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ISSN: 1327-9556 | <https://textjournal.scholasticahq.com/>*University of New England***Jennifer Mae Hamilton***Modes of thermoregulation*Abstract:

This personal essay explores the partly autonomic, partly behavioural process of thermoregulation in relation to everyday life. Queer feminist and materialist life writing regularly examines how socio-economic systems and cultural norms relate to the desiring self. I build on this tradition by reflecting on how experiences of extreme heat and cold can influence thermoregulatory processes and seed new desires. Although the non-human meteorological elements of heat and cold feature in a narrative representation of a formative decade in my adult life (24–34), this piece does not adopt a strong post-human or eco-sexual stance. Rather it questions whether the messiness of human desire, combined with our animal need for thermoregulation, can collude with the variabilities of weather in queerly anti-imperialist forms of ecological embodiment. What takes this life writing beyond the human is the attempt to document the possibilities in the human-weather relation: the human potential outlined here cannot be separated from the aliveness of the body and the energetic force of the weather.

Biographical note:

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Keywords:

Desire, thermoregulation, weather, queerness, necessity

The coldest I've ever been in my life was in New York City. I went out because I'd over-identified with a mashup of fictional characters, and I was excited to be walking the streets alongside them. That day, I was at one of the city's big universities looking for a public talk by a fairly famous speaker. But I could neither find the building nor any evidence of a special event; I couldn't even enter any of the buildings without a swipe card. While lost and locked out, an unfamiliar and painful sensation took hold of my feet.

That year the snow was unseasonably late to the city and so it did not look so cold. It actually looked more like a temperate place. But the cold around me was of a different order: dry, invisible, and deep in the city's concrete core. Thin soled shoes and a fast fashion coat didn't touch the sides of the day. Ironically the traditional markers of very cold weather like ice and snow would have insulated me from the concrete, which had by that point absorbed over two months of winter. Instead, the concrete was free to radiate the whole season upwards into my body.

The pain travelled fast and got rapidly sharper, moving up through my skin and flesh, into the bones of my feet and up into my ankles. I'd never felt anything like this. I was running now from building to building, rattling locked doors. I tried to hold on to my plan. When the pain moved into my lower legs though, my non-fictional situation could no longer be ignored and I surrendered to my need to get away from the cold. The Starbucks door was unlocked and a friendly bell welcomed me in. I bought a cinnamon-toast flavoured latte for the privilege of time inside to warm up.

Concrete and weather are more than human things that differently shape human worlds and lives. Concrete provides paths for bodies to move down and walls to block other routes, and weather can catalyse how fast or slow we walk down the path, or whether the path is even walkable at all. That day the concrete was supposed to lead me to my desired destination and the cold weather it conducted physically stopped me. Concrete paths are designed for the flow of specific kinds of people and profit, poured by workers following the plans. Weather forecasts are provided by state authorities to help manage the flow of people and profits on these paths. Concrete and weather influence bodies on their way through the world, playing a role in shaping human desires too.

Though we might feel in charge, humans are always adjusting themselves in relation to concrete and weather. I'm curious about the body's agency (as both desiring and in need of thermoregulation) when navigating the paths offered by concrete and weather. It's a relationship we can only partially study in other ways. At a population level, data on hardship, illness and death in heatwaves, for example, documents people falling afoul of the path laid out for them; the concrete heats up too much and they don't have the resources needed to cool off (Kim, 1992). In urban environmental sciences, research shows how concrete and rain mix into a disgustingly toxic soup which impacts health (Arnold et. al., 1996). In economics, studies show that weather shapes consumer habits in big cities and how this is affected by climate change (Oh et. al., 2021). But to access the granular details of the body's ambivalent and diverse ways of weathering the world [1], we need different methods. Using memories of hot

and cold weather in the concrete city, can I write a partial but viable answer to the questions: how does my need for thermoregulation relate to my desires? And how do these internal forces intersect with the external ones of concrete and weather?

