burke’s own terms, locate agency beyond the agent, would envision the scene not as a dramatistic backdrop of available means but rather as its own legitimate source of agency working in constant cooperation and flux with the “agent.” The agent is not acting in the scene, but rather with the scene. This more widely distributed positioning of agency has in the field of rhetoric manifest in a motley assortment of object-centered approaches. These approaches examine how things exert material and suasive force upon human agents: the sentiment and nostalgia evoked from a toy (Hesse; Sommers; Yancey); the shared sense of past brought about by public monuments (Dickinson, Blair, Ott; Bernard-Donals); the inclusion of animals as a way to challenge traditional notions of rhetoric (Kennedy; Davis; Hawhee; Muckelbauer); and the presence of social media to gather people (Bay and Rickert). Such examples reveal the extent to which human and nonhuman beings are rhetorically intertwined and are ultimately irreducible to simple “subject-object” categorizations. Far from the inert objects or instruments we sometimes take them to be, things have their own particular agency that contributes to the gathering of social, political, and rhetorical worlds. This trend reveals a shift away from cultural or epistemic rhetorics and towards ontological rhetorics: the idea that things matter rhetorically, and, as many

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argue, impinge upon human activity. By locating agency outside of the human subject, rhetoric is opening itself up to the idea that motive and action and ultimately ends are precipitated or caused by nonhuman entities.

There is not a more timely or resonant example that illuminates a posthuman account of agency than in the debate concerning firearms: namely, the human relationship to the material artifact of a gun. Latour uses this topoi to exemplify his conceptualization of humans and nonhumans “folding into each other” (Pandora’s Hope 176). “Guns don’t kill people; people kill people” is an adage bandied about by the National Rifle Association and proffers what Latour calls a sociological explanation of our interaction with the object: “The gun is a tool, a medium, a neutral carrier of human will. If the gunman is a good guy, the gun will be used wisely and will kill only when appropriate. If the gunman is a crook or a lunatic, then, with no change in the gun itself, a killing that would in any case occur will be (simply) carried out more efficiently” (Pandora’s Hope 177). This neutering of the gun implies that this artifact is but an inactive conduit in a violent exchange between two essentialized beings, lacking differentiation from a knife, pencil, or encyclopedia in the act of violence driven by an internal moral ineptitude of an individual. “Guns don’t kill people; people kill people” is a cultural maxim that is indicative of the anthropocentric view of causality of events and symbolizes (and perpetuates) a

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10 He does so to contrast his ideas with Martin Heidegger’s articulation of humans’ relationship to technology (Gestell): “For Heidegger, a technology is never an instrument, a mere tool. Does that mean that technologies mediate action? No, because we have ourselves become instruments for no other end than instrumentality itself” (176). While Latour echoes Heidegger’s call to include technology in our ontology, our very being (Dasein), he distances himself from the all-encompassing mastery Heidegger supposes technology has over us as humans. There is no room for our mastery of tools or their mastery over us because it is in and during our mutual exchange that meaning is made. Heidegger is “mistaken” in his “insuperable” view of technology as dominating all because, as Latour would have it, meaning is made through transactions and translations between human and nonhuman actors and not through a process of unveiling.
refusal to acknowledge the forces of nonhuman agents and thus over-attributes causality to human will and agency.

In an admittedly caricatured contrast to this is the materialist version of a human’s interaction with a gun, epitomized with the simpler but no less trite slogan of “Guns kill people.” Regardless of the moral or behavioral disposition of the person, the gun has irreducible qualities that work in conjunction with the person to alter, modify, or enable the actions of the individual. The very material components of the gun add substantially to the encounter: “an innocent citizen becomes a criminal by virtue of the gun in her hand” (*Pandora’s Hope* 177). For the materialist (and on a larger scale the posthumanist), the gun is not a neutral conduit through which action happens; rather, the gun is an active mediator first in its relationship to the potential shooter and then again in its triangulated relationship with the potential victim. On a descriptive level, the gun and its irreducible qualities help shape the trajectory of the potential shooter’s actions. On an ontological level, there is actually a change in materiality in that “the good citizen is transformed by carrying the gun. A good citizen who, without a gun, might simply be angry may become a criminal if he gets his hands on a gun—as if the gun had the power to change Dr. Jekyll into Mr. Hyde” (177). Reversing the Platonic moralism that grants sole agency to a person’s inherent goodness, materialists are satisfied doling out agency to our nonhuman compatriots, acknowledging that the transformation an individual assumes when interacting with the material object is sufficient enough to grant a certain level of agency related to the irreducible qualities of the artifact—in this case the gun—itself.

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11 The concept of irreducibility is a foundational one for Latour’s ontology. Artifacts and objects have qualities bound to themselves, and cannot be reduced to anthropocentric explanations but only to their ontological status as beings with agency.
It is in this apparent proclivity of objects to redirect the trajectory of our actions that Latour sees a key component to his investigation into the material. But it’s not that simple. Measuring the agency of objects, difficult in even a strictly human sphere, is done by paying close attention to the process of mediation between humans and nonhumans. This alters the nature of disasters, particularly the way we and the public writ large understand their causes, by challenging the leitmotif of human mismanagement in the unfolding of catastrophic events. The idée fixe in disaster discourse of causality being a lapse in the masterful dexterity of human control over ecologies and technologies is the same idée fixe in rhetoric’s insistence on developing anthropocentric models of analytical thought and action not dissimilar to Burke’s pentad. Both discourses locate agency and thus causality in Burkean terms as intrinsic to the individual human involved.

Agency, then, in a posthuman configuration, becomes distributed ontologically across a wide array of things and objects as opposed to the tendency to view agency as centralized in a single body driven by human efforts or will. To use a more personal example, Bennett turns to her book itself:

The sentences of this book also emerged from the confederate agency of many striving macro- and micro-actants: from “my” memories, intentions, contentions, intestinal bacteria, eyeglasses, and blood sugar, as well as from the plastic computer keyboard, the bird song from the open window, or the air or particulates in the room, to name only a few of the participants. What is at work here on the page is an animal-vegetable-mineral-sonority cluster with a particular degree and duration of power. (23)

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12 Latour grows weary of this term “agent” as a descriptor and opts for the term actant instead.
Discourses of environmentalism tend to oversimplify nature as an “object” (Killingsworth and Palmer), as something separate from human interaction. Theories of distributed agency, like those purported by Bennett and Spinoza, embed humans in a larger ecology of agents.

Rhetorical Ecologies (without Nature)

The trope of ecology has been prevalent in rhetorical studies since Marilyn Cooper (1986) “introduced” the metaphor for the practice of writing over three decades ago, making writers more aware of the natural and social relations constituting their recursive discursive processes and making the materiality of “place” and the physical relationships of writers to others and their various ecologies significant factors in rhetorical processes. Since then, rhetoricians and teachers of writing have became cognizant “of the presence of a material dimension in rhetoric and of the rhetorical dimension in the material” (Selzer 9). And while “bodily rhetorics” not unlike Sauer’s certainly trace their lineage to the Greeks, particularly Isocrates, and thus to writers within our own field (Blair; Hawhee; Ratcliffe), never before have rhetoric’s doors been so widely open in their integration of theories and ideas from elsewhere, most notably sociology and the hard sciences. The modes of invention, indeed the topoi used by rhetoricians in articulating relationships today are increasingly driven by an attunement to

13 This is all well and good but it cannot be overstated the degree to which materialist/posthumanist philosophies challenge dominant modes of thought, particularly, as Coole and Frost point out, Newtonian physics and Cartesian ontology. For Newton, objects move only through an encounter with an external agent (Coole and Frost 7); Cartesian ontology casts cogito (mind) as separate from matter, further extended humans’ relationship to materiality. This is important because Cartesian ontology dominates much of Western philosophy and has long reinforced the notion that sense is made of the world around us through our (human) willful and self-determined measuring of the static, inert, passive materiality of nature. This ontology, this framing of the way we relate to nature assumes a position of manipulative authority: that humans are master manipulators and users and measurers of nature and thus dominant over it. Of course, this ethos of mastery continues today, not the least of which is continued in offshore drilling practices.

14 This subheading is a nod towards Timothy Morton’s work, specifically Ecology without Nature (2007), where he contends that a properly ecological view promoting sustainability comes, paradoxically, from ridding ourselves of traditional conceptions of “Nature” as an entity to be protected and that exists separately ontologically speaking.
nonhuman entities. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (2010), in the introduction to their edited collection on “new materialisms,” ask quite frankly: Seeing as we inhabit an “ineluctably material world...[at] every turn [encountering] physical objects fashioned by human design and endure natural forces whose imperatives structure our daily routines for survival, how could we be anything other than materialist?” (1). A posthumanist approach to philosophy is not one that seeks to theorize and thus set more distance between ourselves and the world, but rather one that bridges the gap by putting at the forefront the everyday objects that constitute our meaningful experiences. By placing material objects at the forefront and by attempting to analyze the ways in which these objects have profound, circumscribing, measurable, “productive,” and “resilient” (Coole and Frost 7) effects on the way we think and live, we are granting material objects the level of agency that they actually have in our lives in ways beyond Marx and more everyday than Heidegger. This granting of agency is, for Coole and Frost and for most of the contributors to their collection, an essential component of a posthuman politic and mode of analysis.

It can also be understood as a key facet of Edbauer’s approach to rhetorical ecologies. For Edbauer, the rhetorical triangle is not enough. The “scenes” of disaster, and they are many, require a more nuanced, deep approach to the rhetorical situation. Edbauer’s work on rhetorical ecologies might help us think about these issues in that it opens us up to new possibilities for analysis by proposing “an augmentation to [rhetoric’s] popular conceptual frameworks of rhetorical situation” (9), frameworks that have been effectively critiqued (Vatz; Smith and

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15 There are many different rhetorical situations in a disaster. For example, as this dissertation is being written, BP, Transocean, Cameron, the U.S. government, the MMS (now BOEMRE), local business owners, and environmentalist groups are all entangled in a nasty legal battle in the courts, of which its discourse could most politely be described as finger-pointing. BP recently pled guilty to 14 criminal charges relating to the rig explosion and has agreed to pay $4.5 billion in fines and other penalties (Krauss and Schwartz).
Lybarger; Biesecker; Phelps). As opposed to approaching rhetoric “through the terministic lens of conglomerated elements,” which would include speaker-audience-message, ethos-pathos-logos, and rhetor-audience-constraints-exigence, Edbauer looks “towards a framework of affective ecologies that recontextualizes rhetorics in their temporal, historical, and lived fluxes” (9). In moving from rhetorical situations to rhetorical ecologies, Edbauer seeks to open up our topoi for public situations (read: disasters) to the affective moods and experiences around material sites. This widens the possibilities of invention to the various “concatenations” (Warner 62) of discourse surrounding and constituting events.  

Edbauer borrows cultural geographers Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift’s work in cities to show how a “city” operates less as a static, discrete physical location (situs) and more as an area of movements and processes—from less of a noun (“city”) to more of a verb (we “do city”) (Edbauer 11). This movement away from a container model of geographies allows Edbauer to apply this same principle to rhetorical situations, to move away from the notion that there are discrete, contained means and elements of any given exigence or situation and rhetors are constrained by such means and elements. To say that rhetors are constrained by the rhetorical conglomerates (e.g., speaker-audience-message) is akin to adopting a “site-model” (11) approach to analyzing cities, such as New York or Austin, which would approach cities as containers already holding the elements particular to that given city. This approach, Amin and Thrift and Edbauer argue, “does not adequately describe the city as an amalgam of processes, or as a circulation of encounters and actions” (Edbauer 12). This for Edbauer makes rhetoric less about static locations, or place, as about public distribution across and within non-discrete spaces.

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16 Edbauer uses the example of how the slogan “Keep Austin Weird” countered the urban sprawl that took place in her adopted town in Texas.
Breaking the “container” of the rhetorical situation, in and of itself a matter of rhetorical invention, is a necessary move if we are to continue including the material masses into such rhetorical distributions.

Public Distributions of Blame: A Brief Example

But what would this extension of *topoi* for rhetorical invention look like in terms of disaster, and more specifically the Deepwater Horizon blowout and oil spill? While chapters three, four, and five all use to varying degrees this question as their springboard, it would serve well to briefly touch on an example.

When the National Commission on the BP Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill and Offshore Drilling released its Final Report to the President on January 11th, 2011, it was understood that the prestigious collection of engineers, scientists, and politicians who published the report would outline the event in high detail, culminating into a discourse of “blaming” characterized by singular technical causality and stakeholder responsibility. It was understood that internal and external contracted engineers would work tirelessly to diagnose, deduce, and attribute the cause of the spill to one instance, one fault that acted as the trigger to the deaths and destruction of so much, one artifact that did not live up to its expected performance so as to assign culpability for this injustice. The report did not disappoint in achieving such tasks.
The dramatic Final Report fit the expected genre\(^\text{17}\) by narrativizing the Deepwater Horizon blowout into three “parts”: I) The Path to Tragedy; II) The Explosion and Aftermath: The Cause and Consequences of Disaster; and III) Lessons Learned: Industry, Government, and Energy Policy (National Commission Report). What the report inculcates in our public understanding of the Deepwater Horizon blowout is that, like many other “accidents” or “incidents,” there were a networked series of actions—or inactions—that precipitated the event: quality tests were not performed, gas pressures via mud removal from the Macondo well were not tested, and the design of the drill itself—a singular tube, as opposed to a double-enforced one—all point towards poor management decisions made by BP supervising parties and individuals. For many, the poor decisions made by BP, feeling pressure from time constraints and daily monetary loss of having to conduct more rigorous safety procedures because of a rather new environment (deepwater), cast the subsequent spill as not an issue of “if” but “when” (Casselman and Gold n.pg).

Indeed there were myriad “agentive loci” (Bennett 26)\(^\text{18}\) identified by the National Commission Report filed to the president. These included and potentially should include the drilling fluid designed to detect gas in the muddy reservoirs under the ocean floor that was not used in testing procedures; the Deepwater Horizon oil rig itself, which was leased by BP from Transocean and that replaced a previous rig damaged by a minor hurricane and that was continually understaffed; the underwater cement that only works when the drill is perfectly centered within the well opening, a setting that Deepwater operators overseen by BP supervisors

\(^\text{17}\) The similarity between the BP report and the *Exxon Valdez* report to the President in terms of their preparedness-effects-lessons sequencing of information is strikingly similar. This echoes Beverly Sauer’s (1994) work on the “grammar” of disaster reports.

\(^\text{18}\) Bennett uses the term to indicate the human/non-human actants involved in the North American blackout.
ignored (Lustgarten 46); the muddy oil streaming from the Macondo well that was more potent, more concentrated with higher levels of gaseous hydrocarbons because of its 18,000-foot-deep living quarters; the decision to forego that testing of “mud” (or slurry) that was pre-approved by the U.S. Interior Department’s Minerals Management Service (MMS); the congressional standards of operability passed a few years before 2010 that kept the gap between industry-specific minimal practices and best practices quite cavernous; the Japanese government and their decision to surrender to close WWII, which then, the next day, led to the eradication of fuel rations by the U.S. government; the fuel pump handle at a BP gas station in Detroit, MI that has been touched by tens of thousands of people and that facilitates monetary exchange between the public and the corporation. The National Commission Report, situating the Deepwater Horizon blowout in larger industry, political, and technical contexts, moves beyond the *situs* model of affect by drawing in the myriad social, rhetorical forces involved in the precipitation of the disaster.

The National Commission, of course, was not the only collective to articulate relations. Section 4 of the internal Deepwater Horizon Accident Investigation Report released by BP on September 8, 2012 provides an overview of the accident analyses conducted by an internal affairs team. The accident analyses are based on interviews, *OpenWells* database information, and email correspondence within the organization, and outline the eight key findings that emerged. In their review, they relate that

A complex and interlinked series of mechanical failures, human judgments, engineering design, operational implementation and team interactions came together to allow the
initiation and escalation of the Deepwater Horizon accident. Multiple companies, work teams and circumstance were involved over time. (BP Report 31)

The nine-year-old oil rig named Deepwater was an object constituting a web of “interlinking” factors. Indeed, the writers of the corporate report, based upon analyses facilitated by experts in the area, attempt to draw connections, attempt to see the connectivity inherent not only to the spill but the drilling industry in the Gulf generally. However, this move by BP in their official public report to strive for connectivity is an attempt to dilute the blame and at least partially circumvent harsh and punitive public and political reprimands. While BP was trying to create a distributive assemblage of sorts, it was out of an obvious attempt to reattribute blame across all parties that this move took place. Merely drawing connections between poor political judgment, blowout preventers, and a risk-taking industry is not constitutive of a posthuman approach; rather, a politics such as this must distribute agency among all actants in the assemblage, which re-focuses our interpretative lenses to ethics and not moralism (Bennett 38). The Deepwater Horizon blowout is not a BP-bad, environment-good scenario; BP was operating in large part by government standards of operability, which according to some groups are “woefully inadequate” (Oceana 2012) and that actually contribute to an understanding of the relationship between government and oil companies as “cozy” (Obama 2010).

In terms of rhetorical ecologies, the BP report, unlike the National Commission Report, was very place-based, treating the site of the Deepwater Horizon rig as a container for the available means of persuasion. Despite both the federal government and BP being culpable stakeholders in the disaster, and despite the fact that the reports may be considered different variations of a genre, what made the National Commission Report more “convincing” was its
ability to attend to the affective “moods” and experiences and histories of the blowout. In the BP report, which relegates its object of blame and/or causality to elements on the rig (e.g., engineers, valves, mud), there is a clear effort to merely dilute the singular technical causality by dividing the blowout into myriad factors. We can account then for the differences in the reports, which served the same purpose, by returning to Edbauer’s Deleuze and Guattari-inspired explanation of “energized” rhetorics:

A given rhetoric is not contained by the elements that comprise its rhetorical situation [...] Rather, a rhetoric emerges already infected by the viral intensities that are circulating in the social field. Moreover, this same rhetoric will go on to evolve in a parallel ways: between two “species” [...] What is shared between them is not the situation, but certain contagions and energy. (14)

Disaster rhetorics can be understood in this way, as always already being infected by previous and circulating intensities that direct two different entities (“species”) to account for an event in fundamentally different, dis-located ways. Rhetorical ecologies, which move beyond not just traditional conceptions of rhetorical situations but also more entrenched ontologies of environmentalism, provide a framework for understanding how human and nonhuman rhetorical forces intersect to create meaning in non-discrete ways. While this brief example does not have the purpose of deep analysis, it does serve the necessary purpose of seeing disasters and their subsequent framings as being constituted at least in part by rhetorical problems.

Conclusions and Implications
How, then, can we take the consultant’s concern to consider the personality of oil rigs quite literally and (re)configure Deepwater Horizon blowout with a more trenchant, rhetorical awareness of the political ecologies creating the events that transpired during the early summer months of 2010 in the Gulf of Mexico? Disaster studies and disaster rhetorics, which are largely situated in discourses of environmentalism—discourses that Bennett and Latour seek to eradicate, or at least move beyond—attempt to categorize types of catastrophes into, for example, natural and non-natural, and then perhaps stationery and transient within the latter. In attempting to relate disasters with broad brush strokes, however, we are neutralizing the idiosyncrasies and “personality” of each event or in this case series of events, compromising a more nuanced network of ideas in favor of more digestible disaster narratives that are more easily funneled through the lens of public understanding of science and technology. What an attention to materiality inherent in rhetoric gives us is a disruption of these patterned disaster narratives in the hope an articulation of the material and ethical rhetorical relationships connecting and upholding the event will alter our relations and improve public understanding and practice.

The implied question lingering here is best worded by Bennett: “if we were more attentive to the indispensable foreignness that we are, would we continue to produce and consume in the same violently reckless ways?” (113). Bennett’s question, along with much of her work, is radical and highly theoretical. But it is worth considering. Realistically speaking, a dosage of humility stemming from a sense of foreignness might have slowed the Deepwater Horizon engineers and operators from moving along so hastily in their exploration and extraction of the unpredictable seafloor terrain of the Macondo well. More realistically, however, and
perhaps more modestly, contributing to the enhancement of the public understanding of disaster can maybe alter people’s actions. For, as Warner tells us in his articulation of how publics form, “[a] public seems to be self-organized by discourse, but in fact requires preexisting forms and channels of circulation” (75). The ways in which we retroactively understand and construct disaster has impacts on the future situations in those same industries. The exigence for posthumanist theories is in large part driven by the ethical and political ecological issues that have very real, physical consequences (i.e., global warming). My work here on the offshore drilling industry is no different, as it is becoming abundantly clear that modernist ethics and usual rhetorical typologies are not sufficient to help address the way we understand our complex relationships to emerging technologies and ancient geologies.

It is my contention that, predominantly, the discourse surrounding the Deepwater Horizon blowout is characterized as “environmentalist,” mainly in its focus on the mis/management of nature on behalf of humans. This is a rhetorical problem since the topoi of invention in disaster rhetorics is restricted. The public concern, from the loud voices to the fainter, revolves around a sense of injustice: that BP is culpable and should pay for their failure to hold up their end of responsibility in “taking care” of the ecology in which they were drilling. Despite the circumventing of environmental regulations that was allowed the very President who reamed BP; the corporation's murky and very public track record; the international populace who continued to pump gas from BP stations despite such public track record; the industry’s awareness of the inherent, heightened risks of deepwater drilling; and even the consistent and real threat of hurricanes, the technical and ethical issues surrounding the Deepwater Horizon blowout were all filtered down and narrowed to a simplistic paradigm that blamed the spillage of oil on the
beautiful Gulf beaches on a corporation that does not care about the “environment” evidenced by their cut-corner approach to technical safety issues. There is a need then to extend beyond these constraints and attend to the complex rhetorical ecologies constituting the Deepwater Horizon blowout. The National Commission report identified the “blowout preventer” (dead man’s switch) as the root cause of the explosion. Well, that hydraulic gauge lived up to its name, since its failure directly contributed to the death of thirteen works on the rig. Man is dead in more than just this one sense, however, as the field of rhetoric ushers in a new era of posthumanism that seeks to displace “Man’s” place at the top of the epistemological hierarchy, the Great Chain of Being.

So what does rhetoric as a field bring to existing disaster studies? What would be rhetoric’s contribution to the discussion about the public significance of disaster? And how can contemporary rhetorical theory, with the relatively recent increase in attunement to the intricate relationships between human and nonhuman entities, add another meaningful layer to disaster studies? Historically, disaster studies as a whole has concerned itself with debating the diverse ways to measure the public impact of disasters. The rhetorical impact of disasters is a difficult imprint to trace, but the remaining chapters aim to do just that.

19 While I do not have the privilege of having any or enough ethos within the oil industry or the governmental ministries in charge of regulation (e.g., BOEMRE) to actually alter practice in any significant way, I do have the privilege of being able to use my knowledge of rhetoric to offer and eventually disseminate and enact an informed critique of the (what I deem to be) unproductive constructions of blame and causality in avenues that shape the public understanding of science (e.g., news media outlets and public technical reports). After all, as Edbauer (13) writes, we don’t so much find ourselves in a rhetoric so much as we do rhetoric.
Chapter 3. The Third Divide

“[T]he shadow of the object fell upon the ego.”
—Sigmund Freud

“The straight lines of philosophy are of no use when it is the crooked labyrinth of machinery and machinations, of artifacts and daedalia, that we have to explore.”
—Bruno Latour

Introduction

To explore the analytic possibilities opened up when we distribute agency to nonhuman stakeholders in disaster discourse, this chapter analyzes post-disaster investigative reports (accident reports) using a posthumanist framework. The criteria for the posthuman framework are not based upon any standalone rubric but rather consists of three features of posthumanism that I believe are sufficiently definitive: the acknowledgement of complexity, the negotiating of uncertainty, and the belief in the irreducibility of nonhuman objects. My analysis shows that the reports do not fully meet the criteria of a posthuman approach to disaster but serve as points of departure for considering the larger rhetorical role of objects in risk communication and stakeholder theories.

