Unlike many so-called “isolated” marine disasters, whether the loss of a ship or the material effect of a storm battering the shore, the sinking of the Deepwater Horizon oilrig was a continuous event. In the months that followed, as the mainstream news media’s constant tracking of the situation quite literally showed its underwater reality, oil from the Macondo well flowed for months into the Gulf of Mexico off the shores of Louisiana. The legal, financial, and regulatory outcomes of the “disaster” all remain subject to ongoing governmental and judicial review, if not public debate. Could the Deepwater Horizon be considered an ongoing disaster?

Think back to February 14, 1982, and another rig disaster. These were the early, heady days of offshore oil drilling in the province of Newfoundland and Labrador. The Ocean Ranger, a rig designed, owned, and operated by the New Orleans-based Ocean Drilling and Exploration Company, and under contract to Mobil Oil, was the largest semi-submersible oilrig in the world. It promised to enable the most technologically sophisticated exploration of oil the world, and the energy industry, had ever seen. As Susan Dodd’s remarkable work, The Ocean Ranger: Remaking the promise of oil, recounts, that Valentine’s night when a North Atlantic storm hit the rig with oceanic force. In the early hours of the morning, water started to come into a ballast control room located in one of the rig’s legs. A portlight, eighteen inches in diameter, had been smashed by the drive of the water. As water began to cover the console used to stabilize the rig by controlling the rush of water in and out of its floating pontoons, the men aboard scrambled to find a solution. Without proper training, a decisive emergency response manual, or the basic know-how to respond in this extreme situation, they cut the power to the panel. The rig, engineered to be unsinkable, began to tilt. In an attempt to reestablish its balance, they turned the panel back on. Soon after, the rig was in a full list. The men called in a mayday, and began an unwitnessed evacuation of the rig.

Among the 84 men who died that night, “lost at sea” in the tradition of marine disasters, was a young “mud engineer” by the name of Jim Dodd. “My brother Jim’s death was a personal loss for me and my family,” Susan Dodd writes, “but it was also a political failure” (p. 5). Dodd’s meticulous, critical recasting of the individual, social, political, economic, and cultural legitimation crises that ensued from the sinking of the Ocean Ranger sheds light on the outcomes of the conflict between the very real, traumatic, and socially circulating death of 84 people and the “promise of oil.” In the face of liberal capitalism’s supposed dependence on future prosperity and continual economic progress, the Ocean Ranger, for Dodd, holds, in the retelling of the story of its sinking, the narrative possibility of conducting another form of memory work. Through a commingling of personal and collective trauma, a comparative analysis of governmental and cultural discourses, and a close examination of past and present failures of corporate regulation, Dodd asks: “How do our recoveries from personal and collective trauma relate to the capacity of liberal capitalism to stave off crises of confidence in our political and economic systems?” (p. 25).
Dodd's book, divided into six chapters, seeks to work against the “forgetfulness” induced by “liberal capitalism” (p. 135), and inculcates a sense of discursive readiness when it comes to reading industrial disasters as events that are always already implicated in ongoing narratives, and material documents, of legitimation. She attempts to work through the principal “socio-political processes that respond to a potential legitimation crisis” (p. 137) and the diverse ways in which they address and reorient personal and collective trauma. Dodd opens by taking apart the Royal Commission of Inquiry and its ensuing report. By making the Ocean Ranger disaster into a “‘learning story’” (p. 53), the inquiry’s working process of evidence gathering, consultation with industry and governmental experts, and literary composition,

clarified and secured a public account of how the men died, and it did so in a way that seemed to reconcile the ways people make sense of things in day-to-day life with the decisions-making processes of governments and corporate bureaucracies. (p. 33)

In the chapter that follows, Dodd reworks the heavily symbolic role that money played in the aftermath of the disaster. At the nexus of charity, insurance payouts, workers’ compensation, and out-of-court settlements, the “costs of closure” (p. 55) for the families of the 84 men were steep. Dodd recalls that just as public trust can be battered and buried by a metaphoric wave of regulatory neglect, the righting that needs to take place to restore public confidence, and cultural justice more broadly, can seemingly only take place through the medium of money. She pauses over the variability of sums paid out to the families, drawing out a fascinating subplot of how Canadian and American legal cultures shaped the extent to which families could quantify loss and, in the process, change their own status as particular kinds of victims.

The third chapter picks up on the question of “blood money” that is at the root of tort law and traces its genealogical cultural history. The fourth chapter weighs the political and ideological import of commemoration as a practice in the wake of disaster, noting how these other retellings of the story can “challenge the simple narrative of shock-forensics-reform-action” (p. 111) that such devices as inquiry reports and systems of financial settlement bolster. Dodd's closing chapters return to the processual “politics of memory in liberal capitalism” (p. 151) and how this powerful memory work can both conceal the ways in which governments have failed to regulate profit-driven corporations, and allow for practices of critical remembering, in particular across the fields of sociology and anthropology, that open up societal valuations of evidentiary accounts to qualitative revision and reevaluation.

“The sense of betrayal that emerged in the disaster’s aftermath did not come from a sudden discovery that companies seek profits or that the ocean can kill” (p. 18). For Dodd, this is a simple statement of the obvious. “The shock was in governments’ and oil companies’ failure to acknowledge that a rig is a ship on which people live and work, not just a platform for drilling oil” (p. 18-19). Dodd's retelling of the Ocean Ranger story also indirectly re-conceptualizes the oilrig as a site of labour. Interrupting a technical reading of the disaster as one of mechanical failure—that eighteen inch breach of the world's largest semi-submersible oilrig and the consequences of human decision and action—Dodd brings to life how intertwined technological failure and regulatory
failure can be. Rather than let the Ocean Ranger be washed up into evolutionary narratives of technical improvement through failure, Dodd has written into existence a story wherein “the rig was equipment, certainly, but it was also living and working quarters, inhabited and ultimately managed by men” (p. 37). It was a ship that sank, and a true story of a continuing marine disaster.

Rafico Ruiz, McGill University

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