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Hurricane Rhetorics: An Ontological Analysis of the Recovery and Rebuild of Lone Star College-Kingwood after Harvey

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ABSTRACT

Hurricane Harvey ravaged the Houston area in August of 2017 causing the closure of Lone Star College-Kingwood's main campus. This article employs Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO) as a lens to explore issues of access facing faculty, staff, and students during the rebuild of the campus after Harvey's impact. OOO is a relatively new theory in rhetoric and composition studies that values granting "things" like water, technologies, spaces, and other objects agency equal to that of humans by acknowledging the "suasive natures of nonhuman beings and materialities" (Barnett 4). Looking critically at objects and things as vibrant actors helps students recognize rhetorical activity occurring around them daily that affects their lives in real and personal ways. By supplying practical pedagogical examples of how Lone Star College-Kingwood solved problems to grant access for both faculty and students moving forward in the wake of disaster, this article also addresses a concern raised by Lisa Kirby: "Learning about an experience in a theoretical realm is one thing, but what are the practical applications?" Responses to Harvey's exigencies revealed critical opportunities to improve pedagogies and overall access to learning for students and faculty. Harvey displaced over 12,500 students and more than 500 faculty and staff members. As a result, the college reimagined itself, and faculty and administration collaborated to create new avenues of access for students using technological innovations. Harvey created opportunities to re-envision the rhetorical situation, placing students as critical evaluators of their own selves, lives, and social and economic standing in the wake of disaster and trauma. Using OOO as a lens helps us to better understand and think critically about the environment and world around us to develop appropriate responses to economic and social exigencies revealed by "things," such as Harvey.

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“Rhetoric, too, might well designate the art of being between: of being between things and yet also being their means of connection. These things that we find ourselves between possess a certain ‘thing power’ in the way they gather forces and actors and in so doing ‘affect other bodies, enhancing or weakening their power’” (5).

Scot Barnett and Casey Boyle
Rhetoric through Everyday Things

Introduction

On August 25, 2017, Hurricane Harvey struck San Jose Island in south Texas as a Category 4 hurricane with speeds exceeding 130 mph and a massive storm surge flooding coastal communities. Embodied, and real, wind and water attacked moving through the Houston area leaving a defining trail of mayhem documented by media and evidenced in damages to campuses, neighborhoods, buildings, streets, and sidewalks. National Public Radio (NPR) reported that “500,000 cars flooded, 336,000 customers lost power, and 40,000 sought safety in shelters” (Kennedy). These places became intersecting and critical contact zones teeming with disaster rhetoric—emerging texts that center on chaos and loss associated with catastrophic events—and trauma almost equal to that of Hurricane Katrina. Katrina hit New Orleans on August 29, 2005 as a Category 5 hurricane and as the most expensive and deadliest storm in U.S. history. Katrina caused the closing of a major university, Tulane, for four months: “13,000 students and nearly 7,000 employees, packed up and left” (Hall). Also, as countless news sources reported, Katrina left thousands of residents homeless with forced relocation. Slightly less catastrophic, Harvey lingered over the Houston area for three harrowing days—dumping 60.58 inches of rain (a year’s worth in one week), causing roughly \$125 billion in damage, according to NPR (Kennedy). The storm virtually destroyed the Lone Star College (LSC)-Kingwood campus. But, unlike Tulane, Kingwood did not close! LSC-Kingwood reimagined and re-invented itself during the chaos and disaster by responding to the rhetorical dimensions of water as what Jane Bennett refers to in *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* as “vibrant matter”.

In the fall of 2015, I took a job teaching composition at the Kingwood campus. At the time, I could not fathom a hurricane hitting the area two years later and displacing 12,849 students, the 535 faculty who taught them, and the staff who served

them. Forty-six Developmental Studies (DS) English sections transitioned online, and 140 sections of first-year writing (Comp I and II) went online or hybrid—combination sections of online and face to face. The Lone Star College System boasts five campuses located throughout the Houston area. With 99,000 students, it is the second largest community college in the nation. Kingwood's campus sits just north of the San Jacinto River, a major river dividing the area. Hurricane Harvey triggered a catastrophic rise in the river's water levels resulting in flooding of not only the Kingwood campus but also of the entire area and major shopping centers surrounding the river supporting the community economically (see Figure 1, taken from the college's website). Many students who lived and worked in the area became homeless and jobless in a matter of 24 hours. Six of the nine buildings that make up the Kingwood campus suffered major flooding.



Figure 1. Photo taken from Kingwood Drive approaching the campus near the Student Conference Center (SCC) building, which houses registration, admissions, financial aid, and other offices pertinent to the orderly running of the college.

The rapid growth of bacteria and mold in stagnant waters accelerated by sewage and heat made these structures that once housed the vein of life for the college—faculty offices, classrooms, and a daycare—uninhabitable (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. Flooding around Administration building after Harvey.

Faculty, staff, and students suffered trauma due to inaccessibility preventing the retrieval of valuables and personal belongings because of health liability associated with contaminated waters. Fetid water took on a “vital materiality” with performative capabilities blocking and impeding the will and designs of humans; water acted as “quasi agent” and force with trajectories, propensities, and tendencies of its own (Bennett viii).