Posthumanism in Technical Communication

Posthumanism as a philosophical approach and technical communication as a practicing field are not distant from each other. N. Katherine Hayles’ assertion that “we have always been
posthuman” (209) resonates with the work technical communication as a field has been concerned with for quite some time: situating individuals in larger organizational (Spinuzzi, Hart-Davidson, and Zachry 2003; Zachry and Thralls 2007) methodological (Wysocki, Johnson-Eilola, Selfe, and Sirc 2004; Selber 2004), institutional (Hawk and Reider 2002; Knievel 2006), technological (Johnson-Eilola 2005; Wardrip-Fruin and Montfort 2003), pedagogical (Hart-Davidson and Grice 2002; Hawk 2004; Mara 2006), and communication (Mirel 2003; Albers 2004) networks. As Mara and Hawk (2009) point out in the introduction to a special issue of Technical Communication Quarterly on posthuman rhetorics and technical communication, “even when the profession of technical communication was imagined in terms of isolated forms or end-of-the-process editing, technical writers were still operating in interconnected, complex rhetorical systems [...] From Miller (1984) to Spinuzzi (2003), scholars have been trying to come to grips with the complex systems a writer, text, and reader encounter, affect, and live in” (2). In light of this, Mara and Hawk argue that technical communication is “perfectly situated” as a field to continue to study how complex systems “exert themselves upon the rhetorical situation that writers face” (2) and that “the moment is right to explore technical communication’s connections to posthumanism, which works to understand and map these complex rhetorical situations in their broader contexts” (3). My project takes advantage of this moment as this chapter analyzes specifically how the complex systems and also the individual objects within these complex systems of disaster in the oil industry “exert themselves” in the rhetorical situations of the writing of accident reports.
The Third Divide in Risk Communication

These rhetorical situations, because they deal with public safety, industry safety standards, and ecological impact, are situated firmly in the context of risk communication. That the accident reports were composed after the fact rather than the usual focus of risk on the situations and uncertainties that might lead to disaster does not change the fact that the authors of said reports impact the industry safety standards, continued ecological clean-up, and long-term affects of the “foreign” substance now percolating through Gulf waters. Risk communication as a subfield has achieved important goals in helping overcome, both practically and theoretically, two divides: (1) the political chasm separating expert from nonexpert and (2) the scientific decoupling of knowledge and communication. This chapter considers—given the role technologies play in risk documents such as accident reports—how the role of nonhuman agency alters the way risk communication addresses another, very pertinent, “third” divide: that between humans and nonhumans.

The two extant divides often work in tandem, as being able to lay claim to objective truth usually comes with a social position as an expert, and being a non-expert means that one is merely communicating science, not doing science. As Julie Staggers, in her award-winning dissertation on the rhetoric of risk in the nuclear events at Hanford, writes, with particular emphasis on the nature of environmental documentation:

the dominant approaches to risk communication within communication studies treat risk as a positivist, objective truth, which can only be determined by experts. This treatment

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1 The field of risk communication, not unlike disaster studies, is a comparatively young field of study, despite the fact that the communicating of uncertainty to concerned citizenry is a rhetorical art that essentially dates back to Aristotle. Approaches to risk communication have been widely varied, mainly due to the fact that risk manifests differently in different fields, such as financial risk assessment, cognitive psychology, and communication studies (the last of which serves as the foundation of technical communication’s uptake of risk).
of risk is similar to the treatment of risk in technical communication, where the primary object of study has been the environmental impact statement. Technical communication research on [EISs] treats risk as a preexisting truth determined by specialists and transmitted to the public through the skills of the technical writer. (42)

Staggers’ project delves into the realm of Foucauldian power structures to find out why nuclear power workers, aware of risks, continually put themselves and their family in harm’s way; this over-simplistic model of risk is applicable but insufficient. As such, she turns to Jeffrey Grabill and Michele Simmons’ call for a “critical rhetoric of risk,” which acknowledges the important work done over the past few decades on analyzing the socially constructed nature of risk (Juanillo and Scherer 1994; Katz and Miller 1996; Waddell 1996; Krimsky and Plough 1988) couched within a larger anti-positivist upswing (Kuhn; Latour), and takes advantage of the rhetorical potential inherent in value-laden communication in politically-based environmental writing. Grabill and Simmons’ critical rhetoric of risk, because of its focus on theories of power (Staggers 46), operates very much in the vein of postmodern critique:

[T]he failure to account for power in decision making about the meaning of risk...can lead to the “oppression” of (typically citizen) audiences. Conceptualizing risk as socially constructed is important because (1) it locates knowledge-making within communication processes, and (2) it considers how power is differentially exercised in such processes. (Staggers 46)

What an application of Grabill and Simmons’ critical stance on risk affords Staggers is the opportunity explicate four key implications of their work not only for her own project on Hanford but for risk communication more generally: 1) the elimination of arbitrary divides
between assessment/communication and experts/non-experts, 2) the situating of risk in social and economic factors, 3) the foregrounding of power, 4) the emphasizing of social processes in the construction of risk (Staggers 46). Where Grabill and Simmons fall short for Staggers is in their place of application. For Grabill and Simmons, real on-site decision-making processes are analyzed to see how the communication of risk actually takes place from beginning to end and how the public can be more fully integrated into the decision-making and knowledge-making processes. For Staggers, the more important question is figuring out how something like Hanford could have happened: “How do people come to act in ways that will harm themselves and others?” (51). She seeks to disrupt the divide between experts and nonexperts in their assessment of risk.

Since I am not concerned with, to use Staggers’ phrasing, “gaining a seat at BP’s table,” but rather more concerned with how the disaster is communicated to the public, this chapter does not engage in any sort of risk assessment nor trace any specific decision-making process (Staggers distinguishes between present tense and past tense risk). Risk applies to this case because risk communication is essentially any form of information communicated to a stakeholder that pertains to the harm, impact, or connection between factors and events. This includes accident reports. Risk communication does not end when disaster begins. Rather, risk is a continuing mode of discourse (Sauer The Rhetoric of Risk) which acts as a network that keeps all stakeholders, particularly the public, informed about the degree to which there is the probability or likelihood of an event happening.

Like Staggers, I acknowledge and build off Grabill and Simmons’ crucial work but, also like Staggers, I move beyond their bridging of the divide between technocratic structures and the
public to the bridging of a different divide: the artificial chasm separating humans from nonhumans. It is in the context of risk communication that two key divides have been bridged in technical communication: the divide between scientific knowledge and the discourse used to communicate it and the divide, as seen above, between scientific or industry experts and the public. Yet, as threats to public safety become more and more complex, uncertain, more and more technologically sophisticated, and as threats become increasingly dependent on the functionality of technology, specifically of boundary objects (Wilson and Herndl 2007), there emerges a need for more pronounced attention to less human-centered models of understanding risk. It is my belief that the “critical rhetoric of risk” developed by Grabill and Simmons now faces a third challenge in the context of risk communication: the deeply entrenched ontological divide between humans and nonhumans (i.e., animals, nonhuman living beings, technological objects).

Risk communication’s negotiation of the divides between experts and nonexperts and knowledge and communication has significantly reconfigured what it means to be a stakeholder. Grabill and Simmons have cast the redefined and more inclusionary notions of stakeholders as somewhat of an historical trajectory. Again, the first obstacle was the gap between expert and non-expert. Technical communication, acting as an intermediary between the scientific and technical experts and the “public,” sought to bridge the gap by arguing for the public access of documents and also by taking it upon itself to concern itself with writing about science and technology for a broader public deliberative function, not just as an internal discourse community function. The second obstacle was the artificial disjoint between knowledge and communication. Less of a political and more of an epistemological effort, the Modern divide
between what we know and what we say is still to this day a battle that technical communicators fight, predominantly in fields such as the rhetoric of science (Gross). This divide rested on the notion that scientific knowledge as an external entity can be obtained without interference from subjective perceptions or linguistic constructions. Much of these efforts in risk communication have resulted in a reorienting, indeed an extending of stakeholders. The critical rhetoric of risk communication Grabill and Simmons call for promotes the inclusion of non-expert members of the local community to act as an integral part in the creation of scientific knowledge. More than relegating citizens to mere NIMBY\textsuperscript{2} roles, the public citizens inform the process by sharing their experiences and by having their own experiences honored. This in turn changes the way we think about scientific and industrial knowledge practices.

The third “divide,” as I call it, is ontological in nature. That is, an obstacle immediately facing technical communication today is the distinction between human and nonhuman actants and our related ideations of their agential capacities as the field continues to grapple with how humans operate in complex systems. The accident reports outlined and analyzed below use the framework of this third divide to see the extents to which the writers challenge traditional notions of human agency and technical causality. These reports, in constructing grammars\textsuperscript{3} and narratives about how the public, industry professionals, and scientific experts understand disaster, significantly shape and continually reshape theory and practice through the “cycle of technical documentation” (Sauer “The Dynamics of Disaster”), legal proceedings, and—as will be further considered after the document analyses—the ways in which stakeholders relate to one another in the context of an event such as the Deepwater Horizon blowout. But first let’s

\textsuperscript{2} Acronym for “Not In My Back Yard”.

\textsuperscript{3} Sauer (“Fatal Grammar” 158) discusses the political roles that the writers of these accident reports must occupy.
consider how accident reports as a genre have the distinct opportunity to articulate the nuances between human and nonhuman agency.

**Accident Reports as Posthuman Documentation**

The complex systems “exerting themselves” on the rhetorical situations of Deepwater are ecological protectionism, the technoscientific operation oil industry, and the political regulation of the oil industry. Technical communication and writing about ecological risk have a long history with one another. It was in the 1960s when political legislation was spurred on by environmental groups to make technical reports publicly accessible, with Environmental Impact Statements (EISs)\(^\text{4}\) being the first mandated technical report (Coppola and Karis 2000, xv). Now, in a world of public access and environmental awareness, one cannot build a single acre park without making publicly available an EIS for the local community to review.

Coppola and Karis (2000) point out that environmental discourse and technical communication both benefitted from each others’ goals and as a result both saw an increase in prevalence and legitimacy around the same time (xv). In fact, James Souther (1989) “credits environmental legislation and its required effective communication of technical information to the public as a foothold for advancing the profession of technical communication” (Coppola and Karis xv). EISs, with the purpose of informing the public about inherent ecological impacts and risks in a given government or corporate project, legitimated the role of the technical communicator as one “who can help people visualize and understand environmental data so they can make informed decisions” (Coppola and Karis xiii). The effective political action of

\(^{4}\) EISs were some of the first technical documents used as objects of analysis in the emerging field of technical communication (cf. Carolyn Miller).
environmentally-concerned groups, particularly the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) legislated in 1969, helped created a stable role of technical communicators (who were already helping scientific and academic specialists compose technical reports). Technical communicators were then asked to become experts and mediators between the specialists and the public on matters of environmental discourse—a role cemented in 1992 by M. Jimmie Killingsworth and Jacqueline Palmer’s seminal book, *Ecospeak: Rhetoric and Environmental Politics in America*.

The work of technical communicators and then of scholars like Killingsworth and Palmer showed that ecological issues were just as much a problem of epistemology, ethics, and discourse as they were a problem of science, such that the environment cannot be separated from the words we use to describe it—a position further supported by both Cantrill and Oravec (1996) and Herndl and Brown (1996). In Herndl and Brown’s introduction to *Green Culture*, they write, “In a very real sense, there is no objective environment in the phenomenal world, no environment separate from the words we use to represent it” (1). “The environment” is not the tree getting cut down on the lower end of your front yard; rather, “the environment” is an infinitely complex network of ecological, technological, individual, and political forces. As noted by the Board charged with investigating the Columbia space shuttle accident, “complex systems almost always fail in complex ways” (National Commission Report viii). In the same vein, an oil spill is not merely a corporation’s irresponsible stewardship over a natural resource; an oil spill is a result of a complex web of industry-based, political, ecological, and individual forces and decisions reaching a tipping point.

There are stark differences when comparing EISs to accident reports, not the least of which is the former’s concern to anticipate and account for risk and the latter’s concern to
retroactively account for what went wrong and assist in preventing further events. EISs are preemptive documents, informing the public in advance of the event to help them make informed decisions about how or whether or not the project will and/or should proceed. Accident reports are explanatory in nature, expounding for the public a version or account of what happened, and are charged with the task of articulating what went wrong and what the main critical factors were in the event. As such, the task of the technical communicator in the unfortunate case of disaster is to help, along with industry experts, map the events in a way that accounts for the forces involved. Different reports account for different forces, a pattern largely informed by legal culpability and public image of individual stakeholder writing the report. While it seems reasonable in a complex event such as the Deepwater blowout to not over-attribute to human decision-making or to not be too deterministic in terms of technical causality, the varying rhetorical situatedness of each report make them fall along all points on this “agency” spectrum.

Accident reports as a genre follow certain grammars (Sauer 1994). They have the tasks of identifying technical causes, tracing relationships between stakeholders, providing the necessary context, and sometimes even recommending changes to industry practice in the form of safety manuals or testing procedures. Accident reports map out the complex networks within which the various stakeholders, ecological factors, communicative decisions, technological malfunctions, industry deregulations, and individuals interacted to bring about that particular catastrophe. If, as Mara and Hawk write, posthumanism “does not usurp the human but extends agency throughout the environment” (4), then the accident reports put forth by the writers

5 Spinuzzi (2006) would most likely find this metaphor appropriate for the work done by posthumanists. Spinuzzi argues that previous writing-based metaphors such as “weaving” are too enmeshed within a humanistic approach to discourse, and instead offers his own metaphor of “splicing” to explain how human and nonhuman agents work in tandem to build meaning and power.

6 Sauer (1994) opts to name them “fatal grammars.”
immediately involved with the blowout epitomize what it means to have an opportunity to do “posthuman work” in technical communication.

A posthumanist approach to the Deepwater Horizon blowout, generally speaking, looks not only to the varying levels of personal responsibility and corporate ethical behavior but moreover to the roles nonhuman actants played in the precipitation of the events, to the technological and natural contexts that frame or “exert themselves” on human interaction. This approach understands disaster as a complex interaction between humans and nonhumans, without overvaluing the roles played by either (Mara and Hawk 2). Human-centered models, do not capture the complexities of contemporary philosophy and science (De Landa 2006; Thacker 2004), are inadequate for understanding what happened on April 20th, 2010 in the Gulf of Mexico, and limit our ability to avoid similar catastrophes in the future. The reductiveness characteristic of modern disaster discourse also applies to the oversimplification of technical causes and is insufficient when analyzing the technical documents describing the events.

But to what extent do these documents in the Deepwater case actually distribute agency, actually meet the characteristics of a posthuman approach? And what precisely does a posthumanist approach look like? This chapter analyzes three accident reports from key stakeholders in the blowout (a governmental commission, a group of oil industry experts, and BP). The characteristics, techniques, and purposes of the reports are considered against a theoretical backdrop of posthumanism, specifically three features of the perspective: appealing to complexity, negotiating uncertainty, and irreducibility. These features are adapted from the work of Jane Bennett and Bruno Latour. The reports themselves are dense, highly technical, and, in light of the literature reviewed above, act as political and ideological efforts. They are in no way
summarized below, as this is an impossible task. Rather, I have identified several characteristics of the report to highlight my analysis. My research suggests that while the reports do at times have a posthuman understanding of agency, ultimately they follow the typical grammar of the “modern” accident report. After my analyses, my discussion then transitions into how the genre of accident reports can help continue to bridge what I am calling the “third divide” (that between humans and nonhumans) in risk communication. In doing so, these reports contribute to a more complex vision of how we might consider nonhumans as viable stakeholders in the context of risk and disaster.

Appealing to Complexity: Beyond Fault Tree Analyses

“Mapping” in disaster reports has traditionally been conceived in terms of the linear model of fault tree analysis (FTA). Most disaster reports, whether the result of investigations led by a government sponsored group (National Commission), an eclectic team of industry experts (Det Norske Veritas), a corporate research team (BP), or some combination of these, use FTAs as a method of trial and error to track how the disaster precipitated. Each FTA chooses a single “critical factor” that may have caused or did cause the event and then seek the appropriate contributing factors by “reasoning backwards” (Sauer, “The Dynamics of Disaster,” 401).

Pictured below (Figure 1) is an example provided from the National Mine Health and Safety Academy instructional manual of a generalized fault tree “constructed for the undesired event of a miner being struck by a falling roof” (Rankin and Tolley 18). The construction of a fault tree is the third step in the five-step method many industries\(^7\) use in their accident reports:

\(^7\) While used in many industries, Rankin and Tolley use the example from the National Mine Health and Safety Academy instructional manual.
Figure 1. Generalized Fault Tree Analysis from the NMHSA instructional manual
1. Define the undesired event to be studied.
2. Acquire an understanding of the system.
3. Construct a fault tree.
4. Evaluate the fault tree.
5. Control the hazards identified.

This investigative, reductive model “assumes that investigators can identify a single ‘undesired’ cause of the accident” (Rude, “The Report” 398; Ranking and Tolley 15). Even if there are several critical factors, or primary causes, many industry manuals will insist that “one event should be established that represents all events within each group; this event becomes the undesired event to be analyzed (Rankin and Tolley 17). This insistence to reduce disaster to a single critical factor reflects the quite literally two-dimensional nature of fault trees (Sauer “The Dynamics of Disaster”) and sets up a scenario in which legal proceedings, lawsuits, and public responsibility all hinge upon the oversimplification of a complex process.

The inclusion of fault-trees in the grammar of accident reports seems to have a “trickle-up” effect on the nature of investigative inquiry as a whole. In their pedagogy-focused discussion of a commuter plane crash, Meredith Zoetewey and Julie Staggers (2004) show, using in part the work of Sauer, “just how easily an investigation can become bogged down in the search for the ‘technical cause’ of a failure while entirely missing the role of communication practices in precipitating the failure” (Zoetewey and Staggers). Sauer’s work extended the analysis of disasters beyond the singular technical cause to include not only the larger communicative lapses but also the nonverbal elements of communication (bodily gestures made by the miners, as discussed in chapter two) that are difficult if not impossible to document in the accident reports.
For Sauer and others\(^8\) the “fault-tree mindset” has significant implications in terms of future inquiries because

the ideas and contexts we learn today form the background of our knowledge base and structure our ability to solve problems in the future. Recognizing the importance of “grammars” in the structure of scientific knowledge, scholars have examined how scientists use socially defined conventions of arrangement, style, invention, and evidence to win acceptance for competing paradigms. (‘Fatal Grammar’ 154)

The grammatical structure of accident reports frame the relationships between technical communication and the involved stakeholders and create habitual patterns of inquiry and action that restrict alternate modes of discourse other than the traditional ones that reflect “hidden assumptions about risk, authority, and responsibility” (154). These “hidden assumptions” can be said to be overly reductive in their conceptualization of technical causality and by extension over-attribute causality and blame to single or few agents.

These accident report grammars have rather severe political ramifications. Industry policies and legal penalties are implemented, altered, or revoked based upon the findings threaded throughout these reports. The public understanding of the disastrous events, whether they fall into (if you’ll recall) Kreps’ problematic categorization of the natural or human-made, are aligned with the one-dimensional model of the “fault-tree,” which fails to accurately represent all the complexities and nuances that precipitate the event, opting instead to allocate blame to one instance or one person. Each stakeholder involved has its own “fault-tree” and as

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\(^8\) Schwartzman, Ross, and Berube (2011) also speak about the different patterns that emerge as risk communication deals with large events. In their case, they distinguish between synchronic and diachronic production and assessment of risk.
such the discourse around disasters becomes increasingly political and away from the real, to temporarily invoke Latour.

Rhetorically speaking, the grammatical structures of accident reports perform arguments for the way we, the public, should view the complex relationships between technology, the environment, and human decision-making (Killingsworth and Gilbertson 76; Miller, “Genre” 159). The adherence to socially defined conventions in terms of report writing “embody assumptions about the intended use of the document and about the nature of knowledge [...] The genre not only embodies but also directs the approach to knowledge making” (Rude, “The Report” 183). A pertinent example here would be how a scientist in his or her field uses the grammar of the scientific report (methods/results/discussion arrangement) to learn how to conduct experiments (Rude, “The Report” 183). In the same way, readers outside of a given field or industry are also directed as to how to understand the nature of knowledge in an event by following the grammar of the fault tree analyses, which offer a concrete method for interpreting not only the primary causes of a disaster but also public accountability, ecological responsibility, and corporate ethics.

To counter this linear, reductive way of thinking about causality, Sauer creates her own version of a three-dimensional model of accident analysis, still using the Wilberg Mine disaster as her example. In this diagram (Figure 2), readers and analysts of the accident reports are able to identify the three key variables at work in the precipitating of a disaster (Sauer, “The Dynamics of Disaster” 413):

1. The responsibility of human agency in the disaster;
2. The temporal relationship of events in the disaster; and
Figure 2. Beverly Sauer’s three-dimensional model of causal pathways in disaster.
3. The relative importance or significance of the events in relation to the outcome.

Sauer’s three-dimensional approach resembles the concerns of posthumanism as an approach to technical communication: to locate competing bodies of agency against each other to capture a more holistic systems-oriented approach to an event. In Sauer’s model, individuals and their decisions are located in a highly-technical web of causal possibilities that does not discriminate between human, environmental, or technical causality. For example, in Figure 2, if the reader follows the disaster (“miners die”) all the way to the bottom, they encounter an entire network of critical factors or causes that led to the death of miners: the “mgt pushes production” and “mineral oil burns” are part of the same quadrant and are both contributing upwards to the failure of management to “direct operations.” Both human decision-making and technological malfunctions converge in the precipitation of the fire that eventually brought about the deaths of the miners. Sauer, in her own words:

   The cause of the disaster, from this perspective, is not merely a single static event (the fire, the failure of management to evacuate, the failure of miners to use SCSR), but a dynamic constellation of events linked by logical and temporal pathways. The lines of responsibility are not fixed according to rigid lines that separate technical from management responsibility, union from operator. Instead, the model shows how each decision or event interacts with other decisions and events in time to produce a catastrophe. (Sauer, “The Dynamics of Disaster” 415)

This “dynamic constellation” Sauer conjures possesses the posthuman characteristic of locating agency beyond the individual and into the complex systems within which humans operate (Mara and Hawk 4). Despite the potential technical value and potential public desire for a
straightforward, linear FTA, Sauer insists that—very much in line with Nathaniel Rivers’ (2008) Latour-inspired call for technical communicators to act as “spokespeople” for objects—technical communicators have a responsibility in the composition of accident reports to attempt to account for all forces and agencies at work, be they human or nonhuman. The reductive, “singular technical cause” narrative is driven by the completion of FTAs, so, naturally, a concerted effort to formulate models that move beyond standard FTAs alters the narrative, and thus epistemology, espoused by accident reports.

Still, the nature of accident reports simply cannot be reduced to the fault diagrams of critical factors. Sauer acknowledges this reality, and actually puts forth a description of what a written report, if translated directly from her own three-dimensional critical factor model, might look like:

In translating the three-dimensional model to the written report, writers can discuss the relative significance and temporal relationship of each event in the eventual outcome of the event. Instead of listing events in chronological order with the implied but unarticulated causal connections, writers can articulate the underlying technical, political, and social assumptions that enable investigators to draw conclusions about the link between seemingly unrelated events in the system. In defining a responsible agent for each contributing event, writers could also acknowledge conflicting assumptions about risk and responsibility in...disasters. (“The Dynamics of Disaster” 416)

In terms of the Deepwater Horizon blowout, the National Commission Report (NCR) acknowledges this component of distributive agency, of appealing to the complex and multivalent agential forces at work, of aligning with Sauer’s vision for an accident report that
draws more “seemingly unrelated” events into the system. The NCR engages in the type of articulation Sauer calls for, as it situates the Deepwater Horizon blowout in a larger scope of the industry and also does not focus on allocating causality to a singular technical failure for which one party is responsible. (In fact, the NCR does not include any FTAs in the entire 398-page document.) Yet, despite this appeal to distributive agency, identification of the NCR as posthuman documentation is not so straightforward.

The NCR is a lengthy, technically-complex but narrative-driven document that acknowledges the various roles played by governments (122), industry standards (126), and fellow stakeholders (123). If one were to apply Sauer’s thesis to the Deepwater Horizon blowout, one would expect all the reports to be “bogged down” about discussion of the blowout preventer, or at least the cement casing around the drill that was wrongly inserted. What the NCR does well is it contextualizes the events in a larger network of causality, seeing the difference between government deregulation by the Bush, Clinton, and Obama administrations and the faulty blowout preventer as a matter of degree. While the report does seek to identify responsibility, it is not “bogged down” with this one reductive concern; there is an evident concern to distribute agency across a wide range of objects, stakeholders, communicative lapses, and managerial decisions. This is done by drawing a distinction between “immediate causes” and “root causes”:

Whatever irreducible uncertainty may persist regarding the precise contributions to the blowout of each of several potentially immediate causes, no such uncertainty exists about the blowout’s root causes. (National Commission Report 122).

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9 This echoes the work of Hannah Arendt (1953), who, as discussed in chapter four, draws a distinction between “cause” and “origin” in her discussion of how political rises of totalitarianism come about.
Here, the writers of the NCR allow themselves an opportunity to become more clear about the levels of causes. They are entirely certain that government deregulation, poor safety standards for the oil industry, and an ethos of over-zealous production exist as “root causes,” indeed as the contextual system that exerts itself on rig operators. They are less certain, as the passage above indicates, about the “ranking” of the various technical causes that precipitated the blowout. They do not know the “precise contributions” of the many factors. This is understandable, as the NCR was published a mere nine months after the initial blowout. Much of the technical information, the “black box” information was not fully available at that time. One must wonder whether their appeal to complexity and uncertainty was intentional or merely the practical result of the conditions at hand.