Though it is necessary for survival, thermoregulation is a bit weird. It's both autonomic and behavioural; like desire, it is an interplay of the biological and the social. As with desire, it also relates to our emotions. Every body processes heat, cold and desire slightly differently and our embodied experience is shaped by feedback from a number of different angles. Those like me, inclined toward ecological critique have lately tended to emphasise the agency of non-human things like concrete and weather. We do this to counteract anthropocentrism. But I feel like a gut-driven and mundane understanding of embodied human agency has an ecological role here, if we are able to open to its vulnerable animal presence.

Having only lived in temperate places, that cold February was the first time I felt physically unsafe because of the weather. I felt unsafe because I was exposed but also because I had neither community nor money to really get out of the situation and, even back then, America felt scary and unaccommodating at those kinds of edges. In a temperate place you can get a fairly long way with a beanie, on one hand, and a pedestal fan, on the other. I had accumulated lots of little trinkets that could more or less support my year round thermal comfort in Sydney, but even before the cold day I was already on a financial edge. My trip was funded by my cousin who had recently become a lawyer. After interning over the summer she had been exposed to more money than she'd "ever seen in [her] entire life" and she lived in a city north of New York and sent me a generous cheque in the mail to pay her a visit. I was grateful and excited to be able to stop in this iconic place on the way and live a fantasy beyond my means as well. But I did not have extra budget for the cold. The city suddenly only felt safe and accommodating for certain people. The city is really designed to be safe and accommodating for certain people. On that day I had to figure a way to walk out of the situation in the same shoes that got me into it.

Surviving temperature extremes in the city either requires money, or a strange kind of physical and emotional training. Eileen Myles' version of *Inferno* features New York City as hell. They were initially repelled by the city's heat, but in time came to love its intensity and unbearableness:

I hated how the early fall weather was in New York. You just didn't have a chance. The buildings were really close and the sun was hot and it was humid in a way that simply made you feel filthy, no matter how clean you were. Years later I learned to love this weather. 'Cause you'd go down into the subway and you'd think you were in hell. For some reason I liked that. Though it took years, I think you just need more experience to understand hell as something possibly good. For instance, living in New Mexico for a summer made me understand dry heat and so did sitting in a sauna, which I actually did quite frequently a few years later. Once there was a distinction between dry heat and humidity you could know where you were. In New York you'd look at the lady in

the Laundromat. You'd go, hot. And she'd shoot back, humid. But right now I was twenty-four and had never felt anything like this. (2010, p. 71)

Thermoregulating with the weather patterns of a city is a process that takes time. Myles' coming of age as a poet involves assimilating to the heat of the city over a number of years. Though they do not say so explicitly, the heat here is intensified by the concrete: the stairs down to the subway, the strange hot drafts or gale force winds created by networks of tunnels. I love this and I love them and I get it: being queer in the city is about collaborating with its perversities. But I also wonder: is this the circle of hell in which we still belong?

I remember being the exact same age in the heat of the Sydney and wanting to be part of the city so much for reasons, like Myles', that relate to the desire for self-realisation. With its scale and the abundance of people and ideas, the city gave me the feeling of opportunity and possibility. To do this though, I also had to begin training myself to love Sydney's version of hell heat: I too believed if I surrendered to the intensity I would find my path, even without aspiring to have much money.

I have three stories about this process. Three memories of extreme heat over ten years. Together they tell a story of my process of finding a way to thermoregulate in the city, and then the reasons for one day changing direction. No doubt my age plays a role: I age ten years in a few paragraphs and what I'm doing in the heat changes with that. And also climate change is involved: these memories register a real sense of heat's intensification. But desire and thermoregulation are key too: sensing the heat, feeling how it feels and finding ways to shape the kind of tender and vulnerable relationship I'd like with it. There's always lots that can be said about desire, but Andrea Long Chu put words to my own belief: "nothing good comes of forcing desire to conform to political principle. You could sooner give a cat a bath ... Desire is, by nature, childlike and chary of government. The day we begin to qualify it by the righteousness of its political content is the day we begin to prescribe some desires and prohibit others" (2018). Desire is what it is. We have to work with what comes up. Maybe a thermoregulatory need is, like desire, a kind of ungovernable and surprising form of truth that springs up in relation to the variability of the weather.