As the days passed and the situation with fetid floodwaters grew worse, so did the situation brought on by water’s thing power—the power to become catalyst for change. Administrators scrambled to train ill-prepared faculty and students for teaching and learning in virtual formats. The English Developmental Studies (DS) program suffered most, however. Both Developmental and regular English faculty faced a teaching crisis, resulting in collective trauma. Unlike college-level courses, developmental courses help students gain command of basic skills for college readiness; consequently, faculty teaching DS courses may not possess a master’s in the field. Most are also adjuncts and not required to keep current with new theories and trends in Composition Studies, such as multi-modal composing, or other morphing technological advancements involving course management systems like Desire2Learn (D2L), Blackboard, Canvas, or Moodle, among others. Instead, effective pedagogical strategies depended on teacher-student face-to-face interaction. The opposite, online or virtual teaching, required faculty to effectively navigate complex course management systems such as D2L and iStar (Lone Star’s online employee portal to post syllabi, access schedules and course rosters, manage payroll, make address

changes, and much more) to create imaginative assignments and lectures accessible to students by implementing creative discussions to promote student learning and course engagement. To bring this newfound situation into perspective, in four weeks faculty had to build organized online courses with lecture notes, voice recordings, videos, assignment dropboxes, discussion forums, and gradebook settings readily accessible to students. Navigating D2L and iStar for anything other than basic information created a heightened anxiety for some DS faculty (and some regular long-term faculty) and students. Daily training sessions quickly filled with those seeking help and demonstrations on how to use Jing—a screen capturing program that allows instructors to circle, draw arrows, and make comments on visuals for instructive purposes—to insert videos and other ways to manipulate data and information within D2L.

Revised courses not only had to meet state learning objectives and goals, but also materials had to appear in simplified, straightforward formats that students could understand easily. Previously, DS instructors came to campus and interacted with a small group of students (10-15 at most) in a small classroom, equipped with basic technology to display visuals on a screen or to use a PowerPoint as a method to teach basic paragraph development and the five-paragraph essay. DS students were not required to use D2L to access lectures, assignments, quizzes, or grades, and faculty were not required to use video or voice recording technology to enhance instruction delivery. The use of such technology beyond basic Microsoft Word processing was neither mandatory nor the norm. Fetid waters—vibrant matter—revealed these areas of additional pedagogical opportunities that may otherwise not have been revealed. Furthermore, not possessing the skill to hypermediate—"arrange text, graphics, and video in multiple panes and windows and joining them with numerous hyperlinks"—proved an access barrier. Hypermediation enriches lesson delivery and learning formats (Bolter and Grusin 9). Faculty and students need a strong technological base to remain current in a rapidly advancing wired world; remaining current and sharing this knowledge with students helps ensure access to learning using multiple formats and contexts.

In this article, I use an ontological lens to present an analysis of the water damage to Kingwood's campus and critical discourses created by fetid waters that influenced a successful rebuild and recovery. I explore what water as an agent teaches us about campus as an agent and how these two "things" speak to one another outside the influence of human control. I also investigate how such realities can inform composition pedagogy. To do so, I first define Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO). Next, I present an etymology of related philosophies and engage a practical

application. Lastly, I hope to show that a realist philosophy, such as OOO, can help students make sense of their lives in a meaningful way. The intent of this article, however, is not to delve into the mysticisms associated with water or environmental rhetorics of natural disasters, as Nathaniel A. Rivers¹ discusses. It is also not my intent to explore the rhetoric of cultural policy in connection with rebuild efforts associated with hurricanes and their after effects; this work has been done by M.B. Hackler in *Culture After the Hurricanes: Rhetoric and Reinvention on the Gulf Coast*. Instead, I look at water ontologically and tangibly, as a thing acting agentially in relationship with other objects within a system of networked and dynamic patterns. Ultimately, this interrogation asks can we as writing teachers inform our pedagogies and classroom practices by looking critically at “thing theory”—OOO? How might OOO or “thing theory” reveal politics preventing access and promote student engagement and critical thinking?

“Thales fell into the well while in deep contemplation of the stars above. According to Socrates, Thales was ‘wild to know what was up in the sky but failed to see what was in front of him and under his feet’” (1).

Scot Barnett
Rhetorical Realism

Scot Barnett and Casey Boyle define rhetorical ontology as a harnessing of “the energies of past and present theories of materiality in rhetoric [and] anticipat[ing] possibilities for new rhetorical approaches to materiality going forward” (2). Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO) or Object-Oriented Philosophy, as coined by Graham Harman, is a realist philosophy concerned with how we know things. According to Harman, OOO decenters the human and human agency and positions the external world as existing apart from human awareness (Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology* 10). OOO offers a theoretical approach to valuing the material element of all things—humans and objects—equally to examine how they work together “suasively and agentially in rhetorical situations and ecologies” (Barnett and Boyle 2). For example, in the case of Kingwood, water acted agentially and suasively—having the power to persuade—to create a reality that demanded human response. The water cut human access to campus, thereby making crucial the need to think critically on how to proceed with usual college business in a timely manner. The reality of human response designed to counter water’s agency differs greatly from the water’s reality. Both realities (water/object/thing and human), although networked, exist separately. Barnett and

Boyle explicate: “Understanding things as active agents rather than passive instruments or backdrops for human activity requires different orientations on rhetoric, orientations exclusive of human beings, language, and epistemology, but expansive enough to speculate about things ontologically” (2).

Drawing from German philosopher Martin Heidegger, Harman explains that “[o]bjects are not identical with their properties, but have a tense relationship with those properties, and this very tension is responsible for all of the change that occurs in the world”² (9). Specifically, nonhuman objects influence invention. Water has a tense relationship with itself in that it can flow, settle, boil, freeze, etc.; it also has a tense relationship with humans in that it creates alternate realities for us. We can use it in various capacities to drink, shower, swim or in any other way we choose; at times, water becomes necessary for us to avoid altogether, as in the case with Harvey and flooding. Each relationship is unique and transforms the situation in some real way. Bacteria-infused water networked with buildings and other matter around campus—including the matter making up the bacteria itself—created in administrators, staff, teachers, and students an awareness of possibilities, resiliency, shortcomings, and abilities. To phrase this thought another way, both students and faculty never realized they lacked, or failed to engage, the technological literacy to transition to a virtual learning environment (or at least realized their limitations) until water created a crisis-packed rhetorical situation; from this vantage point and thinking on this newfound opportunity, administrators, faculty, and staff collaborated to create and invent new avenues of access. Using OOO as a lens reveals how matter metamorphoses into a dynamic actant in conflict with human agency, as a thing acting outside human intentionality to reveal dynamics of access by our inability to circumvent exigencies created by the thing.