Despite the posthuman feel to the report, the commission is still given the task of finding the root cause. This in a way is a mandate of the genre. The NCR does have a responsibility to find the technical causes, even if it does not use an FTA to deduce root causality. While they are careful to describe their disposition of uncertainty, the report does conclude that the immediate cause of the Macondo blowout was indeed the “failure to contain hydrocarbon pressures in the well” (115), stating that the three factors that could have contained the well were: “the cement at the bottom of the well, the mud in the well and in the riser, and the blowout preventer” (115). Each of these factors were the responsibility of several parties: Halliburton was in charge of the cement job, Transocean and BP senior rig operators were in charge of using mud to test the well pressure, and Cameron and BP were in charge of the blowout preventer, with the two companies building and maintaining the part, respectively. When the NCR looks for technical causes, they do not divorce them from other “seemingly unrelated events in the system” (Sauer, “The
Dynamics of Disaster” 416); rather, they place them in context with the other more overarching causes: “Better management of decision-making processes within BP and other companies, better communication within and between BP and its contractors, and effective training of key engineering and rig personnel would have prevented the Macondo incident” (National Commission Report 122). This is further indicated in Table 1, where the report couches the decisions that led to the blowout in the context of risk management as it relates to cost- and time-saving decisions (125); it then assigns responsibility to the appropriate party by identifying who had the final call in terms of decision-making.

Table 1. National Commission Report’s time-risk decision analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Decision</th>
<th>Was There A Less Risky Alternative Available?</th>
<th>Less Time Than Alternative?</th>
<th>Decision-maker</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not Waiting for More Centralizers of Preferred Design</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Saved Time</td>
<td>BP on Shore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Waiting for Foam Stability Test Results and/or Redesigning Slurry</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Saved Time</td>
<td>Halliburton (and Perhaps BP) on Shore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Running Cement Evaluation Log</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Saved Time</td>
<td>BP on Shore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using Spacer Made from Combined Lost Circulation Materials to Avoid Disposal Issues</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Saved Time</td>
<td>BP on Shore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Displacing Mud from Riser Before Setting Surface Cement Plug</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Unclear</td>
<td>BP on Shore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Setting Surface Cement Plug 3,000 Feet Below Mud Line in Seawater</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Unclear</td>
<td>BP on Shore (Approved by MMS)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Installing Additional Physical Barriers During Temporary Abandonment Procedure</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Saved Time</td>
<td>BP on Shore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Performing Further Well Integrity Diagnostics in Light of Troubling and Unexplained Negative Pressure Test Results</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Saved Time</td>
<td>BP (and Perhaps Transocean) on Rig</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bypassing Pits and Conducting Other Simultaneous Operations During Displacement</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Saved Time</td>
<td>Transocean (and Perhaps BP) on Rig</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
More than just placing them in context, the writers of the presidentially-commissioned report do something that Sauer, in her assessment of accident reports, wished she saw more of: the drawing of specific connections between technical malfunctions and human risk assessment and responsibility: “BP’s fundamental mistake was its failure [...] to exercise special caution (and, accordingly, to direct its contractors to be especially vigilant) before relying on the primary cement as a barrier to hydrocarbon flow” (National Commission Report 118). Ultimately, the report implied that BP was the most responsible because of the sheer amount of poor risk assessments in comparison to the other stakeholders (see Table 1). The over-reliance\textsuperscript{10} and unfounded confidence imbued in BP management in their technology left the NCR no choice but to relate the necessary information that would inevitably serve against BP in the criminal accusations of gross negligence. Rather than simply rely on the traditional FTAs, the NCR moves beyond linear, two-dimensional notions of causality and instead offers up an interpretation of the events that traces the connections between the various stakeholders on and off the rig and the technical malfunctions that allowed the blowout and the subsequent spill to happen. However, the nature of the genre as an inquiry into causality still has restrictive effects on the writers’ ability to circumvent issues of primary responsibility and singular technical causality.

My desire here is to congratulate the NCR on doing such a fine job at contextualizing the event, differentiating between “root” and “immediate” causes, and tracing the complex human and nonhuman assemblages involved in the blowout, specifically as it relates to risk assessment. While I cannot truly call the NCR a “posthuman” report, it is also unreasonable to assume that

\textsuperscript{10} This over-reliance was well documented by Lustgarten (2012) and epitomized in BP engineer Brett Cocales’ email sent on April 16: “But who cares, its done, end of story, [we] will probably be fine and we’ll get a good cement job. I would rather have to squeeze [remediate the cement job] than get stuck above the WH [wellhead]. So Guide is right on the risk/reward equation” (National Commission Report 116).
the composers of this report as individuals have much to gain from radically expanding agency
to nonhuman forces. So, considering the nature of the genre, and the constraints therein, as well
as the writers’ ability to trace the nuances of the complex systems “exerting themselves” into
rhetorical situations, the NCR gets as (to put it bluntly) posthuman as possible considering the
modern industrial and political frameworks from which the document manifested.

Negotiating Uncertainty: Timing and Access

The first criterion of posthuman analysis—appealing to complexity—was applied
specifically to the single document of the NCR because it was the only one of its kind to even
remotely come close to fulfilling Sauer’s posthuman-esque vision. The second criterion—
negotiating uncertainty—is a category that is more widely applicable to all reports and is a bit
more difficult to assess. The reason why it is more difficult to assess is because of the timing of
the publication of these reports. The uncertainty of the technical causes of disasters is hard
enough to resolve years after the event (as recent findings\textsuperscript{11} change the development of the
Columbia space shuttle disaster over a decade later); yet the accident reports I am analyzing were
published less than a year after the blowout, a blowout that is generally understood to be the
worst ecological disaster of its kind. When assessing this criterion then, with these reports or any
other, it is important to learn to differentiate between uncertainty as a philosophical approach and
uncertainty as a practical reality. The latter does not necessary mean that it is engaging in
posthuman practice. With that in mind, let’s compare the NCR with the BP report.

\textsuperscript{11} This is in reference to the recently unearthed “Day 2” object (David 2013).
One of the key features of posthumanist thought is an embracing of uncertainty, indeed the belief that philosophers and scientists should be wary of any account of action that claims to attribute agency to a single source, thereby taking that source out of the inevitable relations within which it was operating. Posthumanist thinking rejects the notion of “objectified scientific analysis in which the analyst is an independent, distanced observer who can rationalize a system in which he [or she] is subject rather than object” (Sauer, “The Dynamics of Disaster” 405; Harding; Keller; Hacker; Code). Instead, posthumanism acknowledges the uncertainty and contingency humans experience when trying to grapple with the world around them, always acknowledging the notion that as mere individual agents within a larger network of other human and nonhuman agents, we can never understand a real, true, objective sense of the world around us.

The NCR, as mentioned above, sends mixed messages about the degree of uncertainty in terms of technical causes. The writers are consistently very careful to avoid making any definitive statements, no doubt in their interest to remain on the surface unbiased:

We may never know the precise extent to which each of these missteps and oversights in fact caused the accident to occur. Certainly we will never know what motivated the final decisions of those on the rig who died that night. (115)

So too did other stakeholder reports (namely the BP Deepwater Horizon Accident Investigation Report, herein referred to as the BP Report) dwell in uncertainty, despite the fact that they are driven by an FTA-type document model or narrative (which is unlike the NCR). The BP Report itself developed FTAs and placed them as appendices to the end of their report, which largely connected Halliburton to the poor cement casing job. This is the factor the BP Report counts as
most critical, this despite contrary claims made by the Det Norske Veritas Report,\textsuperscript{12} which focused almost exclusively on factors relating to the blowout preventer (BOP) as the most immediate causes. (It should be noted here that BP was the primary accountable party in relation to the functioning of the BOP.) Each report can be understood as identifying different “causes” of the blowout, which positions them all in a context of technological dissensus, or what the media likes to designate as “finger pointing.”

The extensive FTAs created by the BP Report (almost impossible to view in the PDF format provided) reveal the complexity of an oil spill of this magnitude. The BP team used the fault tree analysis critiqued by Sauer to identify the multiple causes of the blowout. Unlike Sauer’s work, however, BP would not be reductive in their view of causality:

The team did not identify any single action or inaction that caused this accident. Rather, a complex and interlinked series of mechanical failures, human judgments, engineering design, operational implementation and team interfaces came together to allow the initiation and escalation of the accident. Multiple companies, work teams and circumstances were involved over time. (BP Report 11)

If we are completely honest, this passage is clearly an attempt to dilute and disperse the responsibility that would inevitably be placed upon BP as a corporation. BP has its own right for self-interest and for maintaining its public image, and they are aware that this stems from a inquiry-based investigation completed by experts who are “on their side,” or who can vouch for them in a legal setting. Their uncertainty is less grounded in philosophy and more grounded in self-interest.

\textsuperscript{12} The Det Norske Veritas (DNV) Report was written by a private risk management company of the same name. DNV was contracted by the collective of the Department of the Interior, specifically its internal department in charge of environmental concerns: the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, Regulation, and Enforcement (BOEMRE).
Nevertheless, BP did provide a section designed to educate the public and put forth their version of what happened. The report shows four distinct fault trees:

1. Well integrity was not established or failed
2. Hydrocarbons entered the well undetected and well control was lost
3. Hydrocarbons ignited on Deepwater Horizon
4. The blowout preventer did not seal the well

While they are simply too large to copy here, each FTA describes a possible cause to the blowout, tracing the necessary steps backwards to possible faults. Now, while it might be considered that it is in BP’s best interests to use their accident reports to distribute causality, still, the report does not give into the genre expectation discussed earlier that only one cause relating to the entire event should be chosen. So, to what degree then is this uncertainty in the posthuman sense? How much does corporate interest and public distrust and skepticism frame our theoretical interpretations of technical documentation? Certainly the NCR, while it does discuss the political failures of past and present administrations, have interest in the outcome of the case even if their representatives were not aboard the rig. The BP Report does, it appears, try and dilute the responsibility. It is not unreasonable to think that. But it should also be noted that BP actually did not have access to the blowout preventer (BOP), which was eventually discovered to be the key technical component of the blowout and a component that was ultimately found to be the responsibility of BP rig operators to maintain. This is akin to aviation experts trying to deduce the cause of an airliner crash without the black box.

BP cannot determine which of the four FTA applies because their report is preliminary, submitted soon after the accident and without a complete analysis. That is, both the NCR and the
BP Report came out less than a year after the blowout took place (BP Report came out in September of 2010 and the National Commission Report in January of 2011). Both reports make it clear that they are not final reports and have no legal bearing but instead represent the respective investigative teams “best judgments” about the events given the information provided at the time. Here’s a snippet from the preamble in the BP Report:

> In preparing this report, the investigation team did not evaluate evidence against legal standards, including but not limited to the standards regarding causation, liability, intent and the admissibility of evidence in court or other proceedings. (n.pg)

What this means is that the two public reports with perhaps the most relevance were releasing substantial amounts of information about the blowout and spill with only partial amounts of information and limited access to crucial technological artifacts that would further enhance and provide stability in analysis. (The BOP was actually in possession of Cameron, its maker, at the time [BP Report 190].) Despite this precarious position, BP’s investigative team, later on in the report, makes it clear their purpose: “While the understanding of this accident will continue to develop with time, the information in this report can support learning and the prevention of a recurrence.” The writers of both reports, but especially the BP Report, are intimately aware of the temporal constraints of these investigative processes and do their best, despite the conditions and skepticism of political and corporate self-interest, to grapple with the uncertainty of technical causality and organizational agency.

In light of these difficulties, it is difficult to check off either the NCR or the BP Report as engaging in philosophical uncertainty about agency and human-technological relations surrounding the disaster. It is also difficult to discuss authorial intent and political and corporate
motivations within the eight months after the disaster and without substantial pieces of information. So, while uncertainty is clearly a marker of a posthuman approach to the philosophy of science, and it clearly is a key characteristic of the post-disaster cacophony, I read both reports as inconclusive in this regard and see the value in my analysis as reinforcing the importance in maintaining a nuanced and informed approach to uncertainty in the genre of accident reports.

Irreducibility of Technical Objects: The Blowout Preventer (BOP)

The final criterion—the irreducibility of objects—is deeply philosophical, and more specifically ontological. This criterion encourages readers to think about the specific roles individual nonhuman objects play in our ability to engage in various rhetorical situations and the degree of “agency” they have in such relationships.

The Deepwater Horizon blowout included “four major players,” all of whom had various positioning in terms of the technology used to extract hydrocarbons from the well thousands of feet below the surface of the Gulf of Mexico. Further, each major player had a distinct relationship to the blowout preventer: Cameron International made the part; Transocean leased the rig depending on the part; BP was operating the rig and testing the blowout preventer (BOP); and Halliburton cemented the drill walls with cement to ensure stability around the BOP. On February 25, 2013, in the federal court in New Orleans, the trial over liability, centered around identifying the cause and thus public responsibility for the blowout, began (Johnson Jr, Fisk, and Feeley 2013). This trial was in large part characterized by determining the relationship of each major stakeholder to the BOP, which would then give an accurate picture—in the court’s mind—of the varying degrees of liability. The BOP was made by Cameron, surrounded by Halliburton
concrete, operated and maintained by BP to act as the dead man’s switch for Transocean’s rig.
And despite BP’s best efforts to emphasize the poor cementing job done by Halliburton, the
failure of the blind shear rams (BSRs) within the BOP were ultimately—according to legal
documentation—what allowed the rig to experience a blowout, and thus an explosion and spill.

Now in order to frame the court’s decision in this matter, it is useful here to turn to Bruno
Latour’s work on the ontological nature of technological objects and Latour’s focus on the
relationism characterizing objects. Perhaps the most prevalent and well-known articulation of
how we can conceive of the relationships between human actants and organizations and
nonhuman objects is Latour’s Actor-Network Theory (ANT), which has already made its way
rather substantially into technical communication (Rivers; Spinuzzi; Mara and Hawk; Hawk).
Latour is concerned with moving away from first principles and instead toward conceiving the
world as a series of actors interacting with each other, thereby being irreducible to themselves.
Humans relinquish their privileged role as phenomenologists and instead are relegated to mere
“objects” themselves, on equal footing with the real world in which they live. All entities are
interdependent and cannot exist apart from from that system. They are irreducible to themselves
and cannot be explained as individual objects outside of their networked connections to other
entities. This system, then, is predicated primarily on the principle of the irreducibility of
objects,\textsuperscript{13} of the notion that the agency of an object cannot be merely reduced to the agency of
another actant or even its own sense of agency.

For Latour, objects have been mistreated, or altogether ignored, couched thoughtlessly in
the disconnected construction of “nature” or “technology” and thereby remaining absent from

\textsuperscript{13} This has led to an identification of Latourian philosophy as an “object-oriented philosophy” (Harman 2009).
humanistic conceptions of rhetoric. They are the “missing masses” from our sphere of thinking, lacking any sort of democratic representation in our fields of discourse and realms of philosophy.

To give voice, so to speak, to real objects, Latour insists that we need to alter the way we approach and analyze the world. In his essay, “Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?” we see Latour outlining why criticism as it exists today uses objects as explanatory means for larger social issues and realities (241). This is unacceptable, as no single entity (whether it be an idea like greed, a disease like cancer, a technology like a smart phone) is capable in and of itself of explaining a phenomenon or an event. No single entity, such as the BOP, is capable of being used as an explanatory device for causality of a larger event, such as the Deepwater Horizon blowout.

Rather, Latour, quite disdainfully, points out that objects are used as explanatory devices to explain human behavior in a rather self-centered, anthropocentric position. In terms of the Deepwater Horizon blowout, the failure of the BOP (“dead man’s switch”) in the single-tubed drill inserted into the Macondo well was because of BP’s amoral corporate goals and not because of the explosive, humbling powers of the hydrocarbonic gas dwelling deep within the muddied well waters. His desire is that we begin to trace through inquiry all the actual relations between objects to seek answers to our experiences. The relation between a hammer and the nail holding together a table is just as important as the acts of sociability and consumption that take place on that very table.

Because Latour is concerned to over-attribute agency and causality to any one entity, and this includes individual humans, it can be said that the French thinker deals with the “democratization of objects.”14 The role of the human in Latour’s ontology is minimized, at

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14 cf. Levi Bryant.
times to an equal plane with objects. The philosophical trend to excitedly grapple with the
democratization of ontology indicates a frustration with cultural and political theories of relations
that place emphasis on semiotic interpretations of relationships and meaning. An example that is
often given is a natural disaster or event, like a hurricane. Undoubtedly hurricanes have changed
the social and political landscape in the areas it affected (i.e., Katrina). This catastrophe brought
up many political issues (treatment of area by President Bush) and religious issues (disaster
result of God’s direct punishment) that would indicate that our understanding was focused on
how a natural event changed our semiotic understanding of our environment. What Latour wants
to do is grant a level of agency to natural events, casting Hurricane Katrina as an object or an
entity that exists not in and of itself or independently of our interpretations of it. This framework
changes the way we understand our relations, particularly with nature, and not only offers a fresh
alternative to cultural theories and political science theories of our relations, which tend to
assume monolithic status of cultures and deem objects as being overdetermined by culture, but
also humbles the agency humans have in ontological frameworks. To even say anymore that
humans have a relationship to nature is a misnomer in the sense that humans are nature and
nature is humanity. Each object within our environment is absolutely irreducible to anything else:
everything has a form of agency that extends beyond the attribution we assign it. To use Latour’s
example of guns again:

You are different with a gun in your hand; the gun is different with you holding it. You
are another subject because you hold the gun; the gun is another object because it has
entered into a relationship with you. The gun is no longer the gun-in-the-armory or the
gun-in-the-drawer or the gun-in-the-pocket, but the gun-in-your-hand, aimed at someone who is screaming. (*Pandora’s Hope* 179-80)

The gun is irreducible to itself and its impact on and with the person holding it—and even vice versa—must always be considered.

Back to the Deepwater litigation. If we take these complicated Latourian ideas and think about the BOP as an object that is irreducible and cannot be considered outside its relations to the “four major players,” we find ourselves in a position unlike the reductive positions taken by the news media and even some technical inquiries. We find ourselves in a position where we cannot simply identify the BOP as the cause of the blowout; we cannot simply think that the BOP can be chalked up as the culprit in the oil spill and that is has any sort of agency outside of its immediate and extended articulations with the stakeholders in contact with it. After the first couple of weeks of the liability trial, it was found that Cameron International Corp.—the Switzerland-based maker of the BOP—was not culpable for any payments or damages for the Gulf ecosystem or for private businesses. It was found that the maker of the BOP was not responsible for its malfunctioning during the time of the blowout. On April, 2013, Cameron was dismissed from the Deepwater Horizon trial; they were “no longer a defendant in the first phase of a trial designed to identify causes of BP’s well blowout and assign fault to the companies involved” (Associated Press “Cameron Dismissed”). U.S. District Judge Carl Barbier did not find any negligence on Cameron’s part that contributed to the disaster:

The evidence is directed not at Cameron itself but rather at Cameron’s customers...[BP and Transocean are] sophisticated customers [...] They specified and selected the type of blowout preventer, the components, the arrangement of the components and made
decisions, whether those decisions in the end were right or wrong or proper or not, they
made decisions as to how this blowout preventer would be configured and arranged and
its capacity. (Johnson Jr., Fisk, and Feeley 2013)

During the trial there were investigations as to whether or not the part was indeed made with a
malfunction. No evidence was found that Cameron did in fact make a faulty BOP. Thus, the
judge ruled that it was the responsibility of the buyers and operators of the BOP to maintain its
functionality, namely BP and Transocean.

In terms of documentation, the BOP as an object was discussed thoroughly in the
accident reports, and was identified most often as the “primary technical cause.” The accident
reports, and the witnesses and experts used to compose the documents, were used in the liability
trial to help determine causality of the event (showing how accident reports serve as part of what
Sauer calls the larger cycle of technical documentation). The BOP, which was deeply involved in
the “emergence” (Mara and Hawk 4) of disaster in terms of how the reports were written, was
found, in part because of the non-posthumanist-leaning accident reports, to be irreducible. The
courtroom proceedings, mainly the liability trial, focused almost exclusively on which
stakeholder was most responsible for the functionality of the BOP. The reductive technical
qualities of many of the investigative reports used as evidence in the trial had the narrowing
effect of determining culpability based upon one’s proximity to or responsibility with the BOP. It
was almost as if the BOP was itself the fifth major player—perhaps even a stakeholder—in the
trial, exerting itself into the complex legal systems involved of the ruling.

The final section, in building off the previous criteria outlined, briefly considers the
prospect of thinking more complexly, perhaps more radically about the idea of viable nonhuman
stakeholders. In the section, I ask: How can we begin to think about specific nonhuman actants as stakeholders? What affordances does this give us? Does it help us think more rhetorically about objects? Does it expand the way we think about stakeholder theory?

Towards a Notion of Nonhuman Stakeholders

The classical definition of stakeholder used most often in technical communication comes from Andrew Freeman (1984), who defines stakeholders as “any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization’s objectives” (46). This then-revolutionary way of understanding organizational behavior and public image challenged the way people thought of organizations: “The organization itself should be thought of as a grouping of stakeholders and the purpose of the organization should be to manage their interests, needs, and viewpoints” (Friedman, “Stakeholder” 1). Freeman’s intentionally broad definition leaves it up to individual organizations to decide where the lines between “affecting” and “being affected” reside. The relationship between what a stakeholder is and who has agency is unclear in this work.

While not as radical as the Community Environmental Legal Defense Fund’s (CELD) insistence that plants have legal rights, there is a cognizance by those using stakeholder theory

15 In a special NPR series on “The Future of Nonhuman Rights,” Weeks (2012) wonders whether or not plants have the legal right to evolve. Since animals have legal rights, and plants to “exhibit humanlike behavior,” should we not respect the “anoetic consciousness” (Chamovitz 2012) of plants? Based on the humanlike behaviors (like chili peppers being able to “hear” sweet fennel), CELDF argues that plants have both interests and rights as they continue to evolve side by side their animal and human counterparts. Under such a system that grants rights to ecological entities, Mari Margil, member of CELDF, claims that “a river may be recognized as having the right to flow, fish and other species in a river may be recognized as having the right to exist and evolve” (Weeks 2012). This system is certainly in line with perspectives promoting sustainability by advocating for the natural balance of ecosystems. Weeks concludes his piece by indicating his position: “And if sovereignty for soybeans is not imminent, our awareness of our relationships to plants—and how we treat them—is moving to the front burner.” Put in the language of technical communication, CELDF is advocating that ecologies and the nonhumans constituting them are stakeholders in the larger scheme of human progress and development.
that the way one “treats” or “frames” the environment is important. For example, BSR is an organization devoted to promoting and building sustainable measures through networking businesses worldwide.\textsuperscript{16} They have a specific approach to identifying stakeholders (BSR 1), mainly one that involves mapping and charting the levels of influence each stakeholder has. What is useful here is that, in their categorization of stakeholders, they have one hodgepodge category for all things pertaining to

\begin{quote}
Environment (e.g. nature, nonhuman species, future generations, scientists, ecologists, spiritual communities, advocates, and NGOs)
\end{quote}

This broad brushstroke is reminiscent of the discourses of environmentalism discussed in chapters one and two in that rather than work towards complexity, it works towards oversimplicity. The same goes for Henrietta Nickels Shirk (1998) when she speaks of the greening of technical communication by having “the environment” as a stakeholder. Indeed, Cantrill and Oravec’s (1) assertion in \textit{Symbolic Earth} that, “Of our environment, what we say is what we see,” is really driven home when one looks how at the environment is depicted in stakeholder theories. The environment in discussions on stakeholder theories and practices is depicted as a static object that must be considered rather than a complex system contingent upon our communicative constructions (Luhmann 1989).\textsuperscript{17} Nonhuman entities have been consistently integrated into the legal realm of events and are included in many instantiations of stakeholder models of communication. In such cases, they are seen as legitimized things which require our

\textsuperscript{16} From their about page: “BSR works with its global network of more than 250 member companies to build a just and sustainable world. From its offices in Asia, Europe, and North and South America, BSR develops sustainable business strategies and solutions through consulting, research, and cross-sector collaboration” (BSR).

\textsuperscript{17} Niklas Luhmann’s \textit{Ecological Communication} (1989) works towards understanding environmental dangers in terms of how society’s react to the way we communicate about them: “The oil-pumps may run dry and the average climatic temperatures may rise or fall. As long as this is not the subject of communication it has no social effect” (28-29).
care. They are part of the larger “environmentalist ethic” and not part of the concern to elucidate the suasive force of things. The increased integration of nonhuman natural things into stakeholder conversations is the result of ethico-political pressures from other stakeholders entrenched in the same issues being discussed. Nonhuman species must be considered a significant stakeholder because a civil society organization values their existence and thus protection. As such, the “suasive force” (of influence, and not necessary persuasion) of natural nonhuman things is indirect, operating as surrogates for the agendas of human-driven stakeholders (cf. Morton, *Ecology without Nature* 4). Human stakeholders give voice and act as spokespeople for nonhuman stakeholders. The suasive force of a forest in eastern Washington state facing potential deforestation is saved not because of its voice but because of its representational value for the concerns of other groups.