The first memory is a New Year's heatwave: a party at Lanfranchi's Memorial Discotheque to welcome in 2006 and the fallout of the following day. Which is before the acute cold-feet episode in New York. The second about swimming in Redleaf pool on Sydney Harbour about five years later. And the third is cycling home from work in 2017.

Lanfranchi's was an artist warehouse in Chippendale named after Warren Lanfranchi, a drug dealer that was assassinated by a corrupt cop in the laneway nearby [2]. It was a space where art and life merged on the edges of the city's legislative frameworks. It was a spatial realisation of the true promise of the creative city: people had space to actually do what they wanted and do it in ways they wanted it. The accountability was to the community rather than a funding institution. I felt what everyone was doing by living in that space was the right thing to be doing. I felt energised by the community's atmosphere of freedom. That night we had silly fun in the

heat (literal and metaphorical) dancing, drinking, taking drugs, watching performances and welcoming the new year. I can still feel the heat and music and see the people and colourful lights.

That New Year's Day was the hottest on record: a high of 44 degrees. I walked for 30 mins with my flatmate across exposed concrete path to see a midday screening of *King Kong*. We did this to spend as long as possible in the cool theatre only to learn, after we'd bought our snacks and tickets, that the air conditioner was broken. We must have been too tired to insist on a refund. It was so disgusting on so many levels: the diverse substances moving through our bodies, the popcorn-infused stuffiness of the cinema, my crush on my flatmate, the film's staggering duration and the different qualities and intensities of heat both indoors and outdoors. Instead of checking in with how gross I must have felt, I romanticised how the dark intensity of the night flowed into the brightness of the day after. I must have convinced myself that freedom ultimately meant feeling dank. I felt alive.

Half a decade later, Sydney suddenly seemed to stop even cooling off in the night time. The first time this happened felt like a party. We'd been eating and drinking. It was a Saturday nearing midnight and still really hot. The night did not call for a jacket or walk home to rest, it called for continuing play and maybe even more swimming. By this time of the day, it was supposed to be bedtime. While by this time in life, we were at varying stages of becoming inner-city creative professionals – writers, journalists, academics and artists – and some of us could afford taxis to a harbour pool to strip down to our underwear and dive in. So we just did it and it felt good. Jumping from the pontoons, swimming through the slightly thick-slick harbour water, drinking just enough to stay loose. A lot of people had the same idea. I remember loving my body and the city and the heat. I felt hot in both senses of the word and it was so cooling and felt so cool to be living in the city like this. The city seemed like the best place on earth. I felt alive.

The third story is different. Yet another heatwave another half-decade later. This is story of an older body, becoming less willing and less able to assimilate with the city's aggressive heat. By this point I'd committed to a life commuting from home to childcare to work and back in a non-electric bike-and-trailer combo over a series of substantial hills and dales. Cycling built on my earlier heat training, but shifting my pleasure seeking from partying to cycling (though the two do overlap). With a solid fifteen years of learning to tolerate the city's heat under my belt, summer cycling was a good thing. But by this time it was not just about pleasure and poetry, it was also about health: healthy for me, healthy for my baby, healthy for our family, healthy for the city and healthy for the planet. Cycling seemed like an accumulation of wins and not just for health, but for fun. Cycling felt then a bit punk. I met partners and friends cycling. I could easily break the law. I did overnight bike rides around the city and bike protests. I cycled everywhere. I started a performance company called Bicycle User Group. I thanked my bike in my PhD acknowledgements. But it was a 38-degree day and instead of romanticising this intensity, on this day I sensed a shift: this doesn't feel good anymore. I felt like dying.

