

Arctic-Oceanic New York

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I would that my name be carved on the tablets
of the sea.

—Letter from Henry Hudson
to Richard Hakluyt

Hudson achieved in 1609 nothing memorable,
even by this new way.

—Hessel Gerritz¹

In the summer of 1609, under orders from the Dutch East India Company to venture north by northeast towards the Russian archipelago of Novaya Zemlya, the English navigator Henry Hudson erred: thwarted by icepack, and unwilling to return so soon to his Dutch patrons, he sailed west instead, journeying down the North American coast that his friend John Smith had described to him. Entering what we now know as New York Harbor in September 1609, he sailed up a river called the North River, a waterway that Italian explorer Giovanni da Verrazano sighted in 1524 but never

¹ Hudson quoted in Edward Butts, *Henry Hudson: New World Voyager* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2009), 30–1; Gerritz quoted in G.M. Asher's volume for the Hakluyt Society, *Henry Hudson the Navigator* (New York, Burt Franklin, 1860), 187.

explored. Traveling as far north as modern-day Albany before the shallow waters forced him to turn back, Hudson's journey helped establish the city of New Amsterdam for the Dutch, making him, arguably, the founder of New York City and the face behind the Hudson River. But Hudson was not looking for the isle of Manhattan or interested in the economic potential of the river valley; first mate Robert Juet's dull descriptions of the landscape, printed in Samuel Purchas's *Pilgrimes* (1625), prove this point: "The land grew very high and mountainous. The river is full of fish....The mountaynes look as if some metall or minerall were in them."² Juet's cursoriness belies Hudson's *true* intention, however: he hoped to find the Northwest Passage, the fabled route to Cathay the English eagerly coveted and even—according to the magus John Dee—*deserved* as inheritors of King Arthur's legendary conquest of the northern ocean. This river, so Hudson thought, would finally make his country a global (colonial) power.

Thus a city that often emphasizes its ties to the Atlantic Ocean owes its inception in part to another ocean: the *Arctic*. New York City is a city, we might say, that began because of Hudson's geographical *error* upriver. I purposefully use this word in its etymological sense of the Latin *errare* ("to stray, err").³ Hudson's geographical errancy would negatively affect his image for years to come; consider the Dutch publisher Hessel Gerritz's dismissive summation in 1612, for example, or fellow passage-seeker

2 Asher 83, 89. All quotations from Hudson's voyages hereafter refer to this edition.

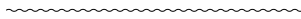
3 See *error, n.* in the Oxford English Dictionary online, especially sense I.1.

and compatriot Luke Foxe's slanderous estimation of his predecessor in *North-West Fox* (1635). Recalling a moment in which Hudson sent home a "Master Coolbrand" on his fourth voyage of 1610–11, Foxe held the latter to be in "every way [...] a better man than [Hudson],"⁴ for Coolbrand was the one who "devised [the] course" into the vast saltwater bay in northern America (180). For these two early modern critics, navigation implies a course and an endpoint; any "error" is that which "strays" from the *correct* path or does not reach the *right* end: a teleology fit for the straight lines of ecological imperialism. Errors cost dearly to them, and it would be errors that ultimately claimed Hudson's life: he died on the fourth voyage in that body of water that now bears his name, Hudson Bay, a victim of mutiny, set adrift by his men who deviated from their captain's orders. Hudson's expressed wish to Hakluyt came true. No other name has more volume of water attached to it. But if I may offer an opinion of my own, Hudson's errancy suggests a kind of "erring" that does not demand an endpoint. To "stray" without something to stray *from*: when accidents are wished for, when erroneousness is an endless change in direction rather than missing a mark.⁵ No one knows where Hudson's bones lie, yet we can imagine a bodily metamorphosis under ice, an Arctic version of Ariel's song that carves his name "on the tablets of the sea," that proves how erraticism is the stuff

4 Quoted in Asher, 180.

5 I liken Hudson to Michel Serres's Ulysses: "The Odyssean path is an exodus rather than a method. An exodus in the sense that the path deviates from the path and the track goes off track." *The Five Senses: A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies*, trans. Margaret Sankey and Peter Cowley (New York: Continuum, 2008), 261.

that dreams and obsession are made on, including our own.⁶ “Hudson” and Hudson: errors both, *still* erring.