The more thoughtful inclusion of nonhuman objects into stakeholder theories represents a posthumanist ethic that moves towards thinking about the world as moving away from an over-exaggeration of the agency of human. This resembles Shirk’s (1998) assertion that the integration of environmental concerns into technical communication (she posits the environment as a programmatic stakeholder) on a programmatic level illuminates the “culture-bearing” qualities of the field (76). Including nonhumans as viable stakeholders develops a sense that what we do in terms of industrial projects or resource extraction has a necessary rippling effect on a variety of other forces and further that these projects are in and of themselves resultant from our own partially-determined sense of agency.

So then what is to be made of the category of nonhumans in stakeholder theories? Do stakeholder models help to more fully account for the suasive force of nonhuman things?
Freeman’s definition of stakeholder is far too open for merely simplify “the environment” as a stakeholder. Technical communicators have the opportunity to take their responsibility to do justice to the complex assemblages they use, study, and theorize and apply it to Freeman’s open definition of a stakeholder. Starik (1993), who offers his own definition of stakeholder, sees a similar opportunity and approaches stakeholders as “any naturally occurring entity that affects or is affected by organizational performance” (22). According to Friedman (2006) and his recent and comprehensive book on stakeholder theory and practice, Starik’s definition represents “the broadest end of the spectrum,” (9), with the most narrow being a combination of both Freeman and Carroll’s (1993) definition: “individuals or groups with which business interacts who have a ‘stake,’ or vested interest, in the firm” (22). For Starik and his expansive definition, the key phrase is still “naturally occurring,” which thus includes only living entities: “animals and plants; it also includes non-living environmental forms such as rocks and water, as well as systems of such entities including the Sun-Earth system (Gaia) and the cosmos” (Friedman 9). Still, there is no active definition in the field of stakeholder theory and practice that depicts nonhuman, technological objects as viable entrants into the stakeholder conversation.

Yet, if plants and animals are viewed as “affecting and being affect by” organizations, one can surely see how, after reading this chapter and perhaps even the ones proceeding it, how nonhuman, non-living objects can, under the same criteria, be considered for stakeholder status. Just how much power did the BOP have on the organizational decisions made by BP? BP engineers and senior rig operators time and time again showed a consistent over-reliance (Lustgarten 2012) on the BOP as a back-up plan, indeed as the “dead man’s switch.” The technologically-complex safety measures in place aboard the Deepwater Horizon rig manifested
as a sense of complacency in the BP workers. The BOP exerted a sense of security that in turn led the BP engineers to make high-risk decisions (see again Table 1) about their drilling operations. If we are using Freeman’s conceptualization of a stakeholder (as having any degree of agency), and putting that alongside Starik’s inclusivity, then how can we not assert that the BOP was a legitimate stakeholder in the BP operations of Deepwater Horizon, affecting managerial decisions and also, as mentioned previously in the chapter, legal proceedings? The BOP has a sense of agency imbued in it that cannot solely be accounted for by human action or technical failure. According to Freeman’s definition, the BOP is a stakeholder and according to the recent courtroom proceedings should be considered as such.

Technical communicators have long wanted the public to see that objects matter, that nonhuman things impact and shape and determine us in very rhetorical, meaningful ways. I contend that a more complete account of risk emerges when the nonhuman factor is fully integrated. The negotiation of the impact of the BOP on the blowout represents in the reports outlined above a larger argument for the inclusion of material objects as stakeholders in the discourse of disaster through emphasizing the importance of tracing the assemblages from which disaster emerge as opposed to identifying the single party from whom the disaster was caused.

Conclusions and Implications

In a complex ecological-technological-corporate disaster such as Deepwater Horizon, current human-centered and “nature as object” (Killingsworth and Palmer) models of stakeholder relations are inadequate. Moving beyond these models can help bridge the divide between humans and nonhumans in the context of risk communication. Ultimately, this chapter shows
how the accident reports composed by various stakeholders of the Deepwater Horizon blowout can be viewed in varying degrees as posthumanist undertakings, thus working towards Andrew Mara and Byron Hawk’s call for technical communication as a field to continue to research and articulate how complex systems—be they ecological, technological, organizational, or pedagogical—exert agency on individuals and groups involved in a given event.

The goal of this chapter was to explore the possibility of conceptualizing nonhuman actants as viable stakeholders in the context of post-disaster risk communication and technical communication more generally. Current stakeholder models predominantly understand the environment as a distinct “object” (Killingsworth and Palmer *Ecospeak*), separate from human affairs, thereby indicating an allegiance to human-centered, humanistic models of thinking. Given the field of technical communication’s posthumanist concern to map and theorize the complexity of organizational, technological, and ecological systems, stakeholder models that cast “the environment” as a single entity are inadequate in their ability to capture the full rhetorical forces at work in a given event.

This “environmental reductiveness” is, in my mind, rendering the public discourses surrounding the event stale. Killingsworth and Palmer, again, write that ecological catastrophes are allowed to take place more and more often because environmentalist groups “have been unable to create strong communicative links with the mass public, links that would support a strong power base for reformative action” (7). This, ultimately, for the authors, is a failure of rhetorical identification, a failure on behalf of such groups—be they preservationists, deep ecologists, or eco-anarchists—to “form adequate identifications through effective appeals” (7). The “Blame and Boycott BP” rhetoric that arose after the blowout is an example of just such an
ineffective appeal. Those seeking bankruptcy and eradication of the BP corporation after seeing what the damage the millions of barrels of crude oil did to the Gulf of Mexico ecosystem and surrounding businesses (a justified sentiment, to be sure) are promoting a narrative no different than the one promoted by FTAs in the technical reports documenting such a sad scene. As Latour notes in *Pandora's Hope* (1999), “the straight lines of philosophy are of no use when it is the crooked labyrinth of machinery and machinations, of artifacts and *daedalia*, that we have to explore” (176). Overly-reductive narratives of singular blame and causality about disasters, whether they are documented in official reports or yelled from the streets, can be tempered by an appeal to complexity: one that reveals the complex interactions between humans and nonhumans in the precipitation of disaster.

Adopting a posthuman approach to accident reports does have the potential to enact real change. Accident reports are in fact key components of the what Sauer (2003) calls “the cycle of technical documentation in large regulatory industries” (17). The oil industry if course considered one of these industries. These accident reports are second in Sauer’s cycle, which consists of, in order: (1) local documentation, (2) accident reports, (3) statistical reports, (4) policy and regulations, (5) practices and procedures, and (6) training and instruction (Sauer, *The Rhetoric of Risk* 17; Tachino 219). The statistical reports and policy and regulations, largely developed from accident reports, are important in forensic rhetoric when corporations such as BP are called to the stand to account for the behavior and to pay reparations for the irreparable ecological damage caused by the spill. The narratives constructed in the accident reports play a significant role not only in the cycle of documentation but also therefore play an extended role in
legal proceedings and political and industry policy changes. Just how news media outlets and popular literature presents such changes is the topic of chapter four.
Chapter 4. A Posthuman *Epideixis*

“It was as if God had decided to put to the test every capacity for surprise and was keeping the inhabitants of Macondo in a permanent alternation between excitement and disappointment, doubt and revelation, to such an extreme that no one knew for certain where the limits of reality lay.”

- Gabriel Garcia Márquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*

*Introduction*

While the previous chapter focused on technical communication within the oil industry itself, this chapter focuses on the rhetorical constructions of the Deepwater Horizon blowout in more explicitly public arenas, namely popular literature and national news media coverage. Colloquially referred to as the “blame game,” post-disaster coverage is typically reductive in its efforts, seeking to find the sole technical cause and the sole responsible party for the catastrophic event. With the sheer complexity of disasters and the high amount of stakeholders involved, such narrow inquiries inevitably oversimplify the event.

Rhetorically speaking, this “blame game” falls within the ancient genre of *epideixis*.

Epideictic rhetorics, according to Aristotle (the first one to categorize the genre), are demonstrative showpieces that seek to either celebrate or blame an individual or group. The most seminal example is Gorgias’ *The Encomium of Helen*, which sought to exonerate Helen of Troy from her position as the cause of the Trojan War. Contemporary rhetorical theorists have noted that epideictic rhetorics, more than just hollow showpieces, actually create and maintain social
values (*doxa*). The post-disaster cacophony of discursive acts we cynically call the “blame game” is actually a battleground for competing cultural, political, and scientific value systems.

Currently, the value system most dominantly propagated in news media and popular literature outlets regarding the Deepwater Horizon blowout is imbued with modernist notions of blame. Anti-BP literature, coverage of BP boycotts, and even the renaming of the event to a misnomer of the “BP Oil Spill” all stem from the fact that it was one of the BP rig operators that was in charge of checking the battery life of the blowout preventer (BOP), the malfunctioning of which allowed the blowout to turn from a kickback to a major explosion and spill. The clear proximity of the rig worker to the malfunctioning part itself, which was largely deemed as the “cause,” allowed those covering the disaster to assert that the blowout was caused by a failure of human responsibility, that the devastating impact on the Gulf was the result of the moral depravity of BP personnel to care ethically for the Gulf waters. Underlying much of the epideictic utterances surrounding the blowout is the ideological, even ontological belief in the human mastery over technology and the natural environment. The blowout and spill, in this modern epideictic framework, locate blame in the will and character of individual human actors.

The problem with this reductive moralization of ecological disasters is that it conflates two distinct aspects of disaster: blame and causality. “Causality” is a matter of forensic rhetoric and analysis. This analysis takes the form of investigative reports and inquiries conducted by scientists and industry experts with the end goal of improving the functionality of the given technology, in this case the blowout preventer (BOP). In its current form, it is a modernist notion planted in a humanist ideology of linear causality from human to machine. In its posthuman form, it is a non-modern concept complicated by the distributed model of agency and a
recognition of complexity and non-linear or emergent causality. In application, causality is the forensic duty of science. “Blame” by contrast is a moral concept, a legal determination, and a political strategy. If blame is also causality, it seems to be so only in a sense that “cause” and “blame” are too casually taken as synonymous. Blame is not a scientific concept or deliberation. Because these two aspects are conflated, the reductive nature of technical inquiry positively correlates with reductive forces of blame. This is a problem, however, because whomever was in charge of overseeing the BOP is not the only person or party responsible for the 46 million barrels of oil now percolating through Gulf waters. This is a rhetorical problem because the politics of blame (*epideixis*) invests too heavily in a single party based on the technical findings of investigative reports. Not only that, but the formulation of the blame is put in moralizing terms: greed, corruption, reckless, dishonest, disloyal—which all point towards a modern understanding of the relationship between humans, nature, and technology.

What happens to epideictic rhetorics, then, if we adopt a posthuman approach? How would epideictic rhetoric work if, instead of aligning blame with singular causality, we aligned responsibility with agential assemblages? What becomes of the relationship between blame and causality in an epideictic framework that decentralizes the roles of human agents in favor of a more distributed idea of human and nonhuman agency? This chapter explores these questions in detail, offering posthuman interpretations of epideictic rhetorics as presented in various news media and popular literature sources. My intent with this chapter is to analyze materials that contain, as Michael Halloran calls them, “epideictic issues” (“Doing Public Business” 121). The materials analyzed in this chapter are largely popular literature and new media sources. Since key characteristics of the epideictic are (a) that it takes place during the immediate “present,” (b) that
the audience is observing, not participating, and (c) that the discourse is infused with ethically and/or morally driven and not technical accounts of the event, journalistic accounts and rushed-to-the-press disaster narratives—the authors’ own sophistic *epideixis*—by popular mainstream publishers serve as ample content for the primarily theoretical purposes of this chapter.

In terms of structure, this chapter begins with an exploration of the epideictic genre or form as it existed in classical Greek rhetoric. From there contemporary instantiations of the genre, with specific attention on scientific discourse, are discussed in terms of their ability to illuminate the social function of the genre. Couched within a posthumanist re-reading of Gorgias’ *Helen*, I then argue that the epideictic genre in terms of application to disaster discourse can be understood as a “rhetoric of agencies” in the sense that the genre functions as a tool for promoting certain ontologies in terms of technical notions of causality and the parallel moral notions of legal culpability and blame. I posit that adopting a posthuman epideictic allows us more rich ground upon which to discuss and map social values and attitudes that shape public understanding of science. In a posthuman epideictic, where agency is distributed and recourse of action focuses on a more full scale approach to individuals and ethics, the problematic conflation of blame and causality begins to unravel, and we are given an approach to disaster that would “detach ethics from moralism” (Bennett 38). In many current usages of epideictic rhetorics in the context of disaster, the application of the moral concept of blame is entrenched within technical and forensic inquiries into causality. Ultimately, adopting a posthumanist approach to disaster allows us to look closely at responsibility without having it hinge upon a reductive technical cause.
Before offering a reframing of the epideictic genre, it is necessary to first start such work with discussion of the original features and functions of the genre. Like much of Greek rhetorical history, it is useful to begin by distinguishing between facets of rhetoric that, as George Kennedy so mildly puts it, exist “before Aristotle” and “after Aristotle.” Before Aristotle, Protagoras, Gorgias, Hippias, and their fellow sophists sought to provide practical rhetorical training to any student seeking to improve his or her verbal capabilities. This training was distinguished by a teaching technique called epideixis, “a demonstrative speech, long or short, often flamboyant, in which the sophist undertook to demonstrate some proposition artistically” (Kennedy 10). The content of these demonstrative speeches was of lesser importance than the logical methods and stylistic devices that the pupil would seek to imitate for whichever and whatever purposes he or she saw fit, be it the courtroom or the countryside. The stylistically focused speeches would further be memorized by the pupils, so as to train them in the “gymnastics of the mind” and to develop an extensive repertoire of rhetorical devices, overcoming what some sophists believed to be an overemphasis on native ability in Greek oratorical culture.

This “skills over content” approach to rhetorical education epitomizes the usual tensions that arise between the sophists and other philosophers, perhaps those more sympathetic to Plato’s foundationalism. This notion is illuminated in Plato’s Phaedrus, when Phaedrus encounters

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1 Kennedy’s definition is backed by fellow classicist E.M. Cope’s (1867) definition of epideictic as the “demonstrative, showy, ostentatious, declamatory kind: so called because speeches of this sort are composed for ‘show’ or ‘exhibition’ ... and their [primary] object is to display the orator’s powers, and to amuse an audience” (An Introduction to Aristotle’s Rhetoric 121).

2 cf. Isocrates, Antidosis (266). In this passage, Isocrates identifies the practical, stylistically-oriented rhetorical skills as a mere preparation for real philosophy.

3 This classification of the genre resembles classical understanding of the panegyric, a “show-off” rhetoric that foregrounds the speaker’s ability over the subject matter (Smith, Hermeneutics of Original Argument 23).
Socrates during his attempt to memorize a singular speech by well-regarded Lysias (228a-b). After listening to Phaedrus’ partly memorized, partly recited expostulation of the speech, Socrates assures him that there are superior ways to structure a speech, and proceeds to give his own. More importantly, Socrates assures Phaedrus that “these types” of speeches that are memorized for modeling purposes are “to be distinguished from serious expositions of an idea” (Kennedy 11). In the exchange following Phaedrus’ recounting of Lysias’ speech, Socrates responds:

I paid attention only to the speech’s style...For it seemed to me, Phaedrus—unless, of course, you disagree—that he said the same things two or even three times, as if he really didn’t have much to say about the subject, almost as if he just weren’t very interested in it. In fact, he seemed to me to be showing off, trying to demonstrate that he could say the same thing in two different ways, and say it just as well both times. (*Phaedrus* 235a)

In taking the time to show how to better organize a speech, and then pointing out that these types of speeches are not necessarily the work of true philosophers, Socrates’ criticism reflected the common belief that an *epideixis* “was a lecture regularly given by sophists as a public display of their oratorical prowess” (Plato, “Complete Works” 792). These public displays, these stylistic templates from which to operate were cast as a distinct area of oratory, specifically one not heavily associated with the art of philosophy.

The insistence that moments of *epideixis* were mere ornamental deliveries not only aligned them with Plato’s version of rhetoric but further complicated the fact that, at times, an *epideixis* would indeed have serious social implications. According to Kennedy, Prodicus’ “Choice of Heracles,” Alcidamas’ “On Those Writing Written Speeches,” and Gorgias’ *Helen*
“fell between the extremes” in terms of the social import of content and the focus on ornamental features, with Helen “illustrat[ing] a method and expound[ing] some serious ideas about the nature of speech and human psychology, but at the end [referring] to the speech as a paignion, or ‘plaything’” (11). In addition to its intellectual weightiness, Gorgias’ attempt to exonerate Helen was an important marker in the public deliberations of Greek social life and cultural history, but it was also just as much an exemplar of linguistic showmanship, oratorical experimentation, and pedagogical promotion. The merging of the poetic with the pedagogical is most definitely what made epideixis a truly sophistic genre and most definitely what made Aristotle skeptical of its social value.

Aristotle, then, was not the first to identify epideixis but was instead the first to try and categorize such speech acts in relation to others. Epideixis is not a term or concept that was invented by Aristotle, but it became the genre we understand it to be today (epideictic) through Aristotle’s systematic categorization of rhetoric as an art form. According to Schiappa and Timmerman (1996), “[p]rior to Aristotle, the word epideixis was used to designate a quality or characteristic of discourse rather than a genre of discourse.” Epideixis became a genre only when Aristotle’s efforts to systematically organize and arrange the art of rhetoric saw the encomium (praise or blame speeches toward a person or institution), the panegyric (festival oration), and the epitaphios logos (funeral oration/eulogy) grouped into one larger branch of rhetoric, complementing the more easily establishable forensic and deliberative branches (Jasinksi 210). In Rhetoric (1358b12-1358b13), Aristotle makes it clear that this hodgepodge of oratorical types could be cast into one category because of their three common characteristics. The speech must:

i) be related to a ceremonial occasion; ii) serve as an elicitation of speaker’s rhetorical technique;
and iii) utilize praise and/or blame as the *topoi*. Unsurprisingly, Aristotle’s uptake of epideictic is unsatisfactorily narrow, and by his own admission weak (Sullivan 231), reducing the species to its praise and blame ends: “[Aristotle] thought of it as the rhetoric of praise and blame, as in a funeral oration or a denunciation of someone, and failed to formulate its role in the instilling, preservation, or enhancement of cultural values, even though this was clearly a major function, as seen in Pericles’ *Funeral Oration*” (Kennedy 22). Perhaps Kennedy’s speculation is right about Aristotle remaining content with a withering third branch of rhetoric because of his healthy distaste for Isocrates and his preference for logical, evidentiary forms of argumentation over the performative.4

*Modern Recovery of Epideictic Discourse*

Equally likely, perhaps, is that Aristotle’s attempt to categorize the potpourri of non-logical genres is a task best left for someone else. For example, in Book I of *On Rhetoric*, Aristotle’s discussion of emotionally-laden, context-specific epideictic rhetoric breaks into a prescriptive “how-to” in praise and blame speeches, offering various “should” statements about the nature of the performance: “one should also use many kinds of amplification” (1368a38); “one should try to show [the subject] acting in accordance with deliberate purpose” (1367b32). This implies that Aristotle did not squelch the genre so much as we should acknowledge that Aristotle’s cautious, rational, and skeptical approach to rhetoric might not have been entirely conducive with the sophistic rhetorics being bandied about.

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4 This is a nod to J.L. Austin’s *How to Do Things With Words* (1975) and his initial dualistic categorization of language into “performative” and “constative” utterances.
Regardless of Aristotle’s personal disposition toward *epideixis*, its underdevelopment over the centuries has provided contemporary rhetorical scholars with ample opportunity and a high degree of license with which to recover the mode of discourse. In stark contrast to Aristotle’s motivation to reduce and simplify the way we understand *epideixis*, modern scholars on the form have taken it in many different, more productive directions. As Dale Sullivan puts it, “[i]f we were confined to Aristotle’s conception alone, we would be hard-pressed to make much of the genre” (231). This observation stems from the fact that most modern uptake of the genre rely on another theorist or the application of other concepts to really develop the potential of epideictic rhetoric, affirming Walter Beale’s assertion that the classification of discourse is not an absolute categorization but rather is “informed by a great multiplicity of motives” (224). Epideictic rhetoric is in large part discussed not as a stable body or genre but in terms of its functions or characteristics: Bernard Duffy (1983) as philosophical; Walter Beale (1978) as performative; Michael Carter (1989) as ritualistic rhetoric; Lawrence Rosenfield (1980) as celebration; and Christine Oravec (1976) as educational. Takis Poulakos (1988) contends that epideictic analysis is a “site of a critique or transformation of the social order” (161) while Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969) claim that it increases “adherence to the values it lauds” (50). The modern development of epideictic theories has been happening in piecemeal, slowly drawing out individual characteristics or functions of a sophistic practice that was difficult to theorize and categorize.

The common thread connecting these diverse but not disparate epideictic rhetorics is the fact that they all stray away from trying to work towards a stable idea of what epideictic is or what it does, an effort that, as we read earlier, hindered Aristotle’s approach. The approaches
mentioned above all focus on the functions (educative, critique, performance, etc.) of epideictic rhetoric in a variety of cultural contexts as opposed to the Aristotelian focus on its conventions. Of all the attempts, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s important work in *The New Rhetoric* “came closest to defining epideictic in terms of its social functions” (Sullivan 231, emphasis added). It was the most definitive attempt at understanding how epideictic rhetoric functions socially by espousing and maintaining cultural values and at establishing a sense of communion between the audience, or observers. The social function of the genre, however, does not preclude a focus on the core characteristic of praise and blame. On the contrary, the most read exemplar of the genre shows how the construction and deconstruction of blame in major social events indeed serves an important social function in the shaping and proliferation of cultural values and practice. This exemplar is Gorgias’ *The Encomium of Helen*.

*Reframing Helen*

Now, as stated above, the purpose of *epideixis* at the time was to both show off one’s oratorical prowess and educate. Some speeches carried little social significance, others carried greater social significance. *Helen* is an example of the latter, since Gorgias is not merely exaggerating the virtue of one man’s life, nor is he merely exposing his ability to employ the technique amplification in his oratory; rather Gorgias takes it upon himself to compose a speech that would, if effective, free Helen from all blame levied upon her for “causing” the Trojan War. His strategy for decentralizing the tremendous amount of blame on a single party (Helen of Troy)

5 What of the distinguishing characteristics of epideictic rhetorics, from the sophists to today, is that the audience is characterized as “observers,” as opposed to say a jury in judicial speeches.
was to speculate about the multiple agencies or actors that added a more complex layer to the notion of causality.

The fact that Gorgias chose the exoneration of Helen of Troy as his demonstration piece speaks to the “serious playfulness” that could at times characterize the genre in the sense that: (1) showy, unserious epideictic rhetoric was the mode through which Gorgias chose to discuss this culturally hegemonic topic, and (2) epideictic rhetoric can be seen as an avenue through which the reshaping of public understanding of culturally significant events takes place. At the time, Gorgias was going against a rather rich literary and cultural history that by popular consensus attributed Helen’s beauty as the direct cause of the 10-year-long Trojan War: Paris of Troy, sent out to find the most beautiful woman in the land, was able to convince Helen, husband to Menelaus, King of Sparta, to elope with him. Now, as Kennedy writes, “Helen’s role in the abduction is not specific in the Homeric poems and was variously interpreted by later writers” (251). That is, whether or not she was violently abducted, gently persuaded, or willingly lured out of the home of Menelaus we cannot be sure; however, the fact that, had she been “less beautiful” she would not have been chosen and thus abducted, was the common opinion (doxa) at the time.

Gorgias, in true sophist form, takes the contrarian perspective on a ubiquitously-believed idea by retracting the blame from Helen and placing onto a variety of other factors. He does so by taking advantage of the historical uncertainty about the nature of Helen’s departure from Menelaus to Paris, outlining in logical form four other possible causes, each offering different accounts: the persuasiveness of speech, the misfortune of love, the power of the gods, and the

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6 The characters and the events in the story are of course major forces in our understanding of Greek life and culture.
strength of the abductor. When Gorgias argues for the higher degree of responsibility in the barbarian who abducted her, the persuader who duped her, or the gods who overruled her, what he is really doing is dislocating agency away from Helen’s essential beauty and towards the other precipitating factors involved. His method for displacing years and years of culturally-calcified blame from Helen was to question the dominant cultural model of agency, which was located directly onto the female agent:

[I]t is impossible to prevent a god’s predetermination by human premeditation, since by nature the stronger force is not prevented by the weaker, but the weaker is ruled and driven by the stronger; the stronger leads, the weaker follows. But god is stronger than man in force and in wisdom and in other ways. If, therefore, by fate and god the cause had been decreed, Helen must of all disgrace be freed. (Kennedy, Gorgias’ *Encomium of Helen* 253).