Stopped at traffic lights in a non-leafy part of Marrickville, the sun was low but still shining hot and the concrete world around me was soaked with the day's heat. I longed to be home with my partner, our toddler and housemates. But though it was only a couple of kilometres away could feel the distance and see the situation I was in for the first time: I was using my little body's slow and gentle energy to try to counter the flow of the whole hard and fast situation (to lower carbon emissions, contribute to making the city the kind of place I wanted to live, to resist capitalism, to slow this ship down and yet also keep up with the pace and unbreakable rules and demands of my child, childcare provider, employer and body on my bike). By this time Sydney had made bike fines equivalent to car fines and running red lights would cost \$500. Just as developers closed Lanfranchi's, the freedom of skirting the edges by bike had shut down too.

In the red light, wet heat, bushfire smoke, exhaust smog of peak hour traffic, I felt a strong sense of resentment. I think it's bad when resentment is related to a *second* thought. By this I mean ideally you have some steps between feeling fine and feeling resentful. But maybe resentment can only come up when you don't pause to notice all those low key in-between feelings and adjust your behaviour accordingly. For example, tiredness would be an obvious feeling in-between. And another less obvious one could be envy: I could be tired because cycling is hard and feel envy for all the people in cars that are not tired and suffering on a bike. In envy, according to Antonia Pont, "we want some Thing that someone else has ... [especially] when that someone else is 'someone like us'" (Pont, 2019). Envy is logical because the city is made for cars so of course I must really want a car. Though envy has a negative reputation as one of the deadly sins, envy can be useful because it can be a catalyst. You could feel envy and be like: oh wow, I don't need to envy the people in cars, I can just get a car and become the enviable person in a car! For sure at least some of those people in the cars on that day were like me: thirty-something professionals, working on casual contracts, renting and parenting. I'm just in denial that bike life is pleasurable, right?

No. It was resentment, not envy. Though I skipped over some in-between feelings, I did not envy what they had (a car, the associated expense, to be sitting in traffic for hours a day for the privilege of living and working in the city). But when exposed to the heat of the too-hot too-long day, amidst the baked concrete, smoke and exhaust fumes, the distinction is important because it contains more information than appears on the surface. As much as I wanted to be part of the city, I did not want to be part of the city as it was. I did not envy the people who had fully assimilated to the city as it was. I loved being able to take the back roads and side paths, coast down hills, be outside the mainstream of traffic and people and move my body and getting hot and sweaty and soaking wet and feeling the world. Biking had been like midnight dancing at Lanfranchi's and midnight swimming on the harbour pool pontoons, but with a different kind of endogenous endorphins. But biking in the 9 to 5 lane was objectively less magical.

Resentment is a really big feeling though. It is a real clue that you are over-leveraged and accommodating something beyond your capacity. It is "a feeling of anger because you have been forced to accept something that *you do not like*" (Cambridge Dictionary). This definition resonates because I genuinely did not want to be in a car and I genuinely did want to be outside,

but that day I literally did not want to have to come close to accepting the intensity of the city's heat. I was resentful of it. Why was the sun burning so bright and so hot? I'm trying so hard to cycle both for the city's future and against the city's present and for some idea of the life I want to live and today's sun is really disrupting this noble plan. Of course it is not the sun's fault. It is never the sun's fault. In respecting the sun, you'd take shelter and just stop for a bit. It was the city. The flow. The speed enabled by concrete, bitumen and fossil fuels. My sense of momentum and how my own ambitions needed to assimilate with the pace of all this, and more so because I didn't have enough money to be this idealistic. My little legs couldn't keep up anymore: don't do this, they were saying, we can't do this anymore, it's not right. I didn't have any other ideas for what to actually do though.