During the last Ice Age, 1.5 million to 10,000 years ago, the Wisconsin ice sheet stretched from present-day Montana to Massachusetts. About 50,000 years ago, this mobile mass of ice entered the current New York metropolitan area, sculpting places like Long Island and speckling the landscape with till and moraines we call city parks: Inwood Hill, Wolfe’s Pond, and Van Cortlandt.⁷ Nowadays the river barely changes in elevation from where it begins at Lake Tear of the Clouds on the slope of Mt. Marcy in the Adirondacks, shifting only about 5 feet in its 145-mile trip to the ocean.⁸ Around 13,500 years ago, however, the river was not as consistent. When “The Great Flood of New York” occurred, Iroquois Lake (now Lake Ontario) burst through its ice dam, sending a torrent of freshwater sluicing south down the glacial river valley where it emptied into the North Atlantic and initiated a global climate change. The valley still extends below water, in fact, and for this reason the Hudson is sometimes referred to as the “drowned river.” The topography of New York City, in short, is

6 Corey Sandler’s *Henry Hudson: Dreams and Obsession* (New York: Citadel Press, 2007) is a fitting example. See “Part V: Deciphering the Hudson Code” in particular.

7 See <http://www.nycgovparks.org/about/history/geology> for more information.

8 Douglas Hunter follows the river in great detail in *Half Moon: Henry Hudson and the Voyage That Redrew The Map of the New World* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2009).



Image 1: Glacial erratics in Central Park.

glacial. In addition to the parks abovementioned, other Arctic remnants are more obvious (Image 1). Inner city rocks like this one in Central Park are what geologists call “glacial erratics,” boulders deposited at sites in which they conspicuously stand out from native rocks, straying from their “proper” place amongst mineralogical kind, and, perhaps in this specific case, from their rightful place in “rural” settings. As geological erratics, they remind us of an ice age supposedly *past*, static objects around which we recreate ourselves in the present.

But such erroneous geomaterial, like Hudson’s *de/re/composing* Bay-body, forges a transhistorical continuum; their surprising out-of-placeness acknowledges them as arrivals that still arrive. Matter agentic and mobile, rocky erratics remind us of being in a *trans/cryo/corporealism*, of the Arctic touching us, of physically

being “us.”⁹ “Hudson” speaks less of the anthropocentrism of bodies of water—river, strait, and bay—and more of icewater bodies. So does a wander in Central Park. New York City’s unofficial anthem might yearn to “be a part of it,” but we are already part of the ice, not apart from it.¹⁰ So is my writing right now in mid-March 2014, insulated but not separated from a “polar vortex” that began in January and has not yet left North America. Unlike Hudson’s fluvial journey *north* into the Arctic, the air current now shifts *south*. We do not need to go the Arctic; the chilling cyclone comes to us, crawling out of its prescribed “circle,” fostering fears that in a New York minute, *nothing* can or will change.¹¹ Or that New York will become the “drowned city” after the polar icecaps melt. “My little town blues / they are melting away,” as the song goes, but these icy blues are not so welcome. Freeze or flood (or both): these images remind us not just of past touches of ice, but forebode future catastrophes to come. Whether we blame the errors of industrial capitalism (if only we were not so rapacious we could have remained harmonious with nature), or if we maintain that denying the existence of climate change is a grievous error (we cannot afford to make *this* one), we are stranded like Hudson as the past becomes future, as river and sea levels rise, as we pass through ages of eco-catastrophe, all victims adrift, erring.

- 9 The term “trans-corporeality” is Stacy Alaimo’s, “in which the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world.” *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 2.
- 10 Sorry, Ol’ Blue Eyes: “Theme from *New York, New York*,” famously sung by Frank Sinatra.
- 11 For example, see an article in *The New York Times* from January 6, 2014: “Arctic Cold Blankets Midwest, Freezing Routines.” <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/07/us/arctic-cold-blankets-midwest-freezing-routines.html>.