Whether or not students gain understanding from the interaction between fetid water and themselves or fetid water and the campus is irrelevant; the reality of the interaction still exists with or without conscious human interpretation. Considering this irrelevance of human interpretation, OOO seeks to accommodate and situate technologies, spaces, and everyday things into rhetorical theory outside the scope of linguistic and social epistemologies of human consciousness. Heidegger first attempted this shift from knowledge to one of a “preontological being-in-the world” in 1971 (qtd. in Weisser and Dobrin xii). He saw “things” as having the ability to gather and create discourses; Heidegger preferred the word “thing” as opposed to the word “object” because, to him, “object” suggested opposition instead of a network of mutuality. OOO offers students an opportunity to think critically about how “things” in network influence and direct daily decision making and how these things have

shaped their lives. Things and objects—technologies—have politics that alter the conditions of life and the way people think and behave (Winner 13). After Harvey, networked objects gathered people and forces around shared interests and concerns to ensure students access to quality learning in different formats in a virtual environment and in multiple modes that transcend limitations of physical space.

Interdisciplinary theorizing in composition studies moved the field from linguistic epistemologies to ontological inquiry. Barnett and Boyle point out that rhetoric's epistemic tradition and "paradigm constrains our ability to grasp the 'thingness' of things—the way things *are* and the rhetorical force they wield in relation to us and other things" (2). In "A Rhetorical Response to Hurricane Katrina," Marcia Dawkins, analyzing the ability of symbols—things—to convey messages says, "Scary symbols and images can prompt us into a heightened state of awareness, in which we can recognize and learn about patterns of experience that have been literally and figuratively submerged by our cultural conditioning" (12). Although ground in a social construction of knowledge based on how cultures view objects as symbols, Dawkins' theorizing provides a foundational explanation of how objects speak. OOO seeks to move beyond the cultural to a more objective respect of an object and its agency. Theorizing material rhetoric (new materialism), feminist scholars, such as Carol Mattingly, Roxanne Mountford, and Laurie Gries,³ demonstrate how everyday material things possess agency; feminists also identify gaps for inquiry from alternate spaces (things). In "Systems and Things: On Vital Materialism and Object-Oriented Philosophy," Bennett suggests we have entered the "geo-political epoch of the Anthropocene... [.] and "various vital materialisms arise to supplement and complement historical materialisms, ...inspired by twentieth-century feminisms" (223). Material rhetoric provides a necessary bridge to rhetorical ontology. Bernardi and Dimmock explain that material objects speak (referring to objects in digital environments) and "enable us to see things differently" and "test assumptions" to "challenge conventional modes of scholarly communication and knowledge production" (187).

While material rhetoric concerns itself with knowledge about things and their meaning based on a social construct, invoking OOO extends beyond examining things for cultural meaning and becomes a critical point of inquiry. OOO concentrates on a thing's relationship or connection to other things within an assemblage or network and their capacity to make meaning independent of social constructs. Theorizing collective existence and networks requires gazing on a thing and allowing it to speak and reveal its qualities. Granting the object agency and allowing it to speak to us often reveals covert politics associated with things and objects—access to all things and how

social class either allows or restricts opportunity, as pointed out by Dawkins (13). OOO offers a plethora of possibilities to enhance and develop critical thinking skills for DS programs in writing and first-year writing in general by giving students a lens for metacognition.

Of course, theorizing with and about things is not a new way of knowing, but only in recent composition scholarship have theorists begun looking at the “thing” itself apart from linguistic and social constructs of knowledge that value human interpretation. In *Rhetoric, Through Everyday Things*, Barnett and Boyle point out Aristotle’s artistic and non-artistic proofs—syllogisms and enthymemes—rested on the basis of their “thingness and material reality” (5). “Thingness” is the power an object possesses to draw, act, or effect change in some way in the environment.⁴ Composition teachers do students a disservice if their pedagogies fail to help students understand how things and objects create exigencies and how things possess politics.

Studying the arrangements and politics of objects reveal important lessons about social order and how objects create and maintain such order. For example, Langdon Winner explains how Robert Moses engineered overpasses in the 1920s as physical arrangements to keep minorities and low-income groups away from certain areas of New York City (22-3). Moses’ overpasses are still in place today, and David Staley contends that studying the histories and politics of objects and things offers valuable insight into the social status and agency of one group to control or limit the possibilities of another (34). The necessity to theorize objects, space, and things cannot be underestimated for the advancement of rhetorical inquiry in composition studies.

In the “Guest Editors’ Introduction: Pushing the Limits of the *Anthropos*,” Diane Davis and Michelle Ballif challenge scholars to seek new theoretical orientations that allow for rhetorical inquiry from “different places, with different attunements and different assumptions about what it means to be—to be rhetorically—in the world” (Davis and Ballif 347). Generally, in the academy, we value rhetorical exchange initiated by and for humans, exchanges contemplated and delivered after giving careful thought and analysis to at least four of the five canons of rhetoric (invention, organization, style, and delivery). Such inquiry values humanistic epistemologies—ways of knowing that position humans as knowledge constructors and at the center of interpretation. Humanistic inquiry does not account for knowledge or theorizing outside the realm of human interaction and interpretation as Ballif proposes. OOO, on the other hand, invites a realist, ontological examination of objects and things working independently, together, or as assemblages,⁵ decentering the human; OOO also enhances invention by helping students realize the resources and assets they possess or lack that help them access systems of achievement, a point I illustrate in

more detail in a later discussion of pedagogies. For example, students have free access to Microsoft Office 365; however, not all students take full advantage of the benefits of this access. The situation with fetid water revealed an opportunity to educate students on available resources and how to find and use those resources; simultaneously, it also revealed the extent of students' neglect to utilize free resources—probably due to unawareness—and the technological deficiencies present in both students and faculty.

