

neighborhood activism that could, under optimal conditions, point toward more radical sociopolitical changes, including greater amphibious acceptance. The report's complete lack of attention to the gorilla in the corner of Houston's oil and gas industry and how entangled the city remains with its toxic infrastructure is of course symptomatic of a technopolitics of resilience that seeks to sidestep meaningful climate action.

Amphibious acceptance's time has not yet come in Houston. But our fieldwork suggests that the repetitive experience of catastrophic flooding is changing the affective presence of water in the city in ways that are only likely to increase in the future. Diluvial individualism seems to us a reactive and mostly (according to our interlocutors) miserable orientation. It is burdened by the sins of settler liberalism without even its emancipatory potential. The dominant model of hydraulic citizenship likewise seems defensive and captured by technopolitical logics and fantasies. We believe that it is in the interests of all Houstonians not only to demand better, more inclusive, and ecologically attuned modes of hydraulic citizenship but also to nurture the more radical impulses of amphibious urbanism. Houston is a city built on the proceeds from plantation slavery. It grew into a global city through oil and petrochemicals. But Houston as Petropolis represents an urbanism of the past. We are eager to see how an amphibious Houston might take shape, a Houston that can learn to thrive in its muck, to live with its rising waters, a city that might still steal a future from the jaws of its toxic history.

Comments

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Dreaming in Mud: On the City and Its Sodden Futures

Boyer and Vardy's insightful article dwells in the epistemic and emotional ambivalence of Houston residents who have been flooded out of their homes. How do they apprehend dwelling, negotiate property, and act in the aftermath of flood? This is an aftermath, the authors show, in which the lines between land and water are recognized to be unreliable, data are too shaky to make credible projections, and racialized legal and technopolitical paradigms for shielding urban homes from floods are ever more regularly compromised. In Houston today, floods do not end when waters recede. Simultaneously unpredictable and ordinary, they saturate their subjects with concerns about the boundaries of livability in an ever-receding future. What does it feel like to live in the flooded city? What kinds of political possibilities may emerge from these deeply affective ways of being in Houston today?

"Flooded City" brings together work on affect, on risk and uncertainty, and on the technopolitics of infrastructure to show the different ways in which the slow catastrophe of flooding is inhabited in Houston. Flooding has long been a feature of Houston's wetscape. Nevertheless, its uncanny manifestations are profoundly unsettling. Experts and citizens struggle to reconcile the city they know with the one they now need to learn to inhabit, one in which "diluvial catastrophe" is simultaneously imminent and unknowable. "Floodies" and hydraulic citizens alike are keenly aware of the differentiated degrees of exposure and protection they may expect from the racializing state. Nevertheless, to have been subjected to flooding is also to recognize the inadequacy of the established tools of mapping, planning, and modern infrastructures that administrators have deployed in their Sisyphean quest to keep wet cities dry.

In some ways, uncertainty is not a new phenomenon in cities, and it is not particular to coastal cities. Urban planning has long sought to exile uncertainty from everyday life. Uncertainty remains a "key dimension of the contemporary urban condition" (Zeiderman et al. 2015:285). Zeiderman et al. emphasize that uncertainty is "both produced and productive" (285), a dynamic and recursive process that generates problems for states to intervene with in urban life. Urban planners have sought to manage uncertainty through technologies like the census, the model, the zone, and the plan. They act on uncertainty by wielding these political technologies in time and space. Uncertainty has been generative in planning interventions such as those of risk management, of zoning, of controlling space.

What is particular to the habitation of coastal cities like Houston today, however, is that both floodies and experts are acutely aware that the political technologies of urban planning are woefully inadequate. Experts and subjects alike today actively doubt that their flood control infrastructures, housing fixes, or forecasting technologies will adequately apprehend the next major flooding event. As a result, and building on the work of Rob Nixon (2013) and Adriana Petryna (2018), Boyer and Vardy show how residents and experts alike in Houston constitute what they identify as the "affective publics of slow catastrophe." Amid the unpredictability of hurricanes and other normal rains that increasingly inundate the city, residents in Houston do not expect their arrangements to be durable. Instead, like residents of Mumbai, another coastal city, they act on a future that is imaginable for now. They build homes and infrastructures to dwell in in the meantime, until the waters rise the next time (Anand 2021).

The paper identifies three orientations that residents of Houston deploy to navigate diluvial catastrophe in Houston: diluvial individualism, hydraulic citizenship, and amphibious acceptance. All of these orientations are deeply critical of ongoing histories of modern state technopolitics and the infrastructures that materialize them. All three orientations draw together anticipation, design, anxiety, and technology in the crafting of livable responses to Houston's climate-changed present.