Gorgias’ exoneration of Helen stems, most effectively, from a movement away from overtly anthropocentric notions of agency. *Helen* is more than just a profit-driven demonstration: it is a treatise on agency that encouraged, rather radically, the public to rethink what they understood caused the most treacherous war in their culture’s history.

By reading *Helen* with attention to agency, we can see how one of the cruxes of epideictic rhetoric is indeed causality, that the rather tired definition of epideictic as merely “celebratory” is inadequate as the form actually serves an integral function in the shaping of

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7 Now, I must qualify my reading by acknowledging that Gorgias’ four arguments were probably not intended to be that serious—hence Aristotle’s critique—and are, to some, rather “unconvincing” (Poulakos 3). Yet, despite Gorgias’ playfulness (*paignion*), modern uptakes of the genre are insistent, and rightfully so, that speeches of virtue and vice, praise and blame, are important in the formation of cultural value systems.

8 It’s important to keep in mind here that Gorgias’ *Helen* was the most famous demonstration for luring students to his academy.
public understanding of the precipitation of major events. While epideictic theorists have tried to expand the genre beyond *merely* praise and blame, it is also useful to reappraise its original function in light of more expanded notions of agency and causality. My project, like Gorgias’ speech, is an exercise in disrupting culturally-dominant notions of praise and blame.

*Scientific Value of the Epideictic Genre*

While the epideictic genre has long had pertinence in more performative contexts and communities, its application to scientific communities has proved a bit more difficult. However, with increased growth and awareness of the rhetorical nature of scientific practice and scientific communication, the value-laden *doxa* of scientific communities has been revealed underneath its seemingly impervious objectivist shell. Specifically, Sullivan (1991) has demonstrated how epideictic rhetoric serves a social function in the context of scientific communities. His premise, largely informed by Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s views, is as follows: “If science is indeed a culture, then it should be possible to characterize internal scientific discourse in terms of epideictic theory because historically, epideictic rhetoric has been the genre understood to create and to maintain a society’s value system” (229). By applying epideictic rhetoric to scientific discourse, Sullivan is acknowledging scientific communities as “cultures” that actively seek to create and maintain their value systems through patterns and functions of discourse, which, contextually speaking, furthered the work done a few years prior by Alan G. Gross (1990).9 Sullivan’s project analyzes the principles and practices of internal scientific communication—communication between and among communities of scientists—and argues that it works as a

9 Gross’s *The Rhetoric of Science* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP. 1990) was a seminal effort in the field of rhetoric of science, exploring the “possibility that the claims of science are solely the products of persuasion” (3).
form of social orthodoxy, borrowing from the work of rhetorician Thomas Lessl (1988).\textsuperscript{10} Sullivan isolates five functions of epideictic rhetoric (education, legitimation, demonstration, celebration, criticism) and applies them to real communicative practices to reveal how scientific discourse works intentionally towards the creation and maintenance of order and common opinion (\textit{doxa}, thus orthodoxy) among its members. This reinforces Gross’s idea that

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[t]he rhetorical view of science does not deny ‘the brute facts of nature’; it merely affirms that these ‘facts,’ whatever they are, are not science itself...[T]he ‘brute facts’ themselves mean nothing; only statements have meaning, and the truth of statements must be persuaded...As rhetoricians, we study the world as meant by science. (Gross 4)
\end{quote}
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Sullivan thus defines epideictic rhetoric as \textit{the rhetoric of orthodoxies} (232). His work overcomes Aristotle’s oversight of the important social function of epideictic rhetoric, specifically its ability to shape the cultural values of a community, however defined.

Building off of Sullivan and his application of epideictic to the rhetoric of science, my work brings epideictic back to the mainstream public terrain from which it originally grew and analyzes the epideictic functions of \textit{external} scientific rhetoric, namely the rhetoric of disaster. While Sullivan’s work focused on the “epideictic rhetoric of science,” my work focuses on the epideictic rhetoric \textit{about} science (cf. Miller). While Sullivan integrated Lessl’s work to formulate his own understanding of epideictic as the rhetoric of orthodoxies, I am integrating posthumanist theory to contend that epideictic can be understood as \textit{a rhetoric of agencies}. When discussing the public understanding or shaping of science, or even scientific literacy, epideictic rhetoric is most appropriate because of a key feature of the genre that sets it apart from its judicial and

\textsuperscript{10} Lessl’s \textit{“Heresy, Orthodoxy, and the Politics of Science”} (1988) while never explicitly mentioning epideictic rhetoric as relevant to scientific discourse, outlines, in Sullivan’s mind, “characteristics of an orthodox response” (231) sufficiently similar to the characteristics of epideictic rhetoric.
deliberative counterparts: the fact that the audience are observers, not judges. In the Deepwater Horizon case, much of the “blame game” takes place in a courtroom setting, which attorneys divide up the blame in portions they see strategically fit. This of course falls under the heading of forensic rhetoric. An epideictic rhetorical approach to disaster rhetorics allows us to focus on the public communication about science and to analyze how the news media and popular literature are shaping the nature of the disaster, specifically how we understand its causes.

Epideixis as a Rhetoric of Agencies

Following Sullivan’s methodology of using Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s modernizing of epideictic to apply to the rhetoric of science, the rest of this chapter demonstrates how and argues why it is valuable to understand the post-disaster rhetorics of the Deepwater Horizon blowout and disaster rhetorics more generally as functioning as a form of the epideictic genre by applying the functions of the genre to the Deepwater Horizon incident. Sullivan writes: “To apply epideictic to the rhetoric of science, we must first grasp the genre’s dominant characteristics and then adapt the genre to the situation being investigated, a task that can be accomplished by defining epideictic rhetoric in terms of its social functions” (230). So, what are these functions? Well, mine are slightly different from the five Sullivan outlines (education, legitimation, demonstration, celebration, and criticism) but I do follow his pattern of identifying significant characteristics and functions. Sullivan again: “My theory of epideictic as the rhetoric of orthodoxies further suggests that epideictic [...] works to build and maintain the belief system, or orthodoxy, of a culture” (232). Now, it is pretty widely understood that science is indeed a culture, so Sullivan’s argument about understanding internal scientific communication as a
culture is more of a truism at this point. Sullivan contends that discourse, with the scientific variety as no exception, can be understood as epideictic if it seeks to create and maintain orthodoxy, order, and/or stability. And while in the more cacophonous public sphere the attempts towards orthodoxy fall apart because of the diversity of perspectives and the move towards debate and not consensus, we can still interpret attributions of blame as value-laden assertions indicating how different sources and authors promote a given politics of blame and thus a philosophical approach to approach and thus an ontological approach to agency.

To interpret such assertions, I need to, like Sullivan did, “go beyond epideictic theorists” (Sullivan 231). In Sullivan’s case, he added a layer of theory about orthodoxy. In my case, I am adding a layer of posthumanist theory to illuminate a key feature of the genre: rhetorical constructions of blame. This chapter uses posthumanist theories from Jane Bennett, Bruno Latour, and others to help accentuate and deepen our understanding of disaster rhetorics as a mode of the epideictic genre. A posthuman epideictic theory is a rhetoric of agencies; my functions are borrowed primarily from Bennett’s work of human/nonhuman assemblages and are defined as those that work to build and maintain complex approaches to agency. Praise and blame rhetorics can be read as reflections of how cultures understand how human and nonhuman agency works. Gorgias’ *Helen* shows us how the Greeks grappled with assigning agency between humans and the gods. Deepwater Horizon public rhetorics show us how American culture grapples with assigning agency between humans and things (which, as Latour might add, have become our new factish gods). From the very beginning, the genre of epideictic rhetoric has

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11 In the fetishes and factishes surrounding disaster, technological artifacts lifted into epideictic rhetorics are the objects of our attention, praise, and worship. The factish resulting from the human and nonhuman interactions in the explosion is, as Latour articulates, a byproduct of fact and fetish. The “fact” was produced by the National Commission Report, and others, that the blowout preventer was the underlying “cause” of the blowout and thus the spill. The fetish that...
dealt with challenging cultural ideas of what constitutes a cause, and thus can be called a rhetor of agencies.

Post-disaster discourse, when understood as a genre of epideictic, functions to shape the public understanding of causality by espousing utterances of blame, which are not merely political finger-pointings but ontological assertions. Viewing post-disaster discourse through the epideictic genre brings to the fore key features of the debate that provide inlets for us to rethink traditional conceptions of agency in light of posthumanist theory. Below is an articulation of three features as played out in the Deepwater Horizon explosion: (1) the conflation of blame and causality, (2) the distinction between singular cause and contextual origin, and (3) the value-laden nature of attribution. Afterwards I argue for why the cultivating of a posthuman approach to epideixis is important: namely that a posthuman epideixis splits the conflation of blame and causality, ensuring that the necessary reductive nature of technical inquiries into causality do not transfer to identifying responsible parties. This, in turn, ensures more productive pathways for public-oriented action.

A Delicate Balance: Blame and Causality

Fordham University law professor Howard Erichson, when interviewed during the recent spring 2013 trials, said that, “[i]n terms of sheer dollar amounts and public attention, [Deepwater Horizon] is one of the most complex and massive disputes ever faced by the courts” (Associated Press “Gulf Spill Trial”). And with the courtroom occupied with almost a dozen teams of lawyers representing the major stakeholders, namely BP, contractors Transocean, Halliburton, and Cameron, the US Justice Department and five Gulf states, it is easy to see why. Yet, in 2010, in
the months following the spill, and before the courtroom drama, it was not that complicated. For
the public, there was only one party to look to, and that was BP.

Protestors, environmentalist groups, and images of oil-soaked pelicans all contributed to
the notion that BP, a corporation with a terrible track record, was at fault. Even more than their
counterparts, BP has been known to “cut corners” to save money, leading people to believe that
the oil ravaging their local ecosystems, oil that belonged to BP and from which BP would profit,
was directly BP’s fault.

Yet, while it was BP’s oil from which to gain, and while greedy decisions were no doubt
made, the singular aggression towards the oil giant represented an over-attribution to human will
and human character. BP was operating in a larger swarm of actants involved, from the US
government, which overlooked some key safety issues, to leased blowout preventers, which were
made overseas and leased as a separate component of the rig itself. Protesting one certain
company over an event represents a belief that agency is located in the moral responsibility of an
individual’s actions. This Kantian approach to agency casts the “autonomous will,” specifically
its choice or inability to abide by moral law, as the cause of “evil.” This Kantian approach,
however, is problematic not because of any theological obstacles but rather because it works
reductively rather than towards a more comprehensive view of an event.

While a posthumanist approach does not deny the impact of a “willing subject,” Bennett
points out that there is a certain “slipperiness” to a human-centered location of agency:

[T]here is not so much a doer (an agent) behind the deed [Deepwater Horizon] as a doing
and an effecting by a human-nonhuman assemblage. This federation of actants is a
creature that the concept of moral responsibility fits only loosely and to which the charge
of blame will not quite stick. (28, emphasis added)

In an effort to move even further beyond the work of Maurice Merleau Ponty (2002) and more
recently Diana Coole (2010), both of whom proffer theories that extend agency beyond the scope
of human rationality, Bennett wants to include nonhumans in the demos (30). She wants to do
this because she thinks that seeking to answer the question “Why?”—representing, like the
protestors, an inquiry into the moral state of an doer or group of doers—is unproductive because
it demands reductive moral responsibility from a complex assemblage. Andrew Hopkins, a
professor and disaster analyst, wrote the book Disastrous Decisions not long after the spill in
order to give the public a glimpse “inside the heads” of the decision-makers deeply involved in
the events leading up to the blowout. This is the type of inquiry Bennett finds unproductive
because it over-corrects, indeed over-attributes the precipitation of an event to the human moral
compass, sometimes of only one individual. Ultimately, the charge of blame will not stick
because in reality human actants and their willful decisions play only one part in the assemblage
of Deepwater Horizon. If, as she implies, the prevention of another disaster requires a series of
cooperative efforts (30)—such as government regulation, public awareness, longer-lasting
batteries in the blowout preventer, corporate responsibility, and increased safety measures—then
really how important is getting “inside the head” of BP CEO Tony Hayward?

Bennett thus delivers a theory of distributed agency that does not “posit a subject as the
root cause of an effect” (31). Simply associating the blackened ecosystem in the Gulf of Mexico
with a moral decision is drawing a straight line over and through a complex web of interactions
and intersubjectivities, to borrow Coole’s terminology. Rather, Bennett, like Latour, favors more
of a tracing methodology aimed at delineating all the actants involved in the swarm: “To figure the generative source of effects as a swarm is to see human intentions as always in competition and confederation with many other strivings” (32). A posthumanist epideictic, then, would understand the blowout more as the result of competing forces of human and nonhuman actants, even if that theory is supported within a more traditional approach to blame.

Abrahm Lustgarten’s journalistic account in his book, Run to Failure: BP and the Making of the Deepwater Horizon Disaster (2012), is an exemplar of the type of anti-BP popular literature quickly sent to press following the highly visible blowout in the Gulf on April 20, 2010. Lustgarten is an environmental reporter for ProPublica, a self-declared “safeguard of the public interest” that produces stories of “moral force.” ProPublica’s mission is quite unabashed: “To expose abuses of power and betrayals of the public trust by government, business, and other institutions, using the moral force of investigative journalism to spur reform through the sustained spotlighting of wrongdoing” (“About”). Right in the introduction, Lustgarten makes it clear where his utterances of blame are directed:

The causes of the disaster didn’t originate on the Deepwater Horizon rig in the days or weeks before the accident. In fact, the fall of dominoes that would set in motion one of the oil industry’s most deadly disasters and worst environmental catastrophes began years before. The roots of the story of the Macondo failure concern corporate responsibility, business ethics, and leadership and go back at least two decades, to a point at which BP executives sought to redefine the company and reposition it as one of the great corporations of our time. (xvi)
Very much in the first sophistic tradition of *epideixis*, Lustgarten produced his great display, his masterful demonstration in the form of a book, his first in the field of investigative environmental journalism.\(^{12}\) Lustgarten bemoans the vices inherent in the oil industry. He mildly doles out responsibility rather publicly to the U.S. government and other overseeing agencies (i.e., MMS/BOEMRE), with the aim of trying to evoke some change in an industry that continues to remain rather cozy with the federal government despite its unsafe and ecologically unsound practices. His focus however is on BP and its longterm operation characterized at best in terms of its irresponsibility. In terms of the epideictic genre, it meets the ancient criteria of pertaining to blame (in attributing causality to BP primarily and the industry broadly) and the more modern one developed by Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca of reinforcing a certain social ethic of corporate accountability and environmental responsibility.

Now it must be understood that Lustgarten’s book is not just a dramatic account of the Deepwater Horizon blowout; rather, it is a lengthy condemnation of the greed and hubris of BP over the past two decades leading up to the spill in the Gulf. Telling is that it is not until chapter 15 of 16 that Lustgarten speaks directly to the Deepwater Horizon blowout. Because he locates causality primarily in corporate practice and managerial decision-making, and because he seeks to publicly hold accountable BP, the blowout in the Gulf is rendered as the final straw in a long list of “accidents.” In terms of the epideictic genre, Lustgarten is taking advantage of a present topic to promote a *doxa* of corporate blame.

Couched within the comprehensive, scathing, and well-researched treatise deriding the British-based oil giant is one of those “inlets for discussion” discussed earlier. It takes place

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\(^{12}\) Lustgarten did write a book in 2008 on the nationalization of Tibet and its relationship to China.
during Lustgarten’s chapter on Deepwater where he chooses to focus on the hubris BP showed toward drilling on Block 252 in the Mississippi Canyon, the future site of the Macondo well, Deepwater’s extraction base. The Macondo well was originally supposed to be what hydrogeographers and those in the oil industry call an “exploratory well” because, while geologists expected the reservoir to contain more than fifty million barrels of oil, the Macondo was both in a difficult area of the gulf to drill in and, by BP’s own admission, was covered with sediment and salt that acted as a barrier to the seismic and sonic waves of their geological instruments (Lustgarten 288-9). Regardless, Lustgarten writes that BP purchased the rights to the well in 2008, Hurricane Ira then shut down production in November 2009, and oil extraction returned in 2010 with the seven-year old Deepwater Horizon rig to complete the task they could not complete.

In order to drive home just how overly confident BP was about its ability to handle the uncertain underwater terrain, Lustgarten takes time to express just how uncertain, unpredictable, and unsafe the Macondo site was. Offshore deepwater drilling is a relatively new practice in the industry (increasing dramatically in the last decade or so), and, for most companies (including BP), the technology has not caught up with the increased drive for profits that force competing oil giants to drill further and deeper. Lustgarten frames BP’s technological interaction with the unpredictable well as a “delicate balance” (288), less between managerial hubris and raw goods and more between the ill-equipped pipe liner designed for exploratory and not extraction purposes and the million-year-old deposit of active hydrocarbons literally bubbling

13 BP’s vice president of gulf exploration David Rainey described the salt barrier as presenting “the same barrier to our seismic imaging capability that a pane of frosted glass presents to our eyes” (qtd. in Lustgarten 289).

14 BP’s response plan for the well boldly asserted that “in the event of an unanticipated blowout resulting in an oil spill...no significant [environmental] impacts are expected” (Gulf of Mexico Regional Oil Spill Response Plan).
beneath the ocean floor. Lustgarten casts the relationship between the “brute force and immense machinery” of the Deepwater drilling pipe and the “inward pressure” of the geologic formation in terms of a battling of agencies:

Far beneath the waters of the gulf and under the immense weight of miles of rock piled on top, the natural pressure from the earth constantly threatens to collapse the well, or force water, oil, or gas trapped in pores in the rock into the wellbore. If hydrocarbons under pressure hit the well—and if they find their way up through either the drill pipe or the long open annulus—they are likely to rush out toward the top in a violent kick, risking a blowout. To control that dynamic, drilling companies use a heavy mud—a dirty mixture of viscous synthetic fluids, polymers, oil, and chemicals with a lead-like heft—to balance that pressure inside the well. (296)

This description is a missed opportunity for Lustgarten to lessen his attack on BP, to realize the inherent danger of offshore drilling and the natural underwater conditions make the very fact that the government allows for such exploration quite problematic. The natural force of a deepwater hydrocarbon is upwards. It is always striving, always being pressured into arising to the sea floor. The further offshore the hydrocarbon pay zones are, the more highly pressurized they become. It is possible then that an oil company could be using the experience and technology of drilling closer to shore in deepwater environments, which would lead someone to note that the technologies are inadequate. Motivated by the larger pay zones further offshore and deeper under water, Lustgarten describes how BP migrated outwards, pushing the envelope with hubris, confident that their technological tools will be able to harness the ancient powers of these hydrocarbons, which are thousands or even tens of thousands of years old. For an ancient
hydrocarbon deposit, which was unnamed until recently (Macondo), the entrance of a BP tube into its confines is the first “external” transaction these hydrocarbons have. The pressure within the drill is a “delicate balance” between high pressure and low pressure. Too much pressure and the well is compromised; too little and the hydrocarbons are able to follow their intended trajectory upwards—what petroleum engineers call a blowout and what the public calls murder and what corporations call a profit-loss. While the delicate balance is between harsh underwater conditions and human consumption, Lustgarten sees the delicate balance as between the rig technology and the hydrocarbon well, both under control by humans, namely BP senior rig operators.

Since the faulty batteries on the dead man’s switch (National Commission Report 115)—the back up mechanism of the blowout preventer (BOP) that shuts out the flow of oil during an emergency—was what allowed the oil to continue to spew into the Gulf after the blowout, Lustgarten spends considerable time outlining the series of poor, unfortunate decisions made by BP management as it related to the proper maintenance of the safety mechanism, to the proper care-taking of the “delicate balance.” As BP shifted the Deepwater Horizon rig weeks before the explosion from exploring a well to producing oil, which is one of the more challenging technical feats in the industry, there was a sense that BP management aboard the rig were heavily influenced by the sense of security the BOP imbued in them. The BOP, sitting on the ocean floor, is the object that facilitates the “delicate balance” the most, as it is equipped with multiple blind shear rams that cut the drill pipe in the case of a blowout of hydrocarbons from within the well
and through the well opening (Figure 3). Time and time again, whether through overruling the rig’s chief mechanic, Transocean’s senior installation manager, the senior toolpusher for the well, or the rig’s most senior driller (Lustgarten 316-7), BP supervisors were insistent that the BOP would function in a way that would allow the rig to continue producing oil, despite the faulty pressure tests (National Commission Report 115) and unconventional decisions based on corporate pressure (Lustgarten 303). Contrary to Lustgarten’s acknowledgment that Shell’s model of designing “wells so that you don’t have to rely on the blowout preventers for well control,”15 BP’s decisions revealed for Lustgarten an over-reliance on the BOP. This over-reliance is characterized in terms of the BOP as an object capable of ensuring the lack of

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15 Quote from Joe Leimkuhler, senior offshore design engineer for Shell (qtd. Lustgarten 308).
disruption of the “delicate balance” between underground hydrocarbons and modern offshore drilling technology.

Despite Lustgarten’s reaming out of BP’s ability to properly assess risk and ensure safety and health for living creatures, and the subsequent heavy-handedness of moral culpability, his *epideixis*—specifically as it pertains to the hubris of BP’s supervisors in terms of the BOP—had the opportunity to move towards a distributive model of agency because in some ways it, as Bennett puts it, depicted “human intentions as always in competition and confederation with many other strivings” (32). However, his move to point out BP’s hubris is contingent upon the BP’s intimate relationship to the primary technical cause: the failure of the BOP. Lustgarten’s public declaration of blame and corporate vice towards BP, when looked at specifically through the lens of epideictic form and specifically deeper notions of agency, can be read as conflating blame with causality. While it was the BOP, in and of itself an object associated to varying degrees with other stakeholders, that failed to maintain the delicate balance of hydrostatic pressure at the entry point of the well thus causing the blowout, Lustgarten focuses on the personal hubris required in relying on such a failsafe mechanism. In doing so, Lustgarten locates, perhaps even over-attributes agency not in the nonhuman/ecological relationship of the BOP, drill pipe, and Macondo well, but instead in the overly-confident, dismissive, profit-centered attitudes of the BP rig managers. Despite the sheer complexity of the ecological and technological components involved in the blowout, Lustgarten’s book intentionally reads as a condemnation of BP, not only for the Deepwater Horizon, but as an entire corporation run by greed and characterized by hubris.

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16 Halliburton cased the pipe with cement, while Cameron assembled the part.
The problem with drawing explicit causal connections between the personal moral qualities of a group of individuals and the functioning of an intricately-designed piece of machinery thousands of feet below sea level atop a highly pressurized ancient oil well is that in an effort to moralize disaster the inherent complexity and forces wielded by technoscientific instruments is located outside the scope of agency. In an attempt to dole blame upon a single corporation, Lustgarten has no choice but to regard the failure of the BOP as a human failure, thereby ignoring a vast web of factors involved in the precipitation of the blowout. Rhetorically speaking, Lustgarten took the results of the reductive inquiries into technical causation (such as the technical accident reports covered in chapter three) and applied the same reductiveness to the proliferation of blame. Lustgarten took the outcomes of the forensic/analytical branches of disaster discourse and haphazardly imbued his epideictic with the same form of singular focus. In doing so, the readers of his book are left with, aside from a narrow view of responsibility, seemingly but one pathway to action: to alter the corporate morality of BP. Since businesses respond best to economic sanctions, people might feel compelled to boycott BP or protest their managerial practices to sway public opinion and maybe the courts in their decision.

In a posthuman epideictic, blame and causality need not be conflated or even taken so nonchalantly as synonymous because agency is seen as emergent rather than as a moral quality. This is not to say that posthuman approaches to disaster do not seek justice. As Bennett writes, there should not be an effort to release BP of any legal culpability: “Outrage will not and should not disappear, but a politics devoted too exclusively to moral condemnation and not enough to a cultivated discernment of the web of agentic capacities can do little good [for]...[i]n a world of distributed agency, a hesitant attitude toward assigning singular blame becomes a presumptive
virtue” (38). Her theory of distributed agency calls us to be more attentive to the specific agentic swarms involved in the given event. If a posthuman approach to causality were applied to Lustgarten’s thinking, or even Hopkins’, the intimate bond cast between BP and the BOP, blame and causality, would be deteriorated under a new ontological understanding of agency as emerging from a complex web of factors. Under a posthuman framework in which the goal is to discern the varying degrees causality, Lustgarten would be unable to pin any sort of moralizing blame onto BP. In a posthumanist framework, the task of the rhetorician or writer in his or her epideictic is not to unethically hone in on one single agent like a technical investigator. Rather, the task is to negotiate the “delicate balance”: How to negotiate the centripetal forces of blame with the centrifugal distributive forces of causality when these two opposing forces are seemingly so closely, positively correlated with each other? The identification of a singular, technical cause in the midst of disaster drives the inquiry process because it is the fulcrum of all legal, moral, and epideictic discourses. The legal accountability and public responsibility in large part is understood and doled out by an identification of who “allowed” the technical malfunction to occur, but, as Bennett points out, a “federation of actants is a creature that the concept of moral responsibility fits only loosely and to which the charge of blame will not stick” (Bennett 28). A posthumanist approach to disaster leaves rhetoricians then with the following task: to account for the wide range of human and nonhuman forces involved in the precipitating of a disaster while still remaining firm in the ethical accountability of its stakeholders. This is underwritten by the notion that the acknowledgement of the agential capacity on nonhuman objects within larger assemblages renders the task of assigning singular blame (1) impossible because the human-centered notions of disaster, as propagated by Lustgarten, rely on a conflation
between blame and causality that posthuman approaches work to detach, and (2) unproductive because it does nothing to enhance the accountability of all stakeholders involved in the precipitation of the event.