In addition, placing the human outside the realm of knowledge exchange disrupts long accepted critical methodological approaches to knowledge as a social and epistemic construct (Grusin xii). Granting agency to things like water and buildings challenge notions of human agency of intentionality. If the sewage-infested waters flooding the campus acted suasively, and I believe they did, then knowledge exists in the absence of human interpretation. For instance, the water brought about the occasion for rhetorical inquiry. Water brought about the occasion for this article. If floodwaters acted suasively, how can we fail to allow the vitality of the object to inform our pedagogies? OOO casts things like water as “vibrant actors,” having the ability to draw and effect change, whether humans desired such change or not (Barnett and Boyle 1).

In the next section I discuss and analyze unique experiences Kingwood faculty, staff, and students faced during Harvey and some of the ways faculty worked together to counter fetid waters' agency. Furthermore, fetid waters taught us students would benefit from implementing pedagogies and assignments that required teaching features of MS Office programs as well as programs such as Google Docs for file sharing and editing. Realizing areas of improvement motivated many faculty and students to educate themselves on the capabilities of the technology for file sharing and editing and inserting video clips, voiceover, and otherwise taking full advantage of software capabilities.

Situated Challenges Facing Kingwood Faculty

Students are networked in social and economic environments that can either grant or impede access. One's social and economic status sometimes restricts movement and thereby success. The flooding and how faculty responded depended largely on technological resources available at that time. Furthermore, faculty having resources did not necessarily mean students could take advantage of those same resources for opportunities to ensure their success. Opportunities are largely dependent on one's social and economic status, and helping disadvantaged students becomes a situated

event because each area and region has its own unique contextualized student population. Under these circumstances, using OOO as a lens helps make sense of what it means to “be” for students from unique circumstances brought on by fetid water’s agency. Furthermore, Kingwood’s experience offers lessons to composition studies in dealing ethically with socially and economically disadvantaged students. Similarly, in “First, Do No Harm: Teaching Writing in the Wake of Traumatic Events,” Sarah DeBacher and Deborah Harris-Moore explain the ethics associated with grading and accountability for both teachers and students in wake of such disasters. Ultimately, our vision and goal are to ensure students’ agency and access with the greatest capacity of ethics, which requires critical pedagogies.

In this section, I attempt to unpack the exigence and rhetorical situation brought on by water. Allowing fetid water to speak as it ushered itself across campus’s most intimate spaces, the dynamism thereof revealed communication and sharing breeches between faculty and staff. That fall, I taught two overloads—seven classes total—in condensed format: two sections of Reading and Writing II (ENGL 0309), a noncredit bearing course; two sections of Composition and Rhetoric I (ENGL 1301); and three sections of Composition and Rhetoric II (ENGL 1302). I have taught writing online for 15 years, using different course editors such as Angel, Moodle, Blackboard, D2L, and Canvas. This experience has helped me realize the benefits of having certain materials readily available for an array of different reasons. Also, having taught different levels of composition affords me the insight to critically understand student needs at different levels. Four weeks into the semester, I found my students struggled with the online format because of reading comprehension. And to complicate matters more, some students actively enrolled in the course did not have access to appropriate technology to successfully engage to complete coursework.

The fact that some students lacked the resources, such as reliable Internet, to successfully complete the course troubled me. I thought about ethics, considering the obstacles preventing most of them from achieving their goals. I thought about why they decided to come to college to begin with. Many simply want a better life for themselves and their children, and college provides an avenue by which to access the American Dream—owning a home and having enough resources to make life comfortable in a capitalist economy. I realized I was asking them to do too much within a short period of time. Faculty realized the limitations of resources we had in place, creating the exigency for faculty to pool together to find positive ways to solve problems and move forward.

For example, faculty immediately realized the lack of enough digitized material to go fully online. We needed a bank of lesson plans and activities that could be readily

implemented in a short period of time and with little preparation. To counter this problem, we teamed up and created community groups in D2L for sharing, which resulted in a virtual bank of ideas, lesson plans, and quizzes available through D2L shell courses; we made shells readily available to all teachers to borrow from or copy directly into a course if the instructor so desired. We also collaborated with library staff and created instructional guides for library access and video integration and uploaded these into D2L for both faculty and student use.

In addition, faculty and staff worked to fully reimagine and transform the library—the intellect of Kingwood—from a physical to a virtual space without borders or structures. On campus, students physically “see” the library. Seeing creates a different level of awareness and access than that of the virtual. Tangibility feels more real and inviting. Before the fetid waters Harvey left behind, students walked directly into the library and asked for what they needed without technological barriers. Reference librarians gathered sources, provided handouts, and gave one on one instruction when needed. Once we transitioned online, my students needed a library card with an access number to access online databases and eBooks from off campus sites. It shocked me to discover that many lacked library cards and the technological literacy needed to acquire one. Students suffered frustrations negotiating links to obtain library cards, an exigency Harvey revealed. Many of my students admitted to never using the chat feature from the library’s website. Furthermore, downed phone lines on and to campus impeded communications. No matter how much students wished to “physically” speak to a live person in the library, the internet proved the only workaround and means of access. Campus phones remained down the remainder of the semester. Students, librarians, and teachers used webcams and WebEx to negotiate library database access, other media, and track success. Those who managed to circumvent technology in the past were forced to confront and befriend wired mediated spaces for future communications. Accessing and accomplishing the simplest tasks required forming extra-human rhetorical relationships with new media—hypermediated spaces involving digitized videos with voice recordings and Internet networked communication spaces where information could be downloaded for remote access. Since the necessity to create access changed the vision and direction of the college, some administrators became casualties of change, being replaced with innovative faculty savvy with technology.

The lack of space also created a crisis packed situation for Dr. Katherine Persson, Kingwood’s president. She maintained control of the situation for faculty and staff by creating access through email correspondences. Encouraging faculty and staff with subject lines that read “Good Day” followed by a number such as “#11.” By

November 6, faculty and staff had received at least 50 update emails with various information regarding action and progress of recovery. We believed in us and our resiliency, and as a result, we did not give up on our students and helping them believe in their own resiliency and ability to succeed despite the absence of a physical campus. Emails appropriated physical space into the virtual. They became evocative, I believe, because they provided visual evidence of the nonexistent, the campus. Through association and affect employees felt a sense of belonging—what physical buildings create for students and faculty. As faculty, we needed to create the same evocation through and from thingness with our students without the help of physical structures.