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The Mahicans who once resided in the region Hudson helped colonize have another name for the Hudson River: *Muhheakantuck*, “the river that flows both ways.” Reconceiving the Hudson as a north-south river marks an icy interchange—a circulating eddy of freeze and flood, past and future, Arctic and Atlantic—that may help us rise to the challenges of a cold waterworld differently. When John Playse recounted Hudson’s first voyage of 1607 in search of the Northeast Passage, he included the captain’s own notes. On the evening of July 11, Hudson complains, “we had the company of our troublesome neighbours, ice with fogge” (12). While noting such dangers is commonplace for travel writers of the north, calling ice a “neighbor” is not. “Neighbor” is a composite word from the Old English *nēahgebūr*, from *nēah* (“nigh, near”) and *gebūr* (“inhabitant, peasant, farmer”).<sup>12</sup> Contrary to Gerritz’s disparagement, I believe Hudson helps us realize what we have forgotten: we exist *because* of our relationship to ice, by being “nigh” to the icy ocean. Arctic-Oceanic New York recognizes how proximity shapes ontology, observable in the hyphenated interchange (-) that “flows both ways,” channeling Michel Serres’s parasitical relationality.<sup>13</sup> It is through such a networked interchange that neighbors interact, co-constitute, coexist. And yet Hudson reminds us of displaced “neighbors,” those absent presences who

12 See neighbour | neighbor, *n.* and *adj.* in the Oxford English Dictionary online.

13 “To play the position or to play the location is to dominate the relation. It is to have relation only with the relation itself.... And that is the meaning of the prefix *para-* in the word *parasite*: it is on the side, next to, shifted; it is not on the thing, but on its relation.” *The Parasite*, trans. Lawrence R. Schehr (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 38.

have been pushed out but leave their traces nonetheless: geographical erratics such as the Mahicans and Lenape he combats on his trip upriver, whose deaths gave Juet place-names like “Manna-hata” (91); geological erratics like the boulders of Central Park, stranded, victims of modernity’s mutiny against ages “past.” We should not remember Hudson’s journey for its “nothing,” but as a reminder of our everyday Arcticality, and act on its impulse to create ethical erratics for co-“inhabitant[s],” good neighbors, to follow. Remember 1609 not for being a failure but for it sponsoring other ways to be, “new ways” to go, chances to stray without reaching a destination—or even positing one.

A “new way,” perhaps, into the geopolitics of our time in which “neighboring” nations in the Arctic look north, just as their forebears did, to metallically rich places like Greenland.<sup>14</sup> Will the receding ice lead to another Manhattan project against “troublesome” non/human neighbors like the Greenlandic Inuit and the ice sheet itself? Is there a “proper” course in this eddy of reality within we live? No: and this is precisely my point. We should all be glacial erratics when it comes to the *fantasy* of being apart from the Arctic, and especially when it comes to being a territorial/izing neighbor. The “Empire City” needs to reject its imperialistic title that depends, in Mick Smith’s words, upon “the antipolitical and antiecollogical principle of sovereignty.”<sup>15</sup> The rule of the human: what impropriety!

14 For instance, see an article in the *New York Times* from September 23, 2012: “A Melting Greenland Weighs Perils Against Potential.” <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/24/science/earth/melting-greenland-weighs-perils-against-potential.html>

15 Mick Smith, *Against Ecological Sovereignty: Ethics, Biopolitics, and Saving the Natural World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), xx.

And here is the cold corollary of refusing ontological sovereignty: letting go of the dream of *equilibrium* that will keep the Hudson Valley and its cities permanently warm and dry. Cary Wolfe notes how “*in the future, we will have been wrong.*”<sup>16</sup> His prophecy does not mean we should stop erring with the world, however, but rather to rethink errors differently than the failure to “get right” or to “find” the singular object of a given search. We will make mistakes; so what may we learn? The ice (the Ice Age) *is* coming at us, but for Hudson, the North River was also an invitation into another oceanic world rather than its foreclosure. Erraticism still is: ultimately, envisioning an Arctic-Oceanic New York assures us that passages do not terminate *up-* or *downstream*—they burgeon, they proliferate relations “troublesome” and otherwise (like English explorers, ice and fog, indigenous tribes, park strollers); they take us into collectives (like New Amsterdam and the eight current member countries of the Arctic Council);<sup>17</sup> they passage us into new/*er* ethical geopolitical realms that make room in their parliaments for icier citizens. Recasting a part of New York City’s oceanic history as Arctic can redefine its future not just as inevitable catastrophe, but also of cryo-coexistence, polar possibilities, dreams as well as obsessions. Beginnings, not just ends, are *nigh*. We may be in the neighborhood of vorticular floes, but we are all Hudson’s heirs as well.

16 Cary Wolfe, *Before the Law: Humans and Other Animals in a Biopolitical Frame* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 103.

17 Canada, Kingdom of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russian Federation, Sweden, and the United States of America. <http://www.arctic-council.org/index.php/en/>