

A Short History of the Hudsonian Ice Age

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to which is added
a guide/less/book for the erratic explorer
along with
essential queries and supply rosters

23986–11286 B.C.E.

Going back to a river's beginning is not to pinpoint its source—it is to begin (again). Time may *flow*, but a river always escapes the trappings of chronology. Riparian time emphasizes riptides, eddies, and turbulent zones over lines, origins, and laminar points.

(All we know are these confluences: Skype chats and emails; poetry and bridge sections; rivers and tides; bendable and multipliable time. Data streams, hovercraft, “Hudson,” *Muhheakantuck*.)

How do we understand a body of water without our own—in it, with it, through it? What will be the stuff of this day's bridges—of space, time, conversation, question and experience—enlisted to build tomorrow's? Does the water outside my window know that I'm watching it, wondering where it will go next? Will it love as it is loved?

- Broadband connectivity
- Iced coffee
- In-box attachments
- NOAA charts
- Public Trust Doctrine
- Salt in the veins

April 10, 1815

Mount Tambora in the Dutch East Indies erupts, spreading its volcanic ash worldwide. Crops fail. Poverty soars. Europe, still in the grips of the Little Ice Age, deems 1816 the “Year Without Summer.” “Seasonless, herbless, treeless, manless, lifeness”: Byron’s “Darkness.”¹

(Less is *more* to those on the volcanic rim, those who wonder why the end is deemed *nigh* with the arrival of particulate neighbors, born from the explosive earth. Even “a chaos of hard clay” shines light from its magmatic core. It is warm here.)

Will we soon be living Years Without Winter as some now live Years Without Water? When will ours come? Will the ice ever return? Would it want to?

- Stories of Pompeii
- Skates
- Yellow ochre
- Woolens
- Farmer’s Almanac

1 *Selected Poetry of Lord Byron*, ed. Leslie A. Marchand (New York: Random House, 2001), 221.

Winter 1817

Temperatures reach -26 F (-32 C) in Upper New York Bay. Horse-drawn sleighs cross the frozen Buttermilk Channel to Governors Island.

(Some fear that Hudson's ghost approaches from the northwest, recounting the river's chilling history as an imagined passageway to Asia. They feel what Arctic explorers felt: cold.)

What of Nature's ambivalence? Is what is perceived as cruelty merely necessary? Without summer, what then?

- Waxed boots
- Goggles
- Blankets
- Face mask
- Buckets
- Guns
- Pitiless determination

1784

Governors Island gets its name from the British royal governors who had reserved the island for their exclusive use, replacing "Noten Eylandt" ("Island of Nuts") given by the first settlers of New Netherland. The Native Americans had previously called the island "Paggank," or "Nut Island" due to the forests of nut-bearing trees that once flourished there. The state government currently recognizes Governors Island as the birthplace of New York City, lauding the "legal-political guaranty of tolerance onto the North

American continent”² proclaimed by the Dutch upon their landing in 1624.

(Juan Rodriguez, born in Santa Domingo from Portuguese and African parents and a translator for the Dutch, is the first documented non-native resident and arguably the first citizen of New York City. Arriving in 1613, he marries into the indigenous community and learns the Algonquian language. Tolerance can be a successful alternative to governance—regarding humans, trees, nuts—especially when it extends across the continent to a widening range of beings. An island cannot be governed, a channel’s tides never wait; all relationships are fragile, every interaction precarious. No man owns an island.)

Is an island still an island if there’s a bridge connecting it to mainland? Does it become something else? A satellite, fruit, or merely an accessory?

- Sandbar
- Canoe
- Paddle
- Satchel
- Beads
- Ribbons
- Kettle
- Epi-pen
- Eldridge Tide and Pilot
- A strong breaststroke

Summer 2008

New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg breaks ground on Governors Island, laying claim to the 150 acres sold by the federal government to the city and the State of New York in 2003. The Trust for Governor's Island promises a mix of recreational, educational, and hospitality services—"a park created by and for New Yorkers."³ A new world is only a ferry ride away.

(The Tolerance Park Foundation reveres Governors Island. Their proposed "living museum" to commemorate, they believe, the first legal declaration of religious tolerance in the New World—to be built by 2009, the quatercentenary of the Half Moon's arrival—never materialized.⁴ Onboard a more modern vessel, landscape architects discuss a rising bay and the threats it poses to the Park and Public Space Master Plan,⁵ perhaps listening to the objections water itself *raises* (from Old English *rīsan*—"make an attack, wake, get out of bed."). This voice asks who and what counts as *public*, who can afford to arrive, to stay, to return. To work with water's destabilizing effects, no one can reclaim what has been taken, only cohabit what has always been shared. An agency derived through nonhuman relation is a bridge between once-opposed worlds, a redefinition of citizenry, a wet wake up call.)

3 Updates are available on their website: <http://www.govisland.com/html/home/home.shtml>.

4 Their initiative appears to be ongoing: <http://www.tolerancepark.org/>.

5 A detailed description of the plan is available here: http://www.west8.nl/projects/all/governors_island/.

Does imagination grow bigger, richer, fuller, when it has land in which to root? How can the shipping chain learn tolerance for the public, patience for that which is not sold?