To ensure educational access in a virtual environment, we continue to update and add to our bank of resources so that if disaster happens again both faculty and students have continued access and opportunity for success. The goal is to keep the learning environment intact even in the absence of physical structures, to prevent disruption of the learning environment. Physical structures can be damaged and/or disappear at any time.

Furthermore, having course shells ensures access regardless of faculty level of experience with technology. Immediately available quality lesson plans allow general education courses to go fully online, if the need arises, with significantly less trauma. Technological capabilities to improve delivery existed prior to the flood but the critical awareness to recognize opportunities for improved layout and delivery lay dormant. Simply put, we did not understand the need or benefit of making materials available virtually and in self-sufficient formats before the after effects of Harvey.

Sustainability happens only with easily replicable actions. Replicating actions requires team effort making information available virtually and in multimodal formats. Faculty with skill creating and delivering lessons using audio and visuals to enhance lesson plans experienced less trauma from the transition to online teaching because of their familiarity and comfort level using technology. Some faculty members already used software such as Jing—a screen capturing program that allows for audio and visual enhancement—in their lesson delivery. Some faculty also used SoftChalk to improve the organization of lesson delivery through D2L. Those familiar with multimodal formats volunteered to help train faculty less proficient using multimodal approaches. Kingwood faculty readily took advantage of training and learning opportunities, because, unlike before Harvey, they realized lacking skill to teach online using multimodal formats hampered student success. Kingwood's goal—as with all colleges and universities regardless of level—is to ensure students the greatest opportunities for access and success.

Before Harvey's fetid waters taught us lessons of access, the immediate tension to transition to fully online teaching, advising, registration, and counseling did not exist. Flooded neighborhoods and homes made registration and advising almost impossible except through online. Naturally, home computers suffered damage from the flooding. Surprisingly, we learned that many students did not have laptops, which would allow them to take advantage of wireless access to campus. Lone Star offered extensive support to students to ensure access to learning and success. One example is how the college found funding for free laptops and issued 40 laptops to students who lacked the resources to purchase their own. However, the concern of dealing ethically with students remained.

Providing laptops might have ensured access capabilities, but true access means achieving a level of success. Having laptops did not solve the problem of reading comprehension or the lack of technological literacy. Harvey revealed these exigencies and created discourses to address the tensions and facilitate the direction of change. Simply put, students needed extra help to understand lesson requirements because presenting material in a fully online format required an overwhelming amount of reading. To deal ethically with struggling students, faculty and technology staff made themselves available at different community centers throughout the area to provide one on one instruction, free of charge and in addition to regular duties, for those who needed it. Faculty also exemplified extreme flexibility and care by modifying assignments and extending due dates to help students achieve desired goals and meet standards. Without fetid waters acting "vibrantly" and wielding what Jane Bennett calls "thing power," we may very well have closed some achievement gaps with technology literacies among faculty and students.

Faculty and technology staff ran labs at two sites—New Caney East Montgomery County Improvement District (EMCID), located six and a half miles north of main campus that flooded, and the Lone Star College-Atascocita Center, located 13 miles east of main campus—to help with software, D2L features, and course formatting. Tasks as simple as chatting with the Virtual Teaching Assistance Center (VTAC) help desk felt daunting and created anxiety for teachers and students under duress. First, chatting requires typing and expressing clear thoughts through written communication; second, using D2L and other software sufficiently requires understanding hyperlinks and other embedded features within the program. Many students gave up. For example, both sections of my English 0309 (developmental writing) capped at 20 but ended with only 7-8 students—more than 50% attrition rate. High attrition characterized the fall 2017 and spring 2018 semesters. Prior to Harvey, instructors might have lost 2-3 students per section, but never over 50%.

English 1301 (Composition and Rhetoric I) and 1302 (Composition and Rhetoric II) students fared a little better than developmental students, but those who had never taken classes online struggled because of the sheer overwhelming demand of work in the condensed 12-week format. Faculty faced the crisis of maintaining standards using ethical measures while shaving assignments to make them manageable for student success. Maintaining standards still required each student to write 4-5 essays in the condensed 12-week period. And of course, having so many essays due within the condensed time period created labor issues for faculty due to the short turnaround for grading. The condensed time also required a high level of flexibility to ensure student success. I struggled along with my students, and to compromise, I engaged more one on one with their writing and providing feedback and required less whole class discussion on the readings. Engaging one on one helped ensure student success at the next level, whether moving to ENGL 1301 or 1302.

In addition, I also counted the extensive writing required in discussions as writing assignments. For example, instead of having a week dedicated to teaching thesis writing, I required students to craft subject lines for their discussion posts that foreshadowed the main point of their post, indirectly teaching thesis writing through adaptation of subject lines. Similarly, I taught paragraph development by requiring paragraphs for discussion replies. I found this worked very well as writing pedagogy.

Again, the conditions described characterized Kingwood's recovery. Dealing ethically with marginalized students presented a real and embodied challenge during the recovery process. We created continued technological access through mobile training, which helped students transition from face to face learning to fully online learning. I do not think the transition would have been successful without alternate training sites available to work around the written communication barriers hindering many students. Because of available training and support, most faculty and students sufficiently engaged the technology and continue to pass the learning on to new students by taking full advantage of the features of D2L, such as using voice recordings and uploading video lectures within the modules and requiring use of these features for class instruction.