Cause v. Origin: Where to Begin?

While a posthumanist epideictic does dilute the intensity of singular blame and single technical causality, it also challenges to the core the very idea of what constitutes a “cause.” In doing so, news media sources aimed at educating the public on the technical nature of the blowout become problematic but also serve as points of departure of what could even be considered as viable “causes.”

As was discussed in chapter three, the most prominent, immediate inquiries into disasters focus almost exclusively on the singular technical cause. For once “the cause” is identified, once the black boxes of obliterated commercial jets are opened, the most pending questions get answered. At the time, before the legal and courtroom battles begin, technical experts are granted full access to find the singular cause. Take the case of the Air France flight 447 (AF447) airline crash of June 2009. When the plane made impact with the Atlantic Ocean just northeast of the Brazilian coast all 228 people on board were killed. Initially, aviation experts believed the plane to have succumbed to severe turbulence, based in large part on a meteorological analysis done two days after the crash that confirmed that a mesoscale convective system (MCS) was occurring at an altitude of 50,000 feet during the time and in the flight path of AF447.17 Two years later, when the black box was recovered, it was found that there were a sequence of events which led

17 Based upon the findings of two different independent studies: Vasquez (2011) and “Air France Flight #447” (2009).
to the disengagement of autopilot, leaving two lesser experienced co-pilots to manually engage the plane in responding to the turbulence (BEA “Final Report”). Then, in March 2013, it was discovered that the two co-pilots were left alone to deal with overcoming the turbulence because the captain left the cockpit for a rest break, since he was operating on only one hour of sleep (Kuruvilla). So, in this case, one must ask: where does causality “begin”? At what point do epideictic rhetorics of disaster “draw a line”? If ice caused the autopilot to disengage, and the MCS caused the turbulence that made autopilot necessary, and the lack of sleep from the captain caused the inexperienced co-pilots to handle the situation on their own, making critical mistakes before the captain could return, where does the cause of the disaster lie? Do we extend as far back as we rationally can until we find the most likely scapegoat, which could have been disruptive neighbors keeping the captain up all night, or do we move in the other direction, towards reductive ideas of technical causality? Approaching epideictic rhetorics through a posthumanist lens forces us to grapple with where, in a seemingly infinite amount of relations, the line of causality is drawn. Of course, each disaster has its own unique milieu, and certain “causes” are more pronounced than others. If we move in the latter direction, then blame becomes easier to dole out. However, if we move toward a more dappled, distributed view of causality, blame, as Bennett puts it, becomes difficult to stick.

To help draw some sort of line, or provide at least a heuristic, Bennett’s posthumanist approach to causality draws some important distinctions. In terms of locating causality, Bennett distinguishes between efficient causality and emergent causality. Efficient causality can be understood as a “chain of simple bodies acting as the sole impetus for the next effect” (32), and is, according to her, “impossibly rare”: “Is George W. Bush the efficient cause of the American
invasion of Iraq? Is Osama bin Laden?” (32). Efficient causality assumes that events operate as chains, as discernible, linear, hierarchical systems of cause and effect and “rank[s] the actants involved, treating some as external causes and others as dependent effects” (33). Emergent causality, by contrast, “places the focus on the process as itself an actant, as itself in possession of degrees of agentic capacity” (Bennett 33). Most often in epideictic rhetorics, efficient cause takes precedence because of the forensic and analytical nature of legal culpability. In the Air France 447 example, we see this as people try and figure out which cause ranks highest: the disengaging of autopilot or the fatigue of the captain?

Bringing it back to Deepwater Horizon, we see this version of ontology present in journalistic accounts of the one, singular cause, usually with the intention of educating the public. On June 10, 2010, The New York Times published their own impressive, demonstrative epideixis—an interactive, multimodal, six-page write-up of the key areas of public concern regarding the blowout (Gröndahl et al. 2010): where the oil is; where it made landfall; the efforts being made to stop the leak; the effects on wildlife; the final moments of the rig; and of course the investigation of the cause. Appealing to the public concern, The New York Times used experts from the field to “get inside” the BOP, to show every single last component of the complicated back-up safety mechanism, to the blind shear ram within the BOP, and even further

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18 Rather ironically, in borrowing the chain concept, BP would later write in their own internal report that it was a “sequence of failures” that led to the subsequent spill: “BP's internal reports said “a sequence of failures” involving “multiple companies and work teams” caused the Deepwater Horizon rig explosion that killed 11 workers and led to the Gulf of Mexico oil spill (Durando 2010).

19 As mentioned before, education is also a key characteristic/function of the epideictic genre, as outlined by Sullivan. While interesting and rife with potential in this topic, it is not covered here.


21 Of these experts was Cameron, the officially manufacturer for nearly all BOPs used in offshore drilling.
to the faulty shuttle valve with the shear ram. While this move does lend itself to the idea of nonhuman agency (BOP as actant), is still over-attributes agency to a very local level.

What this investigative effort is doing, within the context of the epideictic genre, is reducing the idea of causality to as reductive an object or sequence as possible. This *epideixis* came out before the final consensus about the technical components of the blowout, and thus merely discussed what investigators were then focusing on, the BOP: “A risk analysis commissioned by the manufacturer of the blowout preventer identified this valve as one of the weakest links. As the fluid flows through the system, it has two possible pathways until it reaches the valve. So if the valve fails, the well will not be sealed” (Gröndahl et al). Working towards the weakest link of the BOP, and reducing the explosion to such a minute interaction, signals an attempt to restrict causality to a moment in time, which is, according to Bennett, a problematic characteristic of efficient causality: “If one extends the time frame of the action beyond that of even an instant, billiard-ball causality falters” (33). Journalistic attempts to identify the “initial” cause in lay language rests on the implicit ontological assertion that, in the chain of agency, identification of the technical cause reigns supreme atop the hierarchy of agencies and, more importantly, that other utterances of blame are entirely contingent upon the identification of that initial cause. Rather than view the Deepwater Horizon blowout as an entity with its own emerging agentic capacities, epideictic rhetorics in the context of disaster can err towards more efficient causalities of identifiable cause and effect.

The function of narrow, reductive approaches to causality manifests in a problem of how we come to think of the relationship between cause and origin. Viewed through the lens of

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22 As it turned out, the shuttle improperly rationing the amount of hydraulic fluid feeding into the shear rams (Figure 5) turned out to be confirmed as true.
efficient causality, if the malfunctioning shuttle did not properly ration the hydraulic fluid into
the shear rams, and BP was the supervising force over that component, then the path to origin
continues *ad infinitum* past the day of former BP CEO Tony Hayward’s birth and into the
unknown. Hannah Arendt, in her essay “On the Nature of Totalitarianism,” points to the
problematic notion of a cause as it relates to large scale sociological events. To do so, she
differentiates between “cause” and “origin,” the latter of which is singular and direct in its
effects, the former of which is a “complex, mobile, and heteronomous enjoiner of
forces” (Bennett 33):

The elements of totalitarianism form its origins if by origins we do not understand
‘causes.’ Causality, i.e., the factor of determination of a process of events in which
always one event causes and can be explained by another, is probably an altogether alien
and falsifying category in the realm of the historical and political sciences. Elements by
themselves probably never cause anything, They become origins of events if and when
the crystallize into fixed and definite forms. Then, and only then, can we trace their
history backwards. The event illuminates its own past, but it can never be deduced from
it.23

But what are the possibilities if we shift from an efficient causality view to one of emergent
causality? What happens to the epideictic genre if one of its core features of identifying causality
(remember Helen) gets shaken? What is the value of the *New York Times* piece on the BOP in
terms of its epideictic function? I would argue that cause is an “altogether alien and falsifying
category” (Arendt) in the realm of the rhetoric about science as well as it is presented to the

public through *epideixis*. The preceding events that crystallize, allowing an event (the blowout) to happen, are rendered agential: the bill deregulating offshore drilling, the exploration of the Macondo well, America’s reliance on oil, the assembling of the BOP by Cameron—all are “elements,” to use Arendt’s term, separately constituted, that have crystallized into origins of one event. What a distributed theory of agency allows us to do is to work against the reductive grain and towards the illumination of the past events. How would epideictic rhetoric change if, instead of aligning blame with singular causality, aligned responsibility with agential assemblages? The ancient spirit of epideictic rhetoric is one of undoing reductivist *doxa* on causality. Is believing that Helen’s beauty alone caused the Trojan War any less ridiculous than over-attributing the Deepwater Horizon explosion on the BOP?

**Maintaining Doxa: A Matter of Attribution**

As shown thus far, Bennett’s posthumanist approach to disaster provides a useful ground for further developing epideictic rhetorics, rhetorics that are concerned with all but promulgating particular notions of blame and causality. Why Bennett is particularly useful here is because her push to develop more distributed theories of agency represents a concern not only to promote hesitance in the assigning of singular causality, a hesitance that is a “presumptive virtue,” but moreover a concern to disassociate heavily moral judgments in the midst of disaster: “An understanding of agency as distributive and confederate thus reinvokes the need to detach ethics from moralism and to produce guides to action appropriate to a world of vital, crosscutting forces” (38, emphasis added). One such guide to action might resemble the thinking of journalist Thomas Friedman (2010), who wrote mere days after the blowout and subsequent spill that
“there is only one meaningful response to the horrific oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico and that is for Congress to pass an energy bill that will create an American clean-energy infrastructure and set our country on a real, long-term path to ending our oil addiction” (Safina 71). Friedman’s epideixis, while stemming from deep frustration, promotes an ethic of sustainability rather than engaging in a moral derision of BP and others’ shirked responsibilities based upon reductive technical causes. Beyond that, it exemplifies Sullivan’s hitherto mentioned position that epideictic rhetorics reinforce social doxa: “epideictic builds cultures by establishing and maintaining beliefs, values, and ways of seeing that serve as a form of life for everyday activities” (232). In the context of disaster, attributions of causality are in fact value-laden assertions, philosophical (232)—though one could argue more ontological—in nature because they do not focus “energies on the justice or expediency of a particular case” 232). In Gorgias’ case, he was trying to establish a value system based upon where he located agency: relocating agency from the beauty of Helen to brute force of her captor or the persuasive language used to lure her or the overruling fate of the gods is an ontological move that reflects the building of a value system.

For Bennett, distributing agency and thus pinning the locus of political responsibility in a human-nonhuman assemblage (36) reflects a larger value system that resists reductive attributions. In her examples of Middle East conflict, this reductiveness often leads to violence. On the great North American blackout, she writes: “Though it would give me great pleasure to assert that deregulation and corporate greed are the real culprits in the blackout, the most I can honestly affirm is that corporations are one of the sites at which human efforts at reform can be applied, that corporate regulation is one place where intentions might initiate a cascade of
effects” (37). Bennett intentionally withholds the temptation to dole out blame to individual parties because for her “[a]utonomy and strong responsibility seem [...] empirically false, and thus their invocation seems tinged with injustice” (37). If considering the Deepwater Horizon blowout, one can anticipate Bennett feeling uncomfortable with the anti-BP protestors or the hypocritical heavy-handedness with which the Obama administration levied out blame and subsequent penalties and fines. This is, again, because her distributed ontological/philosophical purview of the disaster produces a less reductive approach to blame. Posthumanist approaches to events are in some ways just offering their own version of a well-established psychological theory of attribution, mainly the work of Fritz Heider (1958), which argues that the ways in which people attribute reasons to certain behavior reflects a certain worldview.

While I am not positing my own theory of attribution, Heider’s work is important because it gives us evidence that the way we attribute causality or intentionality or even agency is reflective of a given worldview, and even more narrowly, a certain politic. Take, for example, the issue of global warming and the debate about the amount of anthropogenic (or “man-made”) greenhouse gases. As many have recognized, fluctuations in global climate are not the only cause in the rise in temperature for fluctuations “can be caused by small shifts in the tilt of the earth’s axis, variations in the earth’s orbit around the sun, volcanic activity, and fluctuations in the sun’s energy output” (Seethaler 84). The paralleled increase in the levels of carbon dioxide and the Industrial Revolution are still, scientifically speaking, a correlation but are convincing as a causal linkage because much of the research falls within a plausible “mechanism” (Seethaler 84). That

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24 In 1958, Austrian psychologist Fritz Heider published *The Psychology of Interpersonal Relations*, a book that stands on record as being the first to posit a coherent theory of attribution. Theories of attribution concern themselves with studying the processes by which we as perceptual creatures interpret external and internal events and subsequently assign causality.
is, scientists can document that our planet has an atmospheric greenhouse effect, and that an increase in gases underneath the carbon dioxide ceiling would have an impact, but still cannot conclusively draw a causal link, leading the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in 2007 to report that: “Most of the observed increase in globally averaged temperatures since the mid-20th century is very likely due to the observed increase in anthropogenic greenhouse gas concentrations” (Seethaler 85, emphasis mine).

While it would be ignorant to disbelieve that our global climate is indeed changing, it is not ignorant to disbelieve the notion that there is a causal link between human behavior and climate change, despite the seeming ubiquity of its message. There is a break between scientific status of causality and public perception. Those who attribute the increase in global climate temperatures to over-industrialization coincide with an ethic and even politics of sustainability; those who attribute the increase in global climate temperatures to more natural atmospheric trends coincide with more “anti-scientific” politics. The notion that debates about global climate change fall largely along political lines in America is indicative of how attributing causality and scientific authority are inherently ethico-political decisions. This echoes Killingsworth and Palmer’s (1992) argument that one’s environmental actions are driven by a person’s epistemological rendering of “nature,” which for them falls along a continuum: Nature as Object; Nature as Resource; and Nature as Spirit. All can be held, but one typically predominates over another (Coppola and Karis). What a posthuman approach to epideictic encourages, then, is the acknowledgment that seemingly innocent attributions of causality are in fact ontological assertions deeply enmeshed in larger value systems and debates about public doxa.
To help “locate” where certain valuations and ontologies reside, I have devised a visual diagram to show the various relationships between epideictic utterances around the Deepwater Horizon blowout exist. This diagram is informed by the more robust posthumanist spectrum, which seeks to include narrowly attributed and widely distributed agency across both human and nonhuman entities. What an application of distributive theories of agency allows epideictic rhetorics to achieve is a more complicated, but ultimately more productive framework for how to negotiate blame, causality, and agency in human and nonhuman assemblages. Mapping out where different epideictic utterances fall along a greater spectrum of causality will provide a richer picture where social values and *doxa* in the midst of disaster sit. The self-designed diagram below (Figure 4) shows the range of possibilities in assigning agency in the event of a disaster. Epideictic rhetorics falling more in line with the BP-centered utterances of blame would tend to fall more on the right-hand side of the diagram, since they are attributing causality to a

![Figure 4. Agency-plotting diagram](image-url)
more singular, human-centric source. Now, singular causality, as we saw above with the *New
York Times*, can also be nonhuman, hence the division of the diagram into the upper and lower
halves. As epideictic rhetorics become more distributed in their approach, the distinction between
human and nonhuman tends to be less evident, hence the fading of the line into whiteness as it
moves left.

Scatter-plotting where the popular literature and news media *epideixis* fall in terms of
these distinctions would provide an accurate snapshot of where cultural values reside. Now,
while scatter-plotting all utterances of blame in the Deepwater Horizon explosion is beyond the
scope of this project (since my aim is not to provide a comprehensive account), it would be
useful to plot where some of the sources I used for this project which fall within the genre of
epideictic would be located. John Konrad and Tom Shroder’s book *Fire on the Horizon: The
Untold Story of the Gulf Oil Disaster* (2011) is a rather dramatic, person-centered account of the
blowout. In their author’s note, they explain why they chose to focus on the people’s stories, and
make it clear that the book is not a political argument or “even a judgment on the ultimate
responsibility for the disaster” (xiv):

In the massive coverage that followed, in the finger-pointing and eye-crossing dissection
of technical blame, I saw only jagged fragments of the full reality of the tragedy. I came
to believe that what happened on the Deepwater Horizon, over block 252 of the subsea
geological formation known as the Mississippi Canyon of the Gulf of Mexico, could
never be completely understood without placing it in the full context of the powerful, in
many ways inspiring, but also intrinsically flawed and little-understood culture of
offshore drilling. (Konrad and Shroder xiv)
Contrast that approach with Lustgarten’s, *The New York Times*, and other accounts (see Appendix for brief summaries of plotted texts below) in popular literature meeting the epideictic genre (Figure 5), and we are given a picture that begins to prompt some discussion: If this process were to go forth and plot all public *epideixis*, then we would have an accurate view of the value-set held by those writing about the Deepwater Horizon blowout.

![Figure 5. Agency-plotting diagram, with plots](image)

*Conclusions and Implications*

So, what then does happen when we adopt a more posthuman approach to epideictic rhetorics in the midst of disaster? What does it buy us? I have argued that epideictic rhetorics, when reconfigured historically and contemporarily as a “rhetoric of agencies,” open pathways for discussion about how attributions of blame and causality operate as ontological assertions that
maintain—or even disrupt—social *doxa* about the nature of disasters. I then articulated how three important features of disaster epideictics (conflating of blame and causality, distinctions between cause and origin, and the value-laden nature of attribution) become further articulated when infused with posthumanist theory. This is achieved by revealing the limitations involved and the reductiveness and even unjust over-attribution to single entities.

As I am writing this dissertation in the spring of 2013, almost three years after the deepwater hydrocarbons shot up through the drill, exploding the rig and killing crew members, Transocean Inc. and BP Plc (and myriad others) are still entangled in legal debates over who is to blame in the blowout and spill. For example, on February 14th, 2013 it was reported that Transocean (the owner of the rig) offered a plea agreement for their role in the blowout, which was then accepted by Judge Jane Triche Milazzo (Krauss 2013). The plea was based upon the interpretation given by many governmental and private reports that Transocean workers were negligent in their execution of pressure tests that would have anticipated a blowout and thus would have stopped the blowout from even occurring. The ways in which causality is constructed is the turning point, the fulcrum so to speak of legal and political actions. The determining of causality is such a high-stakes process and these legal actions are (as shown in chapter three) connected to larger ideologies and rhetorics that seek to continue to articulate the notion that causality and blame are connected; culpability is dependent upon where you locate causality, upon where you choose to begin counting. However, the very nature of the Macondo well is just as much a cause: but how do we blame a well? How can our epideictic rhetorics continue to associate causality with blame when a portion of causality is at least doled out to the objects? In Bennett’s words: “Perhaps the ethical responsibility of an individual human now
resides in one’s response to the assemblages in which one finds oneself participating: Do I attempt to extricate myself from assemblages whose trajectory is likely to do harm? Do I enter into the proximity of assemblages whose conglomerate effectivity tends toward the enactment of nobler ends?” (38). Being more inclusive in our nonhuman factors can help rupture the problematic link between human will and blame and causality and begin to see “blame” as a “delicate balance” between humans and nonhumans, but it also deeply challenges what we as a an industrialized culture define as responsibility.

Practically speaking, a posthumanist approach to epideictic rhetorics in the case of Deepwater Horizon not only reveals but moreover focuses on the complex workings of an industry that has been continually allowed to thrive despite its tumultuous histories because of singular attributions of blame on individual corporations. So long as the epideictic rhetorics reflect the interests of the oil industry writ large, and propagate their values, the public understanding of oil spills (doxa) and ecological disasters will continue to be reductive and anemic and the pathways of action will be limited. The post-disaster activity of severe penalties for BP and the protesting of the public against BP is indicative of how reductive notions of blame permeate cultural understanding of this event. This reductiveness leads the public to act upon the only target they know (BP) with the only means they can (economic boycott/protest). A posthumanist approach to disaster can help us move away from the reductive epideixis that delimits public understanding and thus action by simplifying the event. Fully engaging a framework that distributes agency has the potential to diversify the actual opportunities for action and consequently provides more opportunities for actual prevention in the future.
So, while many try and move beyond the “mere” praise and blame characterization of epideictic rhetoric, there is still social power in this particular characteristic. Michael J. Hyde (2001), for example, uses Aristotle’s ideas on praise, specifically the connection between emotion and rhetoric, to illuminate the “call to conscience” imbued in rhetoric generally and misunderstood in Heidegger’s rhetoric specifically. The call to conscience, or the taking of action out of the arousal of moral discourse, is for Hyde “the primordial form of rhetorical (that is, epideictic) discourse” (84). Hyde conceives of epideictic rhetoric in its original Greek meaning, which is to disclose, evoke, display, or show forth (94), to focus on the enthymematic potential of the genre, and uses Aristotle to back up his point: “To praise a man is in one respect akin to urging a course of action” (Rhetoric 1358b-28). So, while others see the defining praise/blame characteristic of the epideictic genre to be one of the obstacles in its development, a more attuned, more thorough investigation of what praise means—and the calls to conscience and actions that this praise and blame enacts—to Aristotle and the demonstrating sophists, and more importantly how it functions, is justified. As Bennett writes, “there is not so much a doer (an agent) behind the deed [spill] as a doing and an effecting by a human-nonhuman assemblage” (28). A posthumanist epideictic provides the framework for articulated the doings, and provides an avenue for an individual’s figuring of their place in such a doing.
Chapter 5. Posthuman Prudence

“Since we ‘call’ things by their names, why should they not answer?”

“It is difficult to get a man to understand something when his salary depends upon his not understanding it.”
—Upton Sinclair

*Introduction*

Chapter one framed the Deepwater Horizon blowout a problem characterized by unproductive “reductiveness,” a characteristic manifested through problematic environmentalist views and false dichotomies between human and nonhuman agents. Chapter two showed how this reductiveness is a fundamentally rhetorical problem and argued for seeing the role of rhetoricians and technical communicators in the midst of disaster as engaging in rhetorical invention and being more inclusive in terms all entities with the capacity to exert agency. Chapter three situated this role in industry-based risk communication practices, specifically in the composition of accident reports, which have the potential to contribute to real policy changes by being attuned to the nuanced relations between humans and nonhumans in the context of risk. Chapter four signaled a shift away from writing disaster to writing *about* disaster, and argued that news media outlets and popular literature sources fall into the ancient rhetorical practice of *epideixis* and thus construct social *doxa*, mainly the beliefs we as a culture have about causality and blame. Applying a more distributed notion of causality to disaster, as outlined in the previous
three chapters, moves us from a reductive framework of individual and corporate blame to a complex view of social responsibility. The next and final move I make is to take a step back and view this social responsibility and practice through the lens of John Dewey’s “naturalistic” political pragmatism, an approach that “makes responsibility more a matter of responding to harms than of identifying objects of blame” (Bennett 101-2, emphasis added). If attunement to nonhuman objects helps us with our tasks of articulating and realizing connections, then how does this attunement help us translate these new forged relationships into productive practice? If, as I have shown, posthuman approaches alter our hermeneutical and analytical practices in the midst of risk and disaster, then how do they alter our practices? And to what or whose benefit? Put simply: How does the acknowledgement of the role of objects in public deliberations affect/change our methods for communicating?

In “What’s Practical about Technical Writing?”, Carolyn Miller argues that technical communication is a “practical rhetoric” that entails “arguing in a prudent way toward the good of the community, [toward] socially responsible action” (23). In chapter three, I argued that the work of technical communicators in accidents reports has the potential to move towards the “good of the community” by tracing the complex connections between many human and nonhuman bodies, not by being reductive in blame and pigeon-holing opportunities for experiences and social action (read: BP protests). By articulating these connections, technical communicators provide a map of the multiple publics mobilized for such an event to happen.

This fifth chapter, then, explores what it means to integrate nonhuman entities more fully and meaningfully into political deliberation about and social action towards technoscientific problems in what Ulrich Beck calls a “world risk society.” This chapter begins with a discussion
of how Dewey links social “problems” (e.g., the Deepwater Horizon blowout and subsequent oil spill) to the development of publics. I then transition into how, despite contrary views, Dewey’s publics can be understood to be inclusive of both human and nonhuman entities. In adopting a Deweyan approach to “naturalistic” publics, analyzing deeply just what Dewey’s publics look like, this chapter frames the Deepwater Horizon blowout as a “problem” that has particular ways of forming publics and of being responding to. Dewey’s outlining of his cultural naturalism expands theory on publics to be more inclusive of nonhuman entities. This integration of nonhuman entities into the formation and circulation of publics sets better conditions for communication and thus for the development or productive democratic habits (phronesis). Dewey’s work then fully integrates nonhuman entities into experience and inquiry and promotes a form of posthuman praxis. I argue that Dewey—misread as an anthropocentrist who did not fulfill a rhetoric legacy—and his articulations of the role of nonhuman entities in the formation of publics and patterns of inquiry allow us to see how objects circulate in public and how objects in and of themselves can create publics.