Diluvial individualism is a compromised "wounded and angry" practice, an individualized adjustment that is focused on

reasserting the primacy of property and the power of architecture to protect residents from rising waters. Hydraulic citizenship is a more collectivized response, a practice of pressuring city authorities to put in place technopolitical infrastructures that might address the problem of flooding through social gatherings and bureaucratic spaces. They compellingly demonstrate that such practices of pressuring public officials in these ways are not restricted to cities of the Global South alone.

Amphibious acceptance is a nascent, speculative practice that emerges from a recognition—increasingly sayable among planners and residents—that nineteenth- and twentieth-century assertions of property and urban infrastructure have at worst been responsible for the crises of rising waters and at best been ineffectual in achieving their most basic objectives. Projects of amphibious acceptance begin from the grounds of wetness (Mathur and da Cunha 2009).

Yet it remains unclear both how projects that begin with amphibious acceptance read the city and how they may connect to extant infrastructures (e.g., sewers, stormwater drains, and pavements) that are predicated on separating waters from the city. Curious and compelled by the openings generated by amphibious acceptance, the authors are ambivalent about what might become of it. It might revitalize technological fantasies of controlling water, or it could present an alternative modality of governing water in cities. The success of either strategy of course depends on how and whether social imaginaries might be remade to accommodate it.

In Mumbai, in Houston, and everywhere in between, the smooth, dry, hard surfaces promised by modernity are today relentlessly muddy; their promises of certainty are literally collapsing under our feet (Choudhary 2021; Krause 2017). Amid both the material and “political exhaustion” of urban design and planning, residents and experts in coastal cities recognize that their futures are built on sodden ground. Yet while amphibious acceptance increasingly permeates wet cities, their inhabitants continue to build their dreams on the hard surfaces of fossil-fueled petromodernity—with highways and high-rises, with seawalls and stormwater assemblages (Koslov 2016; Ranganathan 2015). Whether the affective orientations of amphibious acceptance succeed in producing a different register of hopes, expectations, and desires in and with muddy futures, however, remains to be seen.

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The important study by Dominic Boyer and Mark Vardy has particular relevance for the United States’ current political conjuncture—and crisis. The Biden administration rode to power thanks to the disastrous response of his predecessor to the pandemic and promises of significant—at least to their

popular base—measures to address the deepening and interconnected economic, political, cultural, and climatic crises racking the United States. In an apparent class reversal of the standard Democratic Party betrayal practices, the administration’s initial “Build Back Better” (BBB) bill made it look like something fundamental would change, in contrast to the reassurances Biden had made to his wealthy backers during the campaign. What Bernie Sanders heralded as “the most consequential piece of legislation for working families since the 1930s” broke with, in its initial preparations, neoliberal orthodoxy by including a significant expansion in public services that was linked to infrastructural projects to address climate change. Yet even before it got out of committee, the price tag—over 10 years—had been slashed from \$6 trillion to then \$3 trillion and then a paltry \$1.5 trillion. But a veto by a few Democrats, with no real countermeasures taken by the Biden administration or Democratic congressional leaders, has blocked passage of even a slimmed-down version of BBB. Efforts to secure voting rights met a similar demise.

One reading of Boyer and Vardy’s findings on the various “affective publics” produced by repeated catastrophic flooding—a form of what they call, drawing from Rob Nixon (2013), “slow violence”—in Houston makes BBB’s failure quite unsurprising. The low-income Greenspoint residents and even many in affluent Meyerland evinced what the authors call a “diluvial individualism.” This consciousness was expressed, particularly among the Black low-income residents interviewed by the authors, in their mistrust of government intervention because of the way it has detrimentally impacted African Americans. In addition, the researchers were unable to contact many of Greenspoint’s low-income Black and Latino “floodies” from Hurricane Harvey since they had fled the area. Although not articulated in the study, this latter response could be interpreted as another form of diluvial individualism—accommodationism, flight rather than fight. A further iteration of diluvial individualism, mostly in Meyerland, was expressed through bootstrap, individualized solutions such as house elevations in what appears as a desperate—and, from Boyer and Vardy’s perspective, delusional—attempt to hold on to community. Thus, this affective public, particularly the working-class component alienated from politics, or at least the institutionalized variety, was not a force capable of being mobilized to back BBB, although they would disproportionately be beneficiaries.

On the other side was the “hydraulic citizenship” tendency, represented by relatively affluent homeowners, many from the professional class and whose organizational expression was the Brays Bayou Association. This outfit, like others of their ilk tied to real estate, was obsessed with maintaining property values by backing traditional infrastructure projects in a futile—from Boyer and Vardy’s perspective—attempt to hold back, literally, the tide. Thus, this grouping would most likely be hostile to much of the BBB while warmly embracing the traditional, narrowly defined infrastructure bill that was passed and that reinforces the very structures that drive climate change, such as auto transport.