The day after my resentful episode I recorded relief in my blog:

Today was cooler, much cooler, than yesterday. It might have been 25, yesterday was 38. I was riding up a hill and I was riding in 2nd/6th gears. On a really hot day I'm in 1st/1st. Today it was easier riding in 2nd/6th than it is riding 1st/1st on a really hot day. Today I got rain soaked down to my undies. Yesterday I sweated inside out from my undies and my whole shirt was soaked. Today I couldn't actually make it over [a] puddle below because Jacaranda leaves were clogging it. Yesterday the heat radiated up from the bitumen and fell down from the sky. It's so full on. Weather inside out. Weather outside in. Weather up. Weather down. Either way I'm surrounded by a changing sensory space, one that I have to push through, one pedal after another, to get to work on time. (Hamilton, 2017)

These details would have been invisible had I driven from garage to garage in a climate-controlled car. The felt sense of the weather in the body reveals the energy needed, at a scale of several million (even billion) times more than what any one body is physically capable of generating alone, to hold the weather back. The feeling of having no choice but to ignore the embodied need for thermoregulation and to push through and keep pace with the city was the ultimate catalyst of my resentment.

What if there is some choice and agency here? There is a truth to what you feel when dancing, swimming and cycling at the city's edge that sits at odds with the city's ability to thrive in almost all weathers. The city partially masks weather variation with fossil fuel energy (petrol, coal-fired and gas electricity), infrastructure (stormwater drains; road and mass transit systems; snow ploughs and salt sheds) and related technologies (cars, air-conditioning, heating, concrete); it is an actual miracle what you can do in the city *in spite of* the weather. But what's equal parts awesome and distressing is that in dancing in a warehouse, swimming at midnight and riding a bike you can inhabit a place designed to accelerate into all kinds of weathers while also feeling that weather at the same time. These practices reveal the nature of the relationship between cities and weather and encourage you to see it, feel it and consider how to respond. An energetic body seeking pleasure on hot nights by dancing and swimming or being tired and unable to thermoregulate well on a bike anymore is a kind of resistance; they are all little expressions of a desire to explore modes of feeling beyond the dominant logic of the concrete city.

Myles' identification of the possibilities that come from surrendering to the intensity of the extreme weather city serves us well to a point, but is there more to the path than this? Or if not *more* to the path in this quantitative sense, just a path of a different quality. Could I, like Charon the ferryman of Dante's *Inferno*, guide the damned across the river into another circle of hell [3]? Even if no one came aboard with me, I could at least see what happens if I take the ride myself. Though what is on the other shore is uncertain, in leaving the hell heat circle of concrete, I can start to find home in a different part of the underworld: "I come to lead you to the other shore, / into eternal darkness – fire and ice" (Alighieri 2003, p. 27).

I was surprised that the song "Empire State of Mind", made famous by Alicia Keys and Jay-Z, contains an ambivalent message about New York. It sounds like a full-on devotional hymn to the city. And if the music does to you what it does to me, you might get excited feelings when imagining how awesome life would be there. You might even feel a strong desire to take a trip and start looking up flights on your phone while dancing and singing. But the lyrics actually tell quite a different story: it is a simultaneous bait and switch. The songwriters are unsure about their life in the city. They report writing it while away from the city and feeling homesick, but they also recall being a bit surprised by their levels of homesickness too because they were constantly complaining about how much they hated living there (Concepcion, 2010). Ambivalence, if not resentment, about life in the city is the heart of this song.

The music builds dramatically in the chorus in ways that align with the notion that an anthem is a homage supporting a cause, but the grammar of the second line and the double negative of the third unsettles its meaning.

In New York
Concrete jungle where dreams are made of
There's nothing you can't do
Now you're in New York. (Hunte and Sewell-Ulepic, 2009)

The lyricists want to pay homage to the city they love and miss, but also they kinda don't. Instead they declare it is a "Concrete jungle where dreams are made of". The concrete jungle clearly refers to New York and that is *where* they are making their dreams, but how do the dreams relate to the concrete jungle? Are they making their dreams of the concrete jungle or is the concrete jungle made of their dreams? The end of the third line gives more information about the dreams: the cliché that if you can "make it here you can make it anywhere" is turned into a vague double negative, "there's nothing you can't do". Which possibly means you can do anything you want if you have enough money, but you probably can't if you don't; don't even get me started on the cascading bleakness of final verse. The point is the music feels like freedom but the lyrics suggest it is a kind of freedom that is also a trap. Either way, realising dreams in a "concrete jungle" at least requires an "empire state of mind", and identification with concrete streets for inspiration.