The Public and its Problems

Much as I argued in the previous chapters, disasters are in part rhetorical problems. Dewey would no doubt agree with this sentiment. In The Public and its Problems (1927), Dewey discusses how the people’s ability to articulate their own needs and interests are stifled by larger political agendas (e.g., corporate capital, special interests). In distinguishing between the “state”

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1 I am fully aware of the more nuanced approaches to the “public,” specifically Jürgen Habermas’ (1962) and Dewey’s other arguments (elucidated further in The Public and its Problems) that the “public” does not exist so much as the world consists of multiple publics that gather around specific events and are driven by certain purposes and that can interact meaningfully with each other, a reality brought about by the crumbling of Modern boundaries that once separated the public from the private (indeed, Dewey would argue that publics do not exist until they are brought into life but humans and nonhumans—publics emerge).
and the “public”—the former of which being granted far too much power in creating social realities—Dewey not only laments the general powerlessness of democratic citizens but the subsequent impotence or difficulty of enacting productive public deliberation. While others writing at the time, specifically Walter Lippmann, did not believe that the “public” had the rational capability of engaging in democratic methods of communication, Dewey remained hopeful and optimistic. For Dewey, the “public”—more as a concept than an identifiable entity—was to regain its voice, indeed re-empower its very sense of self/selves through communication: “The essential need, in other words, is the improvement of the methods and conditions of debate, discussion and persuasion. That is the problem of the public” (208, emphasis in original).

Now, despite his insistence about the need for effective communication in reconfiguring sociopolitical realms, Dewey has been accused of not fully articulating or perhaps even being equivocal about the specific methods of debate (Diggins 1994; Danisch 2007). However, Dewey’s work, from all three epochs of his writing (his works are divided into early, middle, and later) shows a consistent concern to fundamentally reconfigure the conditions of debate. If persuasive methods can be understood as situation-based prescriptive techniques for effective communication, then the conditions of debate, discussion, and persuasion can be understood as

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2 Lippmann wrote The Phantom Public (1925), in which he argues that the existence of a democratically-active public is virtually nonexistent. Dewey’s Public, published two years later, can be read as a direct response to Lippmann’s ideas.

3 John Patrick Diggins, who outlines this moment more thoroughly in The Promise of Pragmatism (1994), chooses to frame Dewey’s reserved response at Cooper Union to the Japanese aggression in the Pacific as the failure of pragmatism to uphold what he deems to be the bold tasks of its philosophy. If knowledge, including communicative acts, is viewed instrumentally as a tool to help the public deliberate through difficult—more precisely, “problematic”—situations, then why would Dewey withhold such requisite tools from a public in such immediate need of assistance and direction? From a fundamentally philosophical perspective, Diggins lays claim to the idea that pragmatism’s consistent fringe status is due in large part to its failure to practice what it preaches, to enact on the instrumental usage of the fairly radical ideas it promulgates. For Robert Danisch (2007), however, this apparently underwhelming moment in New York City stemmed not from a failure of pragmatism so much as it was that “Dewey failed as a rhetor” (Pragmatism 1). In that very public, kairotic moment, Dewey made a choice to “remain beholden” to philosophy’s pursuit of knowledge at the expense of responsive rhetorical practice in the form of public oratory.
the social structures, philosophies, and material realities within which said methods are situated. To use my earlier analogy of Whac-a-Mole, Dewey wants less to show individuals how to best pound the animals and more to disassemble the game altogether.

More Money, More Problems

The game, however, requires more than just a simple screwdriver to disassemble. Dewey’s words ring true even today, as we still see a rather wide chasm between the “state” and the “public” with regards to the oil industry in America. A recent study conducted by the University of New Hampshire (UNH) found that a significant number of Gulf coast residents who were directly affected by the oil spill in some economic capacity indicated changed views about major environmental issues (Science Daily 2012). Explaining the study, Dr. Lawrence Hamilton, professor of sociology at UNH, claims that

If disasters teach any lessons, then experience with the Gulf oil spill might be expected to alter opinions about the need for environmental protection. About one-fourth of our respondents said that as a result of the spill, their views on other environmental issues such as global warming or protecting wildlife had changed [...] This proportion rose to 35 percent among those most affected economically by the spill. People reporting changed views also expressed greater concern about sea level rise due to climate change, more

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4 From the study: “The research results are based on surveys of 2,023 residents of the Gulf Coast conducted in the aftermath of the explosion on the BP Deepwater Horizon oil rig in April 2010. Telephone interviews were conducted with 1,017 residents of Louisiana's Plaquemines and Terrebonne parishes and 1,006 residents of Florida's Bay, Gulf, and Franklin counties. Most of the interviews took place between the successful capping of the well in July 2010, and the completion of a final relief well in September 2010. All told, an estimated 4.4 million barrels of oil escaped from the well, some of it washing ashore on wetlands, barrier islands, and beaches of Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and the Florida Panhandle” (Science Daily 2012).
support for a moratorium on deepwater drilling, and were more likely to favor alternative energy rather than increased oil exploration.

Out of the midst of unfortunate events comes the changing of minds on important political and ecological issues. A group of individuals who had material experience with the oil in some capacity were led to engage in some form of inquiry and rethink their views and, if it comes to it, actions at the polls.

However, when looking deeper into the comparisons between responses from individuals in Louisiana and those in Florida, we see that the larger political forces at work—the very same forces Dewey critiques—are restricting publics’ ability to articulate their long term interests. Participants were asked if they were in favor of a moratorium on offshore drilling, which would then lead to an increased use in alternative energies. Participants in Louisiana, though more extremely affected by the spill than their Florida counterparts, were less likely to favor a moratorium. The reason why becomes clear when looking at the amount of state income deriving from offshore drilling. Louisiana, and its open laws on offshore deepwater oil drilling, benefit somewhere in the neighborhood of 65 billion dollars per year from the oil industry. Florida, on the other hand, “actively opposed offshore drilling, which is currently banned in state waters” (Science Daily 2012). In explaining why coastal Louisiana residents were still generally pro-deepwater drilling, Dr. Hamilton continues:

The pattern of responses from coastal Louisiana, where many more people reported effects from the spill, extreme weather, or threats from climate-related sea-level rise -- but fewer supported a deepwater moratorium, alternative energy, or resource conservation -- reflects socioeconomic development around oil and gas. Specialization has been
channeled partly by physical characteristics of the Louisiana coastline itself. (*Science Daily* 2012)

Without engaging in the type of reductiveness I critique in the previous chapters, the differences in state viewpoints can be explained by two general patterns: the actual geography of the coasts (Florida coasts are more conducive to other industries, such as tourism) and the larger corporate and governmental benefits in Louisiana derived from the high-risk processes of deepwater drilling. The short-term gain, long-term risk approach enacted by the Louisiana state government is precisely the conditions of debate, discussion, and persuasion that stifle the publics’ abilities to articulate their own needs, desires, and protections. For those individuals who changed their mind about larger environmental concerns because of the very real, very deep impact of the spill on their lives, there is not an avenue to promote an ethos of alternative energy in a political context where the state’s budget and the functioning of its citizens relies on the ethos of its opposite. For Lippmann, the problem was that the “public” did not own a rational capability to enact change; for Dewey, the “public” does have this capability, it’s just that they are restricted by conditions that are out of their control.

So, what to do? BP, a corporation who works very closely with the Louisiana state government, has a lengthy record of producing deadly technical failures and heavily impacting American families; it is woven into the narrative of their existence as a corporation in America. Rather than feed into the boycotts and protests that seem to happen every decade or so towards BP, it behooves rhetoricians to provide a different framework for the public to both understand and act on the events that transpired in April 2010. It begins, in a way, with the realization that the blowout and spill is not just on BP’s dime and that it did not just begin in April of 2010. The
roots that brought us to where we are today—still polishing oil off Florida panhandle rocks—penetrates deep into a culture dominated by politically-influential, affluent corporations, stifled citizens, and a government who is generally content to look the other way. Spills are not catastrophes so much as symptoms of the publics affected by them unable to articulate their needs in the larger scope of the closely knit ties between the federal and state governments and the oil industry. Until the fundamental conditions are changed, until the public refuses to abide by the belief that the 4.9 million barrels of oil dispersed throughout the Gulf water was the result of corporate greed, oil spills will happen and the corporations and stakeholders primarily involved in the event will continue to exist (read: thrive). A head will roll, and we as a culture will move on, integrating the event into our psyche but not pronounced enough to alter our everyday actions.

Deweyan Publics

The improvement of the conditions of debate, discussion, and persuasion for Dewey resides in a fundamental alteration in just what constitutes a public, or the public, or the publics. Wearisome of his own artificial distinction between the “state” and the “public,” as well as the wide-spread acceptance of Lippmann’s notion of refusing the very existence of a rational public, Dewey used his earlier theories on “naturalism” (cf. Experience and Nature) to expound an articulation of publics that at times is rather analogous to the natural interactions in a given ecosystem or collection of ecosystems. Jane Bennett, drawing parallels between Latour’s
political ecologies\(^5\) and Dewey’s publics, also sees Dewey’s thinking on political action as a kind of ecology (Bennett 101). For Dewey, if we could move beyond the stifling and false dichotomies of the state and the public, then individual citizens and groups of citizens would be in a better, more empowered position, able to mobilize through the creation and re-creation of multiple publics.

According to Dewey publics do not, however, preexist. Publics are not simply willed into existence. They arise or emerge in response to particular problems; enrollment of individuals into these publics is characterized by induction rather than willing volunteering. Because they emerge as responses to events, as responses to problems, they can be characterized in terms of their shared harm. A public “consists of all those who are affected by the indirect consequences of transactions to such an extent that it is deemed necessary to have those consequences systematically cared for” (Public 16). The participants in the UNH study described above constitute a public because they are a group that emerged out of shared harm, provoked together by the “indirect, serious and enduring [consequences of] conjoint action” (Public 16). Conjoint action can be best understood as the un\textit{intentional} effects of a given interaction, an interaction in which “no efficient cause of the problems it generates can really be pinpointed” (Bennett 100).

Let’s return for a moment to Jane Bennett, who sees Dewey’s explanation of political systems as analogous to natural ecosystems and uses theories on publics to “[pave] the way for a theory of action” (103). Bennett, a political theorist herself, reads Dewey as ahead of his time in

\(^5\) This can be compared to Latour’s notion of “political ecology,” which, as he describes it, exists by definition as an “enigmatic emblem” that allows him to refer to the “right way to compose a common world” (Politics of Nature 8). This common world is constituted by the integration of nature (commonly defined), people, and science, in such a way that there is no distinction between scientific ecologies and political ones: “[N]ature becomes knowable through the intermediary of the sciences; it has been formed through networks of instruments; it is defined through the interventions of professions, disciplines, and protocols; [...] it is provided with arguments through the intermediary of learned societies” (Politics of Nature 4).
terms of addressing the complicated intersections of humans, technologies, and ecologies, stating that even current theories of democracy are not equipped to address or explain such nuanced relationships: “Theories of democracy that assume a world of active subjects and passive objects begin to appear as thin descriptions at a time when the interactions between human, viral, animal, and technological bodies are becoming more and more intense” (108). Bennett, who uses Dewey because of his naturalist version of politics, does not think Dewey fully acknowledges the important of nonhuman entities in such politics: “[I]n naming a problem (rather than an act of will) as the driving force behind the formation of a public, Dewey (almost) acknowledges that a political action need not originate in human bodies at all” (102, emphasis in original). She admits that he “flirts” with the posthuman and, in Art as Experience, “comes close to saying that even human initiatives are not exclusively human” (102), but ultimately sees Dewey’s ideas as a generally useful but incomplete model for understanding the place of nonhuman entities in the creation of publics.

I disagree with Bennett on this point. I think Dewey sees political action arising from publics as possibly emerging from and with nonhuman entities. What’s more, I see in Dewey the notion that human experience with nonhuman entities changes minds and alters communicative possibilities. What follows is a rather dense theoretical excursus into the notion of understanding Dewey as an anthropocentric thinker. Once I—and, well, Dewey himself—show otherwise, I then move into the possibility of thinking about a posthuman praxis through Dewey’s articulation of the important concepts of experience, inquiry, and habituation. This is contrasted with other rhetorical uses of Dewey, past and present, with the purpose of showing how the changing of the conditions of “debate, discussion, and persuasion” is a matter of changing our understanding of
how publics form. This, in turn, changes how inquiry happens and thus how habits—democratically productive habits, understood as a mode of *phronesis*—form. Including nonhuman entities in publics is an important point to explore because it is, in my mind, the lack of attention paid to the mobilization of nonhuman entities in the midst of “problems” (read: oil spill) that causes problems in the first place. Dewey saw nonhuman agents as active members of various publics, and I will let Dewey speak for himself on this topic, since Bennett is not the first to charge Dewey with hints of anthropocentrism.

*Dewey Responds to Critique of Anthropocentrism*

In Part II of *Problems of Men*, John Dewey responds directly to the criticism leveled at him by his friend and colleague Morris Cohen, who claimed that Dewey’s ideas were too “anthropocentric”:

> It is expressed in the saying that my absorption in human experience prevents me from formulating any adequate theory of non-human or physical nature. In short, it is held that the fact - which is not denoted to be a fact - that experience involves a human element limits a philosophy that makes experience primary to human affairs as its sole material.

(195-6)

While in previous iterations of Deweyan thought this point might have seemed non-sequitur, never has being clear about Dewey’s ontology of nonhuman objects been such an important element in keeping pragmatist thought a main player in contemporary philosophical discussions. Dewey uses this point of criticism quoted above as the setting for articulating his view of the relationship between experience and nature—a view that is defined by its quality of continuity.
between the two—and his positions that grow out of this belief. Because man lives within the complex network of ecological and material relationships and not outside of it, Dewey refuses to offer up a hierarchy of significance in certain experiences over others. The notion that qualities and values are considered fused with the material they define has brought about the very crisis Dewey was seeking to overcome: “the bifurcation expressed in the dualistic opposition of subjective and objective, mind and matter, experience and nature” (197). The equal valuation of every experience, indeed every increment of growth and development in his theory of the continuity nature and experience reveals Dewey’s concern to shed the “anthropocentric” label placed upon him by his colleague.

In *Experience and Nature* (1958), Dewey makes it clear that we should not be so naive as to think that when we turn our back, things cease to form relationships with other things. Things not only have relationships outside of our own, but Dewey even goes so far as to say that these relationships are primary:

A tool is a particular thing, but it is more than a particular thing, since it is a thing in which a connection, a sequential bond of nature is embodied. It possesses an objective

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6 At the time of his writing, realists distanced themselves from Dewey because there was no stable foundation of experience nature, no way of categorizing the different “things” that supposedly exist (Crick 31).

7 It is understandable that someone would walk away from a reading of Dewey with the maxim “objects in the world that we understand to be ‘real’ are only made such because we as humans experience them.” Dewey has been read as suggesting that objects in part change ontological status after being experienced (McGilvary 1939). This position complicates Dewey’s relationship to Kantian philosophy, which was of course precisely the type of thinking Dewey sought to depart from. In his account of Dewey’s metaphysics, Raymond D. Boisvert points toward Robert Dewey (no relation) and Richard Rorty for the proliferation of such a view. An object such as a table, Rorty asserts, “is for Dewey ‘neither an ugly brown thing whose hard edges bumped people, nor yet a swirl of particles, but something common to both - sheer potentiality, ready to be transformed in a situation” (Boisvert 59). Robert Dewey and Richard Rorty accuse Dewey as being Kantian in the sense that there are unknowable objects beyond the realm of experience, or *Dinge-an-sich* (idealism). These objects are beyond the immediate experience of humans. They point out that Dewey failed to distinguish between things as existents and things as experienced and thus fell into anti-realist notions that materials are based and reliant upon our perceptions of them, and that there is a separation between mind and matter. David L. Hildebrand (2003), in his book *Beyond Realism and Anti-Realism*, asserts that Deweyan metaphysics avoids the distinction between realism and anti-realism and in fact offers a strong alternative to this debate by casting experience (knowing) as taking place within nature, and not apart from it, while still hesitating to grant “full” ontological status to things not experienced.
relation as its own defining property. Its perception as well as its actual use takes the mind to other things. The spear suggests the feast not directly but through the medium of other external things, such as the game and the hunt, to which the sight of the weapon transports imagination. Man’s bias towards himself easily leads him to think of a tool solely in relation to himself, to his hand and eyes, but its primary relationship is towards other external things, as the hammer to the nail, and the plow to the soil. Only through this objective bond does it sustain relation to man himself and his activities. A tool denotes a perception and acknowledgement of sequential bonds in nature. (123, emphasis added)

This important passage disrupts the tendency for readers of Dewey to see him as overly anthropocentric and it is in this passage that we can see Dewey responding to Cohen’s criticism leveled at him in *Problems of Men*. Dewey wants us to recognize that humans are but one bond in this long sequential series of transactions marked by continuity. Dewey continues, in the usual process of critiquing classical philosophy for striking a dualism between means and ends, that “[t]hings have potentialities or are instrumental because they are not being, but rather Being in process of becoming. They lend themselves to operative connections that fulfill them” (*Experience and Nature* 123). Things are literally “acting out” on their potentialities in the process of inquiry, in the “transubstantiation” from event to object, and this oftentimes gets hidden behind the fact that it is happening during the act of experience. But just because a human is using a hammer and that hammer is known through experience does not mean that the hammer

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8 One might make the connection here to Latour’s irreducibility of objects, where the object’s meaning is linked only to its relations and articulations.
and the nail do not have a separate relationship when the human turns around or when they
operate outside the realm of experience.

Richard J. Bernstein (1966), in his exposition of Dewey’s work, supports the notion that
experience is not limited to living beings. While outlining the three different levels of natural
transactions Dewey describes in *Experience and Nature* (the physico-chemical, the psycho-
physical, and the level of mind or human experience, which are based upon levels of complexity)
Bernstein touches upon the reason why Dewey does not need to articulate non-natural categories:

There are no sharp breaks within nature that demand the introduction of “non-natural
categories.” For most of his life, Dewey was concerned primarily with the level of natural
transactions that are exhibited in human experience, and he sought to delineate some of
the major varieties of human experience. But he never would have accepted the
consequence that there is nothing more to nature or reality than what is manifested at the
level of human experience. Indeed, experience is *in* nature; it is one type of natural
transaction embedded in a much wider range of natural transactions. Experience is *of*
nature; it is a type of transaction in which the variety of other natural transactions
participate. (Bernstein, “Dewey” 87)

Dewey makes it very clear that experience is only one *type* of interaction, among a wide range of
other interactions within nature. The fact that there are no “sharp breaks” in nature indicates an
understanding of Dewey’s philosophy that cast “nature” as all-inclusive; there is no split between
human and world because they are inseparable, one and the same. Trying to label Dewey a
correlationist, to again borrow Meillassoux’s term, is not a straight-forward task because he can
conceive of relations and events outside of human experience, but simultaneously makes the
relationship between human experience and nature his (almost) sole concern. However, human and nature are not separate entities so while this relationship is his main concern, Dewey does not craft the same bifurcation that correlationists are accused of making. According to the passage above, non-living entities can have relations to each other that are just as important if not more than the actual human experience of it. What this does is it encourages us to read Dewey as a thinker who saw nonhuman entities imbued with a certain level of agency in a larger ecology constituted by humans and nonhumans.

We can turn back to Bernstein and Dewey’s *Experience and Nature* for further (a) evidence to support the idea that “things” involved in the process of experience do have “rhetorical” agency, and (b) to provide a heuristic for how we can think of Dewey’s rhetorical/problematic situation through the lens of experience, or, “levels” of experience. Bernstein identifies three types of action in Dewey’s text: self-action, interaction, and transaction. “Self-action” designates the type of action where an entity is thought to act solely under its own powers, independently of other entities (Bernstein, “Dewey” 81). The second type of action is interaction, which relates primarily to relative fixed entities and that sees action as taking place among entities and by entities. The third type of action is transaction, which views entities gaining their specific character from the role it plays in the transaction. Bernstein argues that the concepts of self-action and interaction presuppose a restricted notion that entities have “independent existence” (Bernstein, “Dewey” 83) that until they engage in transaction that can be viewed as separate and distinct things that move within nature. More meaning is made with these entities in transaction, but the fact remains that entities are given a type of “self-action” in the process. Dewey’s concept of “self-action” as one of the three modes of action in nature
affords the opportunity to speculate about the degree of volition granted to non-human entities, and the extent to which we “meet halfway” with the objects of our experience. Hickman supports this notion when he writes that Dewey functionalizes objects by characterizing them in terms of their roles in continuing inquiry (Hickman, *Post-postmodernism* 218). Objects are not understood in terms of their individuality, as being cut off from each other. Rather, objects are always understood and made meaningful through their relations to other objects in the process of inquiry. Nonhuman entities have agency in taking active roles in the processes of inquiry and experience and also possess relationships more primary outside of human experience and transaction. Dewey grants agency to things during the act of becoming, during the temporal space of transaction in which the actors or those involved are quite literally transubstantiated (Crick 40). Nonhuman entities play an active role in our transactions and help continue inquiry.

**Metaphysics of Experience: Cultural Naturalism**

This re-configuration of Dewey as not an anthropocentric thinker is important because it now opens up the possibility of using Dewey’s most seminal work—his work on *experience*—as a framework. Dewey’s articulation of experience, which is central to his corpus as a whole, shows how an individual’s physical interaction with his or her environment is the foundation of philosophy, a philosophy not bogged down in traditional metaphysical disputes. In 1915, in “The Subject Matter of Metaphysical Inquiry,” Dewey publicly announced his intention to reconstruct metaphysics as a naturalistic enterprise. For him, metaphysics should abandon the attempt to deal with first causes and devote itself to the empirical study of the irreducible traits of nature. A reconstructed metaphysics would supplement the various sciences, each of which deals with only
a subset of existences, by inquiring into the “irreducible traits found in any and every subject of scientific inquiry (MW 8:4). The traits of diversity, interaction, and change, for example, are found in every subject-matter of inquiry. Through inquiry into these irreducible traits, Dewey wrote, “we shall be saved from the recurrent attempts to reduce heterogeneity to homogeneity, diversity to sheer uniformity, quality to quantity, and so on” (MW 8:7). Despite the human focus in ontology, Dewey’s “metaphysics” focused on the emergent continuities between nature and culture, thereby distancing himself further from Meillassoux’s correlationism (LW 1:50, 52, 308). While the capitalization of “Nature” speaks to some uneasiness in contemporary application, Dewey did view Nature as “pluralistic, nonreductive, dynamic, relational, and polymodal and [was] supportive for those developing an ecological ontology” (Alexander, Eco-Ontology 14). Dewey advocates process philosophies that reject “ultimate atomic substances” as well as atemporal first causes. Dewey’s thoughts are “conducive to developing ecological habits of philosophical reflection, which the various traditional ‘metaphysics of identity’ are not” (“Dewey and Buchler”).

Dewey’s most loaded articulation of his general position of “cultural naturalism” (Alexander, “Dewey” 184),9 which echoes Bennett’s description of understanding Dewey in terms of ecosystem, is in Experience and Nature (1925). It is through the vehicle of cultural naturalism that Dewey is able to address the heritage of and sabotage dualisms, namely the chalking up his work to either a sort of “Hegelian idealism” or reductive naturalism (Alexander, “Dewey” 184). Always for sententious titles, sans the moralizing, it is in this book

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9 It should be noted that Dewey begins the book letting us know that he possess a “close enough” mentality: “The title of this volume, Experience and Nature, is intended to signify that the philosophy here presented may be termed either empirical naturalism or naturalistic empiricism, or taking “experience” in its usual signification, naturalistic humanism (Experience and Nature 1a).
that we find Dewey’s seminal discussions of experience, which are most often couched within discussions of scientific, specifically anthropological or geological, nomenclature:

> Experience is of as well as in nature. It is not experience which is experienced, but nature—stones, plants, animals, diseases, health, temperature, electricity, and so on. Things interacting in certain ways are experience; they are what is experienced. Linked in certain other ways with another natural object—the human organism—they are how things are experienced as well. Experience thus reaches down into nature; it has depth. It also has breadth and to an indefinitely elastic extent. It stretches. (Experience and Nature 4a)

What constitutes experiences for Dewey are not merely the sense perceptions of passive spectators of the world but rather the dynamic participation, the continuing process of an organism’s “adjustment” not simply to environing conditions but within a social and biological environment. In the process of experiencing, something happens: an organism actively encounters a world within which it must adjust (MW 10:9). Dewey, distancing himself from anti-realist connotations and fully embracing materialist ones, posits that there are antecedent, objective conditions which affect the organism in certain ways. The organism, in turn, causes changes within the environment, it interacts with the environment, it does something to effect alterations in antecedent conditions—it attempts to gain control over its surroundings.