Invoking OOO helped me realize critical access issues affecting Kingwood. OOO also provides the critical discourse to discuss and reflect metacognitively on how water, fetid waters, and the objects it damaged acted evocatively with the power to gather people around shared concerns and interests. These objects created a need for new literacies and discourses to deal effectively and ethically to successively counter the fetid water's agency (Barnett and Boyle 4). I propose revisiting the Harvey narrative and invoking OOO as a form of critical pedagogy—a way of helping students think

critically about their own lives and what they have access to and those things to which access has been denied based on their social and economic statuses. Lone Star College-Kingwood serves both urban and rural populations. For example, some students in areas like Tarkington, Splendora, and Shephard experienced internet connection problems; these students prefer face to face classes because they do not have reliable internet access because of a lack of or limited fiber optic cabling and towers in these remote areas. Gaining such access is costly for both providers and consumers.

Using OOO as a lens to understand the politics of access associated with these things helps students gain a better understanding of how networks limit access for the economically depressed classes and areas. What do things such as laptops, wireless internet, and modem speed—much of which requires money to access—mean to them personally? What does lack of access say about their lived experiences? What do these objects reveal about bureaucracies and equality? Through their lived experiences with Harvey, students realized their limitations on different levels. Some students quit logging in to their online courses. Life issues such as flooded cars or not having a car created barriers to access available at community centers and libraries, which were supposed to augment access.

In the next section, I discuss possible curricular adaptations to promote critical thinking in composition courses at all levels. I propose invoking Sherry Turkle's theorizing by turning objects and things, inspecting them, gazing and thinking critically on them for evidence of survival and resilience to re-envision ourselves, our histories, and our lives.

Future Pedagogical Possibilities for Writing Instruction in Response to Natural Disasters

When an object or thing, like water, wields power to make us (humans) act or react, as described in the previous sections, that object takes on agency acting evocatively—suasively, calling attention to itself as a vibrant agent of new knowledge. Turkle writes, “Objects help us make our minds, reaching out to us to help us form active partnerships” (308). She explains that “[t]hinking about the uncanny, about thresholds and boundaries helps us understand objects with their universal powers of evocation” (307). If we accept Turkle's theorizing, then encouraging students to think about things surrounding them daily and inviting wandering and wondering on how objects and things act suasively to guide action and either grant or deny access enriches the composing process. Kevin Rutherford and Jason Palmeri trace ontological investigations in composition studies back to the 70s and 80s with the work of

foundational theorists such as Ann Berthoff, Alton Becker, and Kenneth Pike (96). In “The Things They Left Behind: Toward an Object-Oriented History of Composition,” Rutherford and Palmeri explain that,

Young, Becker, and Pike encouraged students to resist the stereotypical assumptions they may have about objects (whether they are oak trees or abstract concepts such as “civil disobedience”). Instead of focusing on asking simply “what is the object in itself?” or “what is this object for me?,” Young, Becker, and Pike provoke students to recursively investigate the question, “how does this object relate to other objects in a network over time?” In this way, they position the rhetoric classroom as a space in which students can employ heuristics as a method for developing more nuanced and complex understandings of the existence of things in the world. (104)

I propose invoking OOO in the invention phase of the writing process to examine how objects make meaning and promote critical thinking about exigencies associated with objects.⁶ In the previous section, I invoked laptops, wireless internet, and modems as objects that grant and deny access based on social and economic status because of costs associated with these items. Here, I propose using narration and visual analysis as modes to kindle critical thinking toward an ontological analysis by situating the “object” in the writer’s world as a vibrant actor. Granting the object agency to act promotes hypothesizing from the object’s point of view.

Granting an object rhetorical agency is not to be confused with cause and effect thinking. Instead, using narration or visual analysis to invoke ontology invites personal, descriptive analysis from the point of view of the subject while looking deeply at the object; because narration sometimes engages deeply personal reflection, narrative writing provides a low stakes entrance to rhetorical ontology by making an object immediately accessible by thinking critically about what the thing or object has allowed or prevented in the writer’s life. Looking at trajectories and powers of objects offers almost limitless possibilities for critical pedagogies where students can re-envision the rhetorical situation—the text, reader, author, constraints, and exigence—and where they fit into the scheme of things. They themselves become close-up critical evaluators of the social, political, and economic structures that control their movements. How does a lack of reliable internet, for example, restrict their movement? Or, how does having reliable internet grant access? How do both factors, restrictions and access, impact success? What possible workarounds can be implemented to ensure future access without impediments?

Furthermore, rhetorical and visual analysis are common writing assignments in lower-division composition courses. Inviting students to gaze at objects and how objects work to block the will of subjects—much like Robert Moses’s overpasses—offers rich possibilities. What other things in the environment work to control human movement and access? How do these things limit economic possibilities because of access? Buildings are necessary, tangible structures that will continue to exist long after the architectural designer is gone. But buildings limit where humans go and what they can do within the confines of the building. Buildings have fluid boundaries in that they house, protect, and connect people and things by providing intimate and safe spaces to work and take shelter. Ironically, these buildings show us what is missing in online spaces and learning environments: protection and tangible creative spaces that invoke imagination and wonder. Also, electrical wirings and outlets within buildings determine the orderly workings of computers and other functions requiring sufficient electrical output. Engaging rhetorical and visual analysis on buildings as evocative objects helps connect people intimately to objects and what Heidegger calls “thing power”—the power to create the rhetorical situation through their capacity to block the will and desire of humans. In short, objects have the power to reveal.

Looking from the outside in to physical structures for curricular purposes, starting with Kingwood’s Administration Building, the Administration and Performing Arts Center (APA), before Harvey known as the Performing Arts Center (PAC), offers defining possibilities. Before Harvey, the 30,000 square foot multi-story structure housed most of the English department faculty, a writing lab, the (just one) Dean’s suite and supporting staff, and the Art and Drama departments, along with several classrooms. The building also served as a polling location for the greater community during election times. The newly designed building, after Harvey, houses all the previously mentioned but with an added presidential suite and an interdisciplinary Dean’s suite (housing all the Deans on campus) modeled after WeWork. The goal of the redesign was to replicate the environment after Harvey in which the Dean’s collaborated to meet challenges brought on by Harvey, including building a new course schedule to accommodate the 12-week semester and redesign building interiors. As a central hub of campus activity, creativity, and control, the APA provokes wonder because it invites and repels at the same time (See figure 3 for a campus map).