What does noticing the difference between concrete's and the body's relation to weather add to this story? While softer things like grassland, forests and bodies are of course affected by the weather and responsive to it, concrete has a very high thermal mass. It physically holds onto the weather and become so acutely hot or cold a human might die from exposure if we daydream on the street for too long. What about desires for soft shelter in a hard context? What about a body's own thermoregulatory limits? What about the need for rest? What about dreams made of other materials, places and elements? Some are dreams are not imperial; some dreams don't need you to do anything.

Saying this doesn't mean I want to throw the whole of the city in the bin. The hot circle of Hell that Myles lived in is the same one that made queer liberation possible. In "Sex in Public", Lauren Berlant and Michael Werner describe how the city allowed for queer desires to become visible, legible and even, in certain places, dominant: "after a certain point, a quantitative change becomes a qualitative change. A critical mass develops. The street becomes queer. It develops a dense, publicly accessible sexual culture ... no group is more dependent on this kind of pattern in urban space than queers. If we could not concentrate a publicly accessible culture somewhere, we would always be outnumbered and overwhelmed" (1998, p. 652–653). Encouraged by the concrete to stand together, a group can change the meaning and maybe even purpose of the street. A street can become queer. It is important when trying to incorporate the intensities of weather into thinking about the climate changing city that we remember this too. The streets produce a literal concrete poetry. Concrete literally made the critical mass possible which made us possible; but unlike the relational diversity of queerness itself, there are some limits to concrete's possibilities.

Eve Sedgwick draws an analogy between two kinds of weather and two kinds of desire via a metaphor of how water circulates in a decorative fountain. (I think of it as made of concrete, though it's probably stone). She takes the image from Proust's *The Guermantes Way*. The fountain is like a diorama for the water cycle: it circulates over and over again (rinse and repeat). She first observes the fountain as simply "a machine for animating and recirculating water". But Proust represents a gust of wind that blows water out of the fountain and completely soaking a nearby lady "as if she had been plunged in a bath". This allows Sedgwick to make a related point that "somethings that come around don't go around, and vice versa" (2011, p. 3). In other words, even the strongest of rules and regulations that aim to reproduce the social order cannot fully contain the power of forces like desire and weather. It will find a way to break free.

Perhaps the truth of desire and the need for thermoregulation is at the heart of why we seek freedom. No matter how much desire and weather are shaped by concrete, when a body's need in relation to one or the other is not met it will call you up. Hello! // Hi. // Look at you! // At me? // Yes you. You look a bit hot today. // Is that a compliment? /// ... what do you think?

I think this: the vulnerable body's living limits are gifts better received alive. Though it took years, I just needed more experience to recognise this as something possibly good. At first accepting that the body is a fragile animal feels like actual hell. But once you're able to open to it hell itself becomes something that is possibly good. That the body is a bit weak and also a bit strong is all that is and though I am the same person, under to the same sky, the path seems different now. The shift continues on days that are extremely hot and extremely cold and any kind of day really. The world is constantly rolling down its windows and asking if I need a ride and sometimes I take it, but othertimes I decline by smiling and crossing the road. We can thermoregulate differently on a stranger and softer path. I've never felt anything like it.

Notes

[1] This piece spins off a much larger and more general and collectively oriented body of work on "weathering" as feminist theory and practice for climate change. See for example Neimanis, A and J.M. Hamilton. (2018). "weathering" *feminist review* 18: 80-84.

[2] This is an egregious tale of police brutality and corruption. It was turned into the miniseries directed by Michael Jenkins (1995) called *Blue Murder*. A documentary of the final days of the eponymous warehouse space was made by Richard Baron (2010) *Lanfranchi's Memorial Discotheque*. The latter can be streamed for free on YouTube.

[3] In Canto 3 of Dante's *Inferno* the poet meets Charon, a ferryman who transports damned souls across the river into hell; the ride comes at a cost, but it enables the poet's journey to continue.

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