

8 Snow Day (or, Weathering the City #1: Hacking Blizzard Infrastructure in New York City)

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One form of the verb “hack” means “to make rough of random cuts” (hack 2018). It was once commonly used to denote frost’s capacity to chap or crack the skin. This particular meaning derives from “*tōhaccian*” or to hack to pieces (hack). Bearing this violent etymology in mind, and taking New York as my muse, I ask what would it take to materially hack the Anthropocene in the archaic sense of frost cracking skin? What would it mean and what would it take for the city’s lips to be seriously chapped in a snowstorm?

In asking this I reveal my melancholy and my rage. Melancholy for the melting frozen world, the disappearing permafrost, the societies, fantasies and myths built on ice. The rage comes from the relentlessness of business as usual in places like New York, and my hometown Sydney. As if this world of cars, deskwork, mortgages and disposable coffee cups is the best of all possible.

Sometimes, when a city or town receives an excess of ice and snow, a “snow day” is declared. This never happens in Sydney (occasionally we get thunder storms severe enough for political leaders to tell people to leave work early).¹ It does happen in New York. Officially, a “snow day” is when the school bus cannot make its usual route. School is cancelled, triggering a domino effect on other types of daily transportations. The city’s systems stop. Beyond schooling, New York’s snowstorms interrupt the capitalist flow of the iconic city by literally freezing it. The road is at the centre of this story. It is the impervious surface across which buses, cars, trucks, people, goods, services, money and capital flow. This particular kind of flow only occurs if the road can remain open and the predominantly fossil fuelled vehicles can get through. The open road belongs to business. When closed, I reckon the road promises a different kind of economy.

Janine Macleod argues that the capitalist hegemony would not function without its grab bag of watery metaphors: cash flow, the trickle down effect, currency (McLeod 57). To which I would add the flow of traffic. These watery metaphors is affected by the blockages too. When things go wrong assets are “frozen” or the roads are clogged like a drain (40). Playing with the logics of flows and freezes, my offering to Hacking the Anthropocene involves hacking into attempts to keep roads open in a snow-storm in order to find other ways to be open to the conceptually and materially disruptive logic of such weather events. This is not about openness to danger or life threatening cold. This is not to a fetishisation of the logic is not of disaster for constructing a disaster counter-capitalism, but rather a critical uptake of the dreamy news that school is cancelled because of a snow day!

After presenting my Hack to the audience at the symposium, I had two similar and similarly memorable offline responses that suggested that there is nothing dreamy about a snow day. One person said it was “cute” for an Australian to speak about the cold; where cute was equal parts patronising and refreshing. First, “cute” referred to my confident naivety, given I’d never been bogged down by the daily grind of life in the cold, living as I do in the Promised Land, Sydney. Second, “cute” also suggested that this ill-informed perspective was kind of appealing too. The second, less generous version of the same response, informed me I have no idea what I am talking about and that snow days are actually awful and make life really difficult. To paraphrase: “You really have no idea what you are talking about. You obviously haven’t tried to drop the kids at school and get to work after a snowstorm.” And this latter comment—an overtly patronising criticism—interests me most. This person is well-to-do. And so the intense frustration reflects an otherwise sheltered and fully-accommodated life; as such, the negative affect interests me deeply. Poorer people struggle through winter unable to change the economic structures that gives their neighbour ready access to heat, and them a drafty house and broken radiator. Meanwhile powerful and privileged frustration about the weather

is performative. It shapes social norms and living standards. Why can't the more privileged amongst us just let the snow hem them in a little bit? By privileged, I mean people who have the means to keep warm and alive during and after a blizzard. I'm not saying let the poor or homeless freeze, I'm asking what else could it mean—infrastructurally, politically, ideologically, materially, emotionally—to let the snow, rather than the flow of traffic, to dominate for a day or two.

Zachary Maxwell knows what I mean when I say a snow day is dreamy, and he endures Manhattan's harsh winters. Maxwell is a young documentary maker motivated to investigate the snow day in response to a suspicion that the amount of snow days he gets per annum does not properly correspond with the abundance of snowfall he experiences. He'd prefer to stay at home and play with his little brother on a miserable and cold day, but more often than not he has to go into school. Maxwell lives on Manhattan and goes to school there too. It snows a lot on Manhattan island, but snow days are strikingly rare. He decided to investigate why he has so few snow days and discovered that there is considerable infrastructural investment to ensure that the snow day does not actually happen (Maxwell). The infrastructure is designed to keep the roads and therefore schools, businesses and stock exchanges open. It is thus not the elemental stuff of the snow itself, but the infrastructure engineered to ensure business as usual that needs attention.