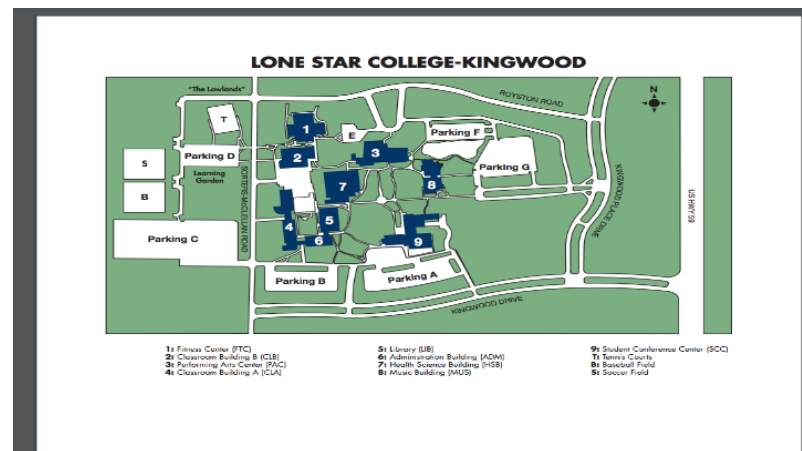


Figure 3. Campus map

To me, buildings like the APA provide a structure and purpose to contextualize the learning environment for students. In so doing, these buildings promote success by providing tangible avenues to areas that promote self-help and success, i.e., the writing lab—a tangible way of controlling student movement not available online. Having students think metacognitively about their own movements within these structures and spaces necessarily helps them realize their own agency and motivations.

How does the object reveal freedom or resistance and to what capacity? Students take on a duality whereby they become both text and reader of text. What does the object in its condition reveal about the culture and the people: those who created it and those who use it? For example, after catastrophic storms like Harvey and Katrina, extending the rhetoric of disaster to an ontological investigation of campus structures, homes, neighborhoods, and stores situates the student in the heart of their own self—their intimate surroundings.

Students also need an avenue to heal and make sense of the tragedy and the trauma. In “An American Tragedy: Reading the Rhetoric of Disaster in Hurricane Katrina Literature and Popular Culture,” Lisa Kirby explains that “Katrina is still an integral part of the New Orleans consciousness” (197), and the “impact... is still ever-present” (198). She posits a rhetoric of disaster that allows for “anger, catharsis, healing, and even humor, all of which are important parts of dealing with tragedy” (198). Tacking into Kirby’s theorizing, I posit allowing students to explore their own stories and their own agency through the rhetoricity of objects and things, whatever those things may be. Doing so serves two pedagogical purposes. First, as explained

earlier, exploring narratives allows students to think critically about their own lives; and second, narration provides an avenue for healing—a way of grappling with the trauma of a catastrophic event. Kirby also acknowledges that “language and writing can never truly capture the enormity of this [traumatic] experience” (198). Kirby has done an important work extending the rhetoric of disaster to the tragedy of Hurricane Katrina. Complicating humanistic inquiries requires not only examining politics, culture, race and gender, but also analyzing the agency of objects as suggested by Bennet, Barnett, and Harman. And here lies the value to students. Inquiring from the outside in lends merit to critical pedagogies.

Causing students to think about their resources or lack of resources and why they can or cannot improve their social and economic situations offers limitless possibilities to think about change. Thinking about what it means to be within their social and economic spaces helps reveal networks and how networks limit or grant access. We must acknowledge that things and objects have politics. When things such as water, wind, buildings, and technology collide, they congeal to produce unique exigencies such as those faced by Kingwood faculty and students after Harvey. Things have narratives. Helping students discover these narratives promotes critical thinking on many levels.

Essentially, this article attempts to answer Kirby’s question of “Rhetorically, what are we to make of this [disaster rhetoric and disasters such as Katrina]?” Kirby poses this question two years before Harvey. Natural disasters continue to happen, and society continues to discuss the poor and disenfranchised and what they have and do not have access to and why? In academe, we grapple with this exigence with the hope of cultivating students who have the agency and access to effect change within their environment—the type of change that liberates an oppressed individual or group.

Privileging water—particularly floodwater—rhetoric and buildings as evocative objects, I explore rhetoric from the outside in—outside the mind, attuning to the suasiveness of the water. As composition and rhetoric teachers, we invite students to think critically about the rhetorical situation and agency. Looking outward provides another dimensionality to the rhetorical situation. Stagnant floodwaters affecting campus wielded a power independent of the human mind. Humans were in no way in charge of this power. Humans could not influence or control it; they could only respond. Water became the center of rhetorical activity, creating a rhetorical situation independent of human influence. The value lies in helping students recognize the rhetorical activity occurring outside themselves. Rhetorical and visual analysis are common writing assignments in lower-level composition courses. I propose implementing assignments that require students to think critically on “things” and

what those allow or prevent—much like Robert Moses’s overpasses. What other objects and things in the environment wield power to control human movement and access? How do these things limit economic possibilities because of access? Tapping into OOO expands our possibilities for critical pedagogies. For example, when the water settled around architectural structures composed of brick and mortar, the water related to the buildings primarily by its ability to contaminate, rendering the buildings unusable for their original purpose(s). This relationship became the catalyst that brought about the rhetorical situation and knowledge making resulting from an asymmetrical relationship between water and buildings. What happens if we teach students to theorize the democracy of networked things in their immediate environments and analyze how those things—things such as Internet access and speeds, wireless capabilities, routers, laptops, and other equipment available—have politics to grant or deny access to people and groups based on location? For instance, some students in rural areas lack sufficient internet speed to effectively access courses remotely. What engineered physical structures created these barriers? Lines, poles, and cables control human behavior whether we acknowledge it or not. Gazing on these things and objects and allowing these things agency to speak, places students in the driver’s seat and promotes critical thinking about the environment.