The meaning Dewey assigns to experiences takes place along the spectrum of “events” and “objects”; actual, tangible, sensual experiences are coined events, while the end result of the process of transubstantiation, which uses communicative and rhetorical means, is an object, or, the “larger,” “social” meaning that then not only defines the event but is the event. The best way
to approach what Dewey means by transubstantiation in this context is by way of example, for then we can see how Dewey’s formulation of what Crick calls the “ontology of becoming” meaningfully shifted discussions from what a thing “‘is’ to what it ‘becomes’ as a result of changed conditions, actions, and understandings.” In typical fashion, Dewey chooses a rather quotidian example to illustrate his points:

I start and am flustered by a noise heard. Empirically, that noise is fearsome; it really is, not merely phenomenally or subjectively so. That is what it is experienced as being. But, when I experience the noise as a known thing, I find it to be innocent of harm. It is the tapping of a shade against the window, owing to the movements of the wind. The experience has changed; that is, the thing experienced has changed [...] This is a change of experienced existence effected through the medium of cognition. The content of the latter experience cognitively regarded is doubtless truer than the content of the earlier, but it is no sense more real [...] It is only in regard to contrasted content in a subsequent experience that the determination “truer” has force. (“The Postulate” 158, 160)

Dewey wanted to draw stark distinctions between what was real and what was true, which he identified to be a stifling debate in the formulation of adequate philosophies. In the example above, the noise, upon first hear, was fearsome. That is real. However, after inquiry and reflection (or, at times, what Dewey calls abstraction), the more “truer” force began to appear, namely, the “object” (knowledge/idea) that the noise was caused by a simple, harmless breeze. Truth for Dewey resides in the value that object has for future experiences. The “real event” was the sensation of fear; the truth of the experience, or the only thing with value, is the notion that

10 Crick, p. 37.
next time he hears that noise, he will attribute that event to something more rational, based on experience. What is most important here is that the “realness” of situations cannot be altered in any way; all we can do, or all that is worth doing, is to “alter what is experienced to be real in the future” (Crick 37). Objects and things transform in our interactions with them: The faulty window sealant, which allowed the window to enter, causing the shade to move and make noise against the sill, was the catalyst behind Dewey’s inquiry into the event. While the event was transformed into an object through critical reflection and repetition, the exigence for action was determined by the material thing constituting part of the event. Situations that require inquiry or critical reflection or communication —rhetorical situations—exist in large part in the experiences we have with the objects of this world.

Problem Habits: The Rhetorical Situation

The meaning of our experiences are further refined as we continually, over and over again, develop habits in our interactions. Not unlike the muscle memory of the mind that Isocrates championed, the habits we form in our interactions constitute truth-meaning for Dewey simply because they represent concerted actions towards what works. For Dewey, habits are the conduit for meaning, indeed that which guides our actions, and habits are acquired from our social and material environment (Crick 48-9). In Theory of Valuation, Dewey asserts that “[v] aluation takes place only when there is something the matter; when there is some trouble to be done away with, some need, lack, or privation to be made good, some conflict of tendencies to be resolved by means of changing conditions” (Bitzer, “Functional” 26). Habits are what “patterns of experience” are for Kenneth Burke. Burkean patterns result from an organism’s
adjustments and adaptations to their environments. Any modification to an environment would thus impact the individual’s creation of meaning within that environment; through this, Dewey’s materialist tendencies are revealed. However, we also have the power to change our own environing conditions through our own exigencies. The value we attribute to events and things always takes place in the context of “situations” or “exigencies.” Dewey calls them “problematic situations,” which, after experiencing a felt need, individuals are driven to adjust the conditions through whatever means possible.

Dewey’s problematic situations, and the subsequent habits our experiences with these exigencies produce, is the closest one can come to a formalized “rhetorical situation” in Dewey’s work. Crick’s smart articulation\textsuperscript{11} of the rhetorical processes in Dewey’s philosophy highlights the importance of the holistic relationship between organism and environment. For Crick, the organisms (citizens) are both created by and create the democratic world (environment) in which they live. A Deweyan rhetoric for Crick casts rhetorical processes as aesthetic processes, with successfully rhetorical citizens embodying a radicalized “ethics of democracy” that moves beyond Dewey’s simple theories of communication and into the more complex, nuanced ways Dewey presents experience as an inherently aesthetic phenomenon that responds, often through modes of advocacy, to the conflicts and urgencies of the world.

\textsuperscript{11} Crick attempts to further our understanding of this by placing Dewey in the debate between Lloyd Bitzer and Richard Vatz. Bitzer’s work in 1969 helped the field of rhetoric expand itself beyond the confines of mere persuasion, for, according to Bitzer, the “practical justification of rhetoric is analogous to that of scientific inquiry: the world presents objects to be know, puzzles to be resolved, complexities to be understood […] Hence the practical need for rhetorical invention and discourse” (Bitzer, “Rhetorical Situation” 13-4). Vatz (1973), however, argued against Bitzer’s iteration of the rhetorical situation, claiming that it was merely an “academic exercise” that defined rhetoric as the ability to understand the situation “correctly.” Instead, Vatz argued that rhetoric actually creates the world we live in, as much or instead of altering or “skewing” our perceptions of it. The Bitzer/Vatz debate is an inherently epistemological and ontological one. Ultimately, Crick deems this debate as insufficient in describing or placing Dewey rhetorically in terms of his “problematic situations.”
Crick would not disagree that the naturalistic interaction between organism and environment is the context of rhetorical meaning. Communicative processes, oftentimes shared, translate or “transubstantiate” the event into an object. This process is achieved through rhetorical means, namely reflection and the development of assertions. The point here is that Crick begins to think about rhetoric when humans begin to cognitively address through the reflection as experience of an event (e.g., window shade). I am interested in seeing rhetoric as being present in the things and materiality that framed and caused the event in the first place.

Publics, Re-Imagined

The purpose for this dense theoretical excursus is to show the theoretical viability of a notion of Deweyan publics that is inclusive of nonhuman objects and that foregrounds material experience with said objects as the roots of inquiry and thus action. Having reached a point in rhetorical history that can be known as post-postmodernism (Hickman *Post-postmodernism*) or posthumanism (Mara and Hawk 2009), we are given the opportunity to re-theorize and re-organize Deweyan rhetorics in very basic, materially-oriented ways that are not pigeon-holed into agonistic political debates, modernist/postmodernist impasses, or incommensurable epistemologies. As Danisch writes, “Dewey provides the theoretical grounds for a reconstruction of rhetoric in greater variety than oratory” (64). Many writers, particularly in the field of rhetoric.
and composition, have successfully thought of and used Dewey in rhetorical ways. Mailloux (1995) suggested that neopragmatism can be viewed as a postmodernist form of sophistic rhetoric, echoing Richard Rorty’s anti-foundationalist, pragmatist critique of traditional epistemology by juxtaposing “conversational” and “confrontational” explanatory models: “accept that our certainty will be a matter of conversation between persons, rather than a matter of interaction with nonhuman reality” (Mailloux, “Introduction” 14). Schiappa (1995) aligned Dewey’s pragmatism with Isocrates to accentuate the—and Stanley Fish would agree—techne nature of a pragmatist rhetoric. Cornel West uses Dewey in the form of “discourse as social action.” Yet, because these efforts were done without careful attention to the material objects that facilitate these processes, Dewey is left standing in the public square without some of his most valuable and productive assets: the artifacts with which we interact. Further attention to the role on artifacts in communicative processes not only recovers what Latour refers to as the “missing masses” but further places them squarely where they belong: in the mix of public conversations about science and technology. What is unique about Dewey, and what has been ignored in previous rhetorical projects based upon him, is his concern for the function of nonhuman objects in the formation of publics and in the process of inquiry. Logically speaking, if the oil spill was not, as I argued in previous chapters, due to the moral ineptitude of a single corporation, then it follows that the oil drifting to the shores and citizens of Louisiana was in fact a nonhuman

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12 There is a temptation when studying pragmatism generally and John Dewey specifically to note that the seminal educationalist is underrepresented in the field of rhetoric and composition. This desire stems from encountering the main topoi of the field (such as citizenship education, service learning, habits of mind, etc.) and realizing that Dewey has something to say about most everything but then seeing nothing but white space in between the Derrida and Elbow citations. Lest proponents of the most influential philosophical movement assemblage in American history play the victim card, it is important to understand why a thinker who is “everywhere in our work” (Janet Emig) occupies such an indeterminate place in the field. Where is this “everywhere”? And why is Dewey’s influence so tacit? What is needed—and what I provide in this chapter—is an explication, indeed a re-situating of Dewey’s place in our field and a subsequent argument that our field’s treatment of Dewey is incomplete, not yet fully treating, accounting for, or showing Dewey’s potential contributions to rhetoric, specifically a material rhetoric.
experience that acted as an exigence for inquiry, and thus the changing of minds. In Dewey’s configuration of human/nonhuman publics, the experience with the oil suggests, to use Dewey’s terminology, another relationship—a relationship with greater environmental concerns spurred on or originating from a real material experience.

There are, unsurprisingly, substantial disconnects between technoscientific research and public understanding (Cox 2012). The rhetorical apparatuses being used, and the contradistinction between them, offer an opportunity for those interested in the rhetoric about science (cf. Carolyn Miller) to develop a more refined approach to how we can understand the conditions for the public and technoscientific deliberation about disaster. Danisch (2010), in an article covering Ulrich Beck’s notion of “world risk society” and how it applies to political rhetoric, asserts that

both the kind and degree of uncertainty that we now face have changed the relationship between science and public culture. The tremendous ‘success’ of scientific research and technological development now acts to produce uncertainty, fear, and danger. As such, science and technology stand at the center of contemporary political rhetoric in a radically different way. (172)

Ulrich Beck, in his book of the same name, World Risk Society (1999), argues that the conditions for scientific discussion and controversy today are characterized most aptly in terms of contingency and uncertainty and subsequently involves experts and citizens making choices based upon their level of knowledge about a given topic or “fact.” This runs contrary to the Enlightenment and modern approach to science and technology, where the aim was to dominate the natural world with high functioning tools that were to, in all the glorious human hubris, work
against uncertainty and contingency (Hughes 2004; Beck 1992). According to Danisch, the “idea of ‘scientific knowledge’ was understood over and against consistent and probable knowledge” (177). Beck’s “risk society,” in acknowledging the place of uncertainty and contingency in scientific controversies and more over the place of rhetoric within that, breaks down the distinction between the public sphere and the technical sphere. This is simply because public well-being is too integrally linked with technological and scientific production:

Beck consistently claims that contemporary Western societies are living through a transitional period, in which industrial society is becoming “risk society.” The most notable fact about this transitional period is that the production of wealth is accompanied by the production of risks, which have proliferated as an outcome of modernization.

(Danisch, “Political” 178)

The main issues Western citizens face in this risk society is the “management and minimization of risks, not the production and distribution of goods” (Danisch, “Political” 178). Survival in contemporary society, for Beck, is based entirely on being able to sift through socially constructed risks, which are based on material reality, and use public access knowledge to make prudent decisions. In Beck’s risk society, there would be no separation between governmental, scientific, and public spheres, which would then facilitate a more productive, comprehensive assessment of risk based on conflicts that can be “debated and judged” (World Risk 5).

One of the obstacles, of course, is that rational deliberation is stifled by technological and scientific progress that is both productive and risk-causing, what Beck calls manufactured uncertainty: “For example, epidemics of bacterial infections are caused by medicines that have created antibiotic resistant bacteria; the cause of floods, landslides, or famines can be traced back
to global warming, which in turn can be understood as the side-effect of industrialization” (Danisch, “Political” 179). Much like the Deepwater Horizon example, which was a rig that produced oil to fund the state of Louisiana but then also manufactured a risk for the Gulf of Mexico ecosystem, a certain amount of scientific literacy, of rhetorical prudence is necessary for operating in Beck’s world risk society. An attunement to material causality, to how our actions and others’ actions are impacting our well-being and those of others, and how our interaction with technology and science is building society, is the key component life in such a society.

John Dewey knew this. According to Hickman, “Dewey repeatedly emphasized his view that failure of artifacts to do their work is not necessarily due to the lack of productive skill on the part of the artist, but may me due to the lack of such skill on the part of the person who is confronted with and called upon to take account of produced artifacts” (Pragmatic Technology 67). It is important to keep in mind here that for Dewey an artist was both a factory line worker and a sculptor. We, as citizens in a world risk society, are those who are asked to take account of produced artifacts, to have a prudence and ethics about our consumption and/or use of any given technological artifact. While my example is of citizens who consume oil, Dewey, dating himself, uses a different example:

Productive skill is required on the parts of the mining engineer and smelter in order to effect the transformation of natural materials such as ores into artifacts that possess intrinsic as well as extrinsic meanings. Productive skill is required on the parts of individuals going about their quotidian business in order to effect the transformation of the raw and immediate materials of focus and context, enjoyment and routine use, into an
experience that exhibits enlarged meaning and significance. And productive skill is required of those who appreciate and use art objects in order to effect the transformation and appropriation of those objects into sources of renewed delight and refined insight.

(Hickman, *Pragmatic Technology* 67)

This passage, far from merely generously doling out the blame of the oil spill to all those involved, to all those who have every pumped gas, is contending that the failure of artifacts—say, an oil rig—is a failure of collective inquiry, a failure on behalf of society to create the proper conditions of debate and access of risk for all those impacted: “One of the principle causes of failure of inquiry is neglect of the reciprocal connections among means and ends” (Hickman, *Pragmatic Technology* 67). The conditions for properly assessing risk and for properly attuning oneself to the material reality of industrial progress were just as faulty, in Dewey’s view, as the hydraulic liquid switch deep within the blowout preventer. Dewey’s material approach to rhetoric and to our relating to objects echoes Coole and Frost’s (2010) insistence that attunement with the everydayness of materiality, with the artifacts that shape our existence, offers a productive reorientation to the world—one that is surely appropriate for the world as Beck sees it.

More than that, this world risk society dominated by our relations with materiality is inherently rhetorical. As Dilip Gaonkar (2001) reminds us, “the contingent is the unproblematic scene of rhetoric” (151). This then, for Danisch, offers an inroad for improving the scientific literacy and rhetorical prudence of citizens in Beck’s neo-industrialized society:

>[T]he task of the rhetoric of science is to argue for civic training that includes the development of a scientific prudence. A fuller articulation of the constitutive features of this prudence would be required, but still the practice of political rhetoric would seem to
rest increasingly on that form of reasoning. Cultivating such a scientific prudence would return the location of judgment to the citizenry and move us beyond the vision of a technocracy of experts articulated and sought at the beginning of the twentieth century. (Danisch, “Political” 191)

Embodying the judgment of Dewey at Cooper Union, while acknowledging the stark change in processes of industrialization by Beck, can help one facilitate a more productive politic as it relates to technological and scientific artifacts. This of course, according to all—Danisch, Beck, and Dewey—requires a commitment to providing forums and opportunities for deliberation (Danisch, “Political” 190).

Conclusions and Implications

For Dewey, communication is not about symbolicity, not about aesthetic representation. Rhetoric denotes a practical skill that enacts changes in environments. Artistic creations on Parisian museum walls are no different than Ford cars populating the lines in Detroit factories. The value of objects, even paintings, is not found in authorial purposes but rather in the actions that are spurred on by citizens’ experiences with the object (Hickman, Pragmatic Technology 70). In this respect, Dewey can be configured as an “object-oriented” rhetorician, as one who seeks to identify value and meaning in the material interaction between objects and humans. The value Dewey assigns to these interactions has been cast as “use-value,” but a more nuanced approach to Deweyan rhetoric would consider the value of these in terms of contributing to public discourse and improving the material and communicative conditions and methods of a

13 “Rhetoric” is absent from Deweyan indices because of his utter disdain for dichotomies, of which the false separation between logic and rhetoric is one. I have felt comfortable using this word as a synonym for Dewey’s communication because in our field the Ramusian divide between logic and rhetoric has effectively been bridged.
modern society. I contend that Dewey’s materialist approach to communication has much to offer the field of rhetoric and composition, namely through placing a stronger emphasis on the conditions of deliberation as well as, and perhaps more importantly, demanding practical examples of this form or model of communication in action. Our field has made a turn away from the symbolic, away from Burkean and Peircean models of thinking, and towards materiality. By using Dewey here my dissertation provides a concrete example not only of what a material approach to rhetoric towards large events looks like but also provides an approach that is grounded in the concerns increasingly relevant and pertinent to our field, namely public discussion on science, education, and experience.

If, as Richard Bernstein so confidently states in his essay “The Pragmatic Century,” the ideas of pragmatism have dominated twentieth century thought, then it is my wish and my belief that pragmatism has the legs to continue the same trend into the twenty-first century as well.
Epilogue. Closing Remarks

So, What Really Happened?

“So, what really did in the rig: human error or faulty technology?”

This question posed to me during a casual Sunday brunch still echoes consistently in my mind and is a persistent point of frustration for me. I understand the reductive nature of technical investigations, but reductiveness towards a tremendously complex event such as the Deepwater Horizon blowout in public conversations must be addressed. How we discuss disaster is tremendously important, for “[a]s we draw on genre rules to engage in professional activities, we constitute social structures (in professional, institutional, and organizational contexts) and simultaneously reproduce these structures” (Berkenkotter and Huckin “Rethinking” 478).

My research suggests that nonhuman entities play an important, though under-theorized role in (post-)disaster rhetorics. This includes both the publicly-circulated technical documentation (e.g., accident reports) and news media coverage. What this role, or more accurately these roles encompass is less apparent. This is similar to Sauer’s goal of uncovering or inventing embodied rhetorics in the context of mining disasters: “we cannot determine whether this information can contribute to risk management and assessment until we can actually see and interpret what miners are representing with their hands” (7). In a similar move, I argue that we cannot determine how a posthumanist approach to disaster can help risk management and thus
help prevent future disasters until we fully understand what role nonhuman entities play in the rhetorical construction of disasters.

My research also suggests that posthumanist theories have helped those in rhetoric and technical communication more fully account for the wide array of bodies and elements involved in a rhetorical situation, or more accurately, what Jenny Edbauer calls “rhetorical ecologies” (2005). My role here has been to employ a theoretically-focused rhetorical framework that provides a more inclusive basis for constructing meaning and arguments in the midst of disaster. This rhetorical framework is infused by posthumanist theory so as to include and even foreground nonhuman elements in the deliberation, judgment, and evaluation of disasters.

Like much posthumanist work done, the rhetorician’s role in the context of disaster is to use invention to increase inclusivity to provide a more complete account of what happened. My role here has begun through the building of an approach to disaster that more fully accounts for the emergent forces involved in the construction of meaning and arguments about the nature, causes, and responsibility of disasters.

Why Deepwater Horizon?

So, why Deepwater? It might be evident by now why I have chosen the Deepwater Horizon blowout as my object of analysis. Beyond just the conflation and complication of seemingly stable, ontological categories, why I have located my dissertation on material rhetorics in the blackened Gulf waters is because of its relative size and silence. That is, Obama confidently labeled the spill as the worst environmental disaster in American history¹ and the

¹ Naturally, Obama would have political motivations to make such a statement as making the “cozy” relationship between government and corporate, specifically oil industry, interests less cozy is part of his platform.
EPA designed the spill as a Spill of National Significance (EPA), a move that, like outlined above, has positive political and economic repercussions, but still represents the scope of the incident. Again, unlike the Challenger disaster or Hurricane Katrina, the latter of which was highly politicized, a concern to disrupt the patterned disaster grammars and rhetorics should be of deep concern because the Deepwater Horizon blowout offers a unique opportunity based upon its integrated configuration and connectivity between the ecological and the technological, the human and the non-human. A more suitable scientific prudence is required; as much, we need to dwell within the public discursive realities.

The Deepwater Horizon blowout was not chosen because of its unique circumstance or particular political intrigue. Despite its rather significant impact, and President Obama’s bold assertion, the Deepwater Horizon blowout itself was, admittedly, rather lackluster in terms of media frenzy, integration into public discourse, and public pressure when compared to the Exxon Valdez or Hurricane Katrina. The Deepwater Horizon blowout was chosen precisely because of these observations. The “patterned response,” right from the immediate events to the sporadically updated “Gulf Update Blog” on BP’s website, was notably stale. My work does not have the privilege of significant hindsight or historical reconsideration or document recovery. My work does have the privilege of recency and of theorizing the still-lingering remnants of the publics’ understanding of the Deepwater Horizon blowout. The theorists underlying my work are inseparably attached from the everydayness, mainly because they both saw colloquial and overused modes of discourse to be infuriating—Dewey from the use of “nature” and Latour from the use of “social,” to name just two instances. This dissertation, in fully embracing the speculative, has sought to contribute to the answering of a crucial question posed by Bennett: “if
we were more attentive to the indispensable foreignness that we are, would we continue to
produce and consume in the same violently reckless ways?” (113). And how does this change the
way we approach and study disaster? Bennett couches this question in her argument for us to
consider the world, and ourselves, less as “embodied” and more as “an array of bodies” (112). It
is also a question that is representative of the much larger task posthumanist rhetorics have in
front of them: to take up their own calling for more participatory and engaging models of
rhetorical practice in order to affect public understand and action towards “matters of concern.”

This task is not unlike rewiring synapses in a person’s brain, although I am unsure how
apt psychological metaphors are here. The patterns of environmental discourse in terms of
human-centered models of interpreting disasters or “accidents” need to be retooled with new
connections and now considerations and ethical responsibilities. This dissertation has framed the
public communication about the Deepwater Horizon blowout as an insufficient model that is
based on unproductive methods employed by impotent “environmental discourses” and in this
light argues for and displays new methods based upon posthumanist rhetorics and a polytemporal
application of John Dewey. How can we use “familiar” or “patterned” events so deeply ingrained
in the public understanding of the “natural” and the “scientific”? In this light, the Deepwater
Horizon blowout raises a troubling question: How are rhetoricians supposed to counter the
political forces that continue to disseminate and reinforce discourses of environmentalism that
sees scientists, engineers, and politicians who are cognizant of the risks continually engage in
destructive activities? These are the questions that drove my dissertation.
Works Cited


Appendix: Scatter-Plotted *Epideixis*: Brief Summaries of Popular Literature

To supplement Figure 5 from chapter four, I have provided brief summaries of the literature not covered in chapter four, with specific focus on where each work locates agency.


Juhasz’s goal in *Black Tide* is to accurately capture the deep and wide reverberations felt by the communities most affected by the oil hitting the Gulf waters and beaches. As such, her goal is not to go in depth about the technical elements of the blowout but rather recount the ongoing adverse effects brought about by the spill. She goes in depth in terms of individuals’ stories in relation to the victims as well as trials experienced by so many fishers. Juhasz, who has
written two books previous investigating the government agencies and the oil industry, makes it clear that the Deepwater Horizon blowout resulted from a complex web of forces that involved far more than just one company, BP, or one government agency, the MMS (Mineral Management Service, now BOEMRE). She couches the blowout as part of a larger industry-driven problem of government deregulation and corporate profit motive.

Carl Safina, *A Sea in Flames: The Deepwater Horizon Oil Blowout* (2011)

Like Juhasz, Safina’s work begins right at the blowout and painstakingly yet engagingly traces the events of each month as the millions upon millions of barrels of crude oil continued to fill the Gulf. For as then Florida governor Charlie Crist put it, “it’s not a spill, it’s a flow.” Safina, who admits that we as a culture are all responsible for what took place on in the spring of 2010 in the Gulf because of our reliance on oil, writes in the preface, “[this book] is not just a record of a technological event. It’s also a chronicle of a season of anguish and panic, deep uncertainties, and the emotional topography of the blowout” (ix). In painting a vivid topography, Safina’s passion towards the issue resonates with the reader, as he calls into question the assumptions the public and the media might have about the causes of the blowout and subsequent devastating oil spill and also is rather polemic in his interpretation of government actions and “interventions” but most of all in his scathing critique of BP operations.

It is appropriate that Cavnar, with thirty years of oil and gas operations experience, hones in on regulatory issues that dominate the oil industry. He positions the spill less in terms of technical error and more in terms of an inevitability, clearly stating that the oil industry “didn’t have the slightest clue” (xiv) as to how to approach the disaster once it happened. As his title indicates, the high degree of resistance to regulation by the major oil companies in the United States ensured that something as catastrophic as the Deepwater Horizon blowout was just a matter of time. In terms of accountability, Cavnar claims that “the disaster on the Deepwater Horizon that was drilling [the Macondo well] is a direct result of a number of complex failures, mostly human” (xiii). For him, the blowout was the result of both government and corporate arrogance, and was “caused by bad design, bad judgment, hurried operations, and a convoluted management structure” (xiii). Cavnar’s insightful, “inside” *epideixis* places the onus on the human end of the spectrum.