In solidarity with Maxwell's youthful frustration,² I submit that a systematic rethinking and restructuring (a "re-infrastructuring") of the urban approach to the snow storm is a potential way to hack the Anthropocene because snow materially slows the city, troubles daily habits (school, work and consumption). We need to occupy the negative affect that builds policy in order to resist slowing along with the cold weather and from there build a new city. Wealthy cities of the global north need to be slowed down, consumption needs to change direction, the more privileged lifestyles need to be far less so, assets need to be snap frozen, human labours need to be redirected towards

an altogether different bottom line, how, what and why we teach is in flux too. Modern cities are icons of the extractivist age; they are materialisations of its logics. The energy intensive infrastructure that aims to keep roads open at all costs after a snowstorm is the epitome of this logic. Currently, the infrastructural investment aimed to keep roads open during a snow day represents the refusal to let the more-than-human to be anything other than ornamental in the city. The snow ploughs and salt sheds exemplify the anthropocentric logic of capitalist fossil fuelled urbanism.

I imagine the skyscrapers as inverted mines, as if all the materials extracted from the earth and the new rocks and metals synthesized—the stratigraphic matters of epoch—are represented in relief in sky, by the skyscrapers that spring up across the land as materialisations of human fantasies of transcendence.

The Spring Street Salt shed is one of 45 Salt Sheds on Manhattan Island. It is designed to look like a salt crystal and can house 5000 tonnes of salt (of the approx. 200 000 tonnes stored on Manhattan at any one time). Salt is used to clear the streets after a snowfall because the melting point of salt water is lower than fresh. On one hand, the salt shed is a green star rated building with a green roof and grey water treatment system. It is the cutting edge of sustainable design. On the other, the salt used to clear the roads is posing a range of environmental issues downstream. It is an architecturally designed paradox of urban sustainability. It is certifiably sustainable and completely unsustainable at the exact same time.

In Canada road salt is considered a toxin, but in the US the millions of tonnes of road salt used each year are causing salinization in the ground water, impacting not only human but more-than-human life. Not to mention corroding other essential infrastructures. Zachary Maxwell calculated that in one snowstorm enough salt is distributed in NYC to cover 789.5 Billion servings of medium sized fries. When discussing ecological issues around this there are currently two paths: one is to celebrate the sustainability of the salt shed in itself, despite the salt. Two is to



Figure 1. Spring Street Salt. Shed Photo by Ken Ohyama, CC-BY-SA

talk about the alternative methods of clearing the roads like beet juice or magnesium. But why not close the road? There are health and safety concerns, to be sure, the need to get some labouring women and heart-attack patients to hospital, for sure. But surely there is a standard of living healthfully and safely between the open road and the one that's clear-and-salted? Surely if labouring women and those having heart attacks took priority, while other kinds of trade in the city stopped, the snow-response team would be differently structured and Zachary Maxwell and others would get a restful snow day.

What would it mean to do freezing weather in cities differently? No one really wants to go to work when the weather is too cold, too hot or too wet, what is really lost by stopping work or school for a day or two here or there? No one likes traffic. Susan Leigh Star argued that infrastructures become visible when they fail (Star 382). What is revealed by their failure is the logic of their success. In ecological terms this weather-management infrastructure reveals the outer limit of a city's capacity to manage the force of the more-than-human world. The snow day, or what else happens during that infrastructural operation, invites thinking about changing those limits. The snow day, if it were to be

thought differently, holds within it a new logic of life, learning and work in relation to weather in cities. Although I recognise there are health and safety concerns involved in having major roads through the city closed, we need to ask if essential services and servitude to capitalism can travel different roadways?

Notes

- 1 In a recent storm in Sydney, then state premiere Mike Baird ordered workers leave early to avoid pressure on the transport systems, because the storm was predicted for afternoon peak hour. <http://www.smh.com.au/environment/weather/sydney-weather-mike-baird-calls-on-workers-to-head-home-asap-before-storm-gets-worse-20150421-1mpv4y.html>
- 2 And others committed to rethinking infrastructure in times of environmental crisis: Stephanie LeMenager, Tess Lea, Lauren Berlant.

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