- Golden shovel & Commemorative plaques
- Paparazzi and PR agents
- Souvenir pens
- Life jackets
- Bullhorn
- Board of Directors
- Angel investors
- Business plan
- Patience

June 3, 1864

A quarter century before Walt Whitman reminisces about the sand bar across Buttermilk Channel, he writes dejectedly about a different dairy product in a letter to his mother. Taking care of wounded soldiers outside Washington, DC, during the Civil War, “I gave the boys in Carver hospital a great treat of ice cream a couple of days ago, went round myself through about 15 large wards, (I bought some ten gallons, very nice)—you would have cried & been amused too, many of the men had to be fed, several of them I saw cannot probably live, yet they quite enjoyed it.”⁶ Amidst the ghastliness of war, Whitman reaches out to his neighbors in an act of love—many unknown, one familiar—providing them with a moment of joy, even if it proves to be as ephemeral as ice on a hot summer day.

6 *Selected Letters of Walt Whitman*, ed. Edwin Haviland Miller (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1990), 104.

(Hurricane Sandy wrecks infrastructures and stalls even the best-laid artistic plans. And it motivates them: an artist restarts her experiment in staying afloat during inter- and intra-catastrophic times, engineering a Citizen's Bridge bound by the physical buoyancy of objects and collaboration with others. A bridge that has contingency built-in, unpredictability expressed, destruction pre-determined. There is no perceivable point across the bridge—just the company of the present and its *building* potential. "Let 'be' be finale of seem."⁷ Let love be in times of strife.)

Can enough frozen cream, melted, flood the belly? Where is the ice cream in a flood?

- Vanilla
- Cream
- Sugar
- Salt
- Buckets
- Cranks
- Gauze
- Scoop
- Spoons
- Bowls
- Penicillin

7 Wallace Stevens, "The Emperor of Ice Cream," in *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 64.

September 26, 2013

We meet at Oceanic New York and decide that our bridges should intersect, thus beginning our erratic expedition together.

January 7, 2014

New York City records a temperature of 3 F (-16 C) as the Polar Vortex sweeps south from the Arctic Circle. Up to twelve inches of ice form on the Hudson River, prompting the US Coast Guard to deploy icebreakers in order to keep shipping lanes open.

(At several times during the nineteenth century, New Yorkers perilously walked across “ice bridges” along the East and Hudson Rivers for a variety of reasons. Ice floes carried away several curious people on the former in 1857, while in 1821 a temporary tavern was built on the latter. As a substance in-between liquid and solid, melting and freezing, ice bridges *bridge* connections between things as well as distribute them: a warmth of a drink shared with a fellow brave citizen can lead to a life-threatening ride atop an iceberg, or even a thrilling one inside an ice yacht, popular on the Hudson since the late nineteenth century. Ice moves, and ice moves us. If there is no governor (or emperor) of ice, only citizens, if there is no central organization to the public, only bridges that span both local and global, then let Hudson be your guide: to err is non/human; and to tolerate, not just in the sense of patiently enduring pain (Latin *tolerare*), but in sharing the burden of endurance with another in order to lessen its hardship, *humane*.)

How does one establish stability on an ice bridge? With the razor edge of a skate or the point of a pick axe? Does water always—no matter its form—counter balance, or is the real adversary time?

- Sand
- Extra scarf
- Extra socks
- Hood
- Hat
- Earmuffs
- Gray piles of garbage, oil, and iced slush
- Caution

1966

Between 1947 and 1997, General Energy dumped an estimated 1.3 million pounds of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) into the Hudson River (the public). Pete and Toshi Seeger start Hudson River Sloop Clearwater in 1966 to protest the river's contamination.⁸

(One of the last songs Pete wrote (with Lorre Wyatt) was recorded onboard a vessel of the same name in 2012. "It's time to turn things around / Trickle up, not trickle down," he sings, "Hopin' we'll all pull through."⁹ It is a chorus writ with water.)

8 For more on the organization's dedication to environmental justice, visit: <http://www.clearwater.org/>.

9 "God's Counting on Me, God's Counting on You."

Who owns the water? And what of when 'navigation' means hoisting anchors for a vessel made of rafts? How does one walk against four knots?

- 50-gallon drums
- Ratchet straps
- Power drill & drywall screws
- Spreadsheets and emails
- 2×4s
- Plywood sheets
- Nets & U-bolts
- Naval Engineering
- A firm handshake
- Unending curiosity
- Leaps of faith
- Courage for ignored correspondence
and cancelled meetings

Summer 2014–

Like Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (1900), we take in "[t]he summer air" of "Mannahatta," only to think on boreal winds in the next breath: "The winter snows, the sleigh-bells—the broken ice in the river, passing along, up or down, with the flood tide or ebb-tide."¹⁰

How long? When exactly? What final requirements and costs for twenty-first-century bodies to relearn the river's? What channels will bridge agendas, world-views, and political

10 *Complete Poetry and Selected Prose* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1982), 613.

tides? Can we choose to be for something else instead of against another?

- A new definition of progress
- Recalibration of success
- A universe of things
- Harnessed friction
- Reverberant creativity
- Hope

(We would sing these songs of shared selves in future.)