Buildings and technological structures are necessary and will continue to exist long after the inhabitants who frequent and use them in various ways are gone. Kingwood’s campus buildings, like water, too are evocative objects: they have fluid boundaries in that they house, protect, and connect people and things by providing intimate and safe spaces. Ironically, these building show us what is missing in online spaces: protection and tangible creative spaces that invoke imagination and wonder. In discussing buildings as evocative objects I hope to illustrate and connect these objects to what Heidegger calls “thing power”—the power to create the rhetorical situation through their capacity to block the will and desire of humans, the power to reveal.

Conclusion

Just as Katrina lives on in Louisiana, Harvey lives on at LSC. Catharsis and healing can play a major role in curriculum building as a way of granting agency through critical pedagogy—a critical consideration of reality and problem solving through reflection (Freire 55). I believe a critical pedagogy informed by OOO provides an even more vibrant rhetoric allowing students to theorize from the outside in. Theorizing from the object helps students think objectively about politics of access—spaces and

technological media that require special knowledge and literacies to reap the benefits thereof. Using narration and visual analysis to theorize objects and things, offers rich opportunities for catharsis and to reveal social and economic realities plaguing individuals and communities. Imagining and understanding their own position based on their relationship with objects, invites investigating how relationships work—networks. Thing theory also has the potential to help students gain greater appreciation for the environment by exploring how agential elements (such as wind, water, buildings, technology and other matter) collide or congeal to produce unique exigencies. Humanist inquiries examine politics and culture, but significant value lies in looking beyond race and gender, as suggested in the work of Bennet, Barnett, and Harman, and inquiring critically from alternate rhetorical perspectives of things and objects. And here lies the value to students.

Critical thinking and reading are main goals of rhetorical pedagogies. New technological advancements invite new methods of inquiry gazing on things as evocative objects and demand rhetoric theorists give quality attention to objects and things as actors. Marilyn Cooper foreshadowed the possibility of theorizing with things as early as 1989. A decade later Jane Bennett captured the exigence with a guiding question: “How would political responses to public problems change were we to take seriously the vitality of (nonhuman) bodies?” (viii). Bennett clarifies “vitality” to mean “the capacity of things—edibles, commodities, storms, metals— [. . .] to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own” (viii). Bennett’s hypothesizing captures accurately my argument on how theorizing with things opens possibilities to problem solving. Consider how cell phone technology morphed from flip phone to iPhone to iPad. Apple later added voice command technology, turn by turn navigation, and iCloud capabilities that mesmerize and capture the attention of millennials for hours. Technologies, objects, and things demand serious attention because wielding “thing” power grants, limits, or denies access to individuals and groups. Technologies shape decision making and overall how we do business.

Water and buildings are vital objects in a hurricane narrative of trauma; as water causes structures to fail or people to respond, institutional politics often reveal themselves and we learn our limitations and ways to improve skill levels and pedagogies. Flooding from Harvey forced Lone Star College-Kingwood’s faculty and staff to work together to find solutions and problem solve to remain in operation to meet the demands of student success. Looking to Harvey and the water, I posit we gained a more enlightened understanding of student and faculty wiring needs—areas

to foster creativity to promote technological literacies for access. Water persuaded us to work together for our students in a time of crisis.

I propose OOO opens new ways of knowing in the classroom, informing composition scholarship in critical ways not yet been explored. Providing objects agency values a different orientation on rhetoric—a move away from linguistic and social epistemologies that privilege human understanding; OOO values humans and things equally, respecting the power of each to act and reveal exigencies.

Notes

1. Nathaniel Rivers attributes the thingness of objects as their capacity to be “wild.” An object is wild because it can “resist . . . and do its own thing” (430). He delves into a deeper comparison of Harman’s and Bennett’s ideas. Human and object are assemblages, according to Bennett whereas Harman sees these two as more separate. He also defines deep ambivalence (ontological equivalence) and summarizes Tim Morton’s work. What he (Rivers) calls wild objects Tim Morton, in *Ecology Without Nature*, calls “strange stranger”.
2. See Graham Harman’s *Guerilla Metaphysics*, 2005, for further reading on the agency of objects.
3. New materialism moves us beyond the realm of language toward thinking about nonhuman social realms and historiography. Feminist scholarship that examines material rhetoric such as Jenny Rice’s *Distant Publics: Development Rhetoric and the Subject of Crisis* and Nedra Reynolds’s *Geographies of Writing: Inhabiting Places and Encountering Difference* have also been important achievements in making it possible to theorize with and about objects.
4. In the introduction to *Rhetoric, Through Everyday Things*, Scot Barnett and Casey Boyle summarize and explain how Actor Network Theory (ANC) breaks from OOO (7-8). Latour does not see his work as asymmetrical but believes things to be in a symmetric relationship, a relationship between human and thing. For further reading on how ANC differs from OOO, see *The Prince and the Wolf: LaTour and Harman at the LSE* (2011).
5. Drawing from both Harman and Bennett, Rivers says it is through relations “assemblages” that things have agency (429). He explains that Bennett and Harman’s research appears contradictory in that OOO and new materialism have not been merged in an acceptable way to date. Rivers differentiates between OOO

and new materialism: “OOO attends to the strangeness of objects while new materialism increases the viscosity of their relations” (429).

6. See the foreword, “The Truth is Out There,” to Christian R. Weisser’s and Sydney I. Dobrin’s *Ecocomposition: Theoretical and Pedagogical Approaches* (2001). Marilyn Cooper explains that process writing was nothing more than an extension of the current traditional model; to Cooper, a “postprocess” pedagogy must focus on systems and/or system thinking because “[a]nalysis destroys relationships, which must be understood as wholes, and even more so as dynamic, changing patterns, rather than as discrete objects (or subjects and objects) acting on each other” (xii). This seems contradictory to OOO philosophy, which grants individual agency to objects, but such theorizing using Actor Network Theory (ANT) provided the foundation for the type of theorizing about objects done by Sherry Turkle, Jane Bennett, and Graham Harman.

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