

Frozen Meaning Made More: Ohan Breiding's Archive Fever

Jeanne Vaccaro

For the time being, perhaps, give up this old obsession with discovering what lies at the bottom of natures. There would be something great and noble about initiating such a movement, referring not to Humanity but to the exultant divergence of humanities. Thought of self and thought of other here become obsolete in their duality.

—Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*

Explain nihilism to me, says the ice cube. Everything melts, says the ice cube tray.

—Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore, *The Freezer Door*

Our eyes come into focus to the whirring motor of a mission in process. A scope makes its way through earth's plumbing. *Belly of a Glacier* opens with a tick-tick-ticking that makes audible the persistent murmur of the Anthropocene's affect. The mechanical rhythmic hum of a clock—urgent and sluggish, melodic and ordered, eruptive and entitled—wrestles the erratic mood of the epoch characterized by the human. As I roam the chaotic emotional landscape of mass extinction, I sometimes wonder if this is how dinosaurs felt. Nobody ever laughs. The irritatingly intuitive self-help adage, *the only way out is through*, portends a terrifying

conclusion. Language struggles to soothe the turbulence. All the usual coping mechanisms stall out. Cognitive dissonance isn't fuel-efficient in this economy.

In *Belly of a Glacier*, Ohan Breiding summons the affect of geologic time, proposing that the geologic record yields all matter of information in excess of science. Ice, the artist tells us, is “the oldest archive,” referencing an overwhelming temporal and spatial scale: “800,000 years of sky” stacked with “the youngest at the top and the oldest at the bottom.” An archive of earth is necessarily an index of the trauma of climate catastrophe. In video, photography, and sculpture, the artist establishes a visual landscape to both observe and feel how planetary and human history is measured. In that process, they disrupt measurement's place in the hierarchy of knowledge. Tiptoeing through climate malaise, drawing on opacity and obfuscation, Breiding asks: What stories does ice tell? What is already lost? And what is contained in storage units awaiting our attention and interpretation?

Ice is communicative. Glacial melt, colonial routings, species evolution and extinction, global exploitation of plants and animals, the trafficking of human flesh. What is stored in ice (and water) is evidence of history we still need to learn to understand the shapes of and that Breiding's *Belly of a Glacier* encourages us to develop more nuanced tools and methods to apprehend. The artist's research at the National Science Foundation Ice Core, operated by the U.S. Geological Survey in Lakewood, Colorado, documents the artifice and fragility of the archive and its management. Ancient ice is stored in Jetson-esque metal containers, silver tubes that, to an overactive imagination, look like elongated bullets for a Cold War space race. Housed behind a door that reads “Exam Room,” we recall that modern archive principally functions as an

apparatus of bodily capture. Scientists are called “curators,” from the Latin to care, manage, or guard. To enter the field of knowledge only the ice carries, these caretakers (or the curators) make holes and cuts, slicing into the icy-hard surface as if it is meat at the butcher or a tree that, when splayed open, reveals the age and conditions of the forest. Some crystalline shards are inevitably lost in every cut, making each precious encounter with this artificially preserved natural resource a risky endeavor.

Ice, which can easily go from solid to liquid, literalizes the fragility of archival capture. The reverse move, from liquid to solid, is only possible under certain conditions or with the aid of assistive technology. *Belly of a Glacier* brings into crisis the familiar binaries of liquid and solid, human and machine, living and inanimate. In photographs taken with a petrographic lens, Breiding seems to halt—if only temporarily—time, capturing the shimmery dust of an atmosphere trapped—suspended really—for some 70,000 years and counting. The ice archive presents a conceptual and material challenge to the collection and preservation of records, making evident archival fantasies of permanence, duration, and stability. If the ice melts, can it become a liquid archive? Is there utility to be gained, for history, science, or cultural memory, in a dataset spilled on the floor?

Archives by their nature are incomplete, too late, always catching up. More than anything, as French philosopher Jacques Derrida theorizes in the seminal text *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, archives are containers of their own impossibility. From the Greek *arkhē* or government, the usual terrain of the archive is as a storage house for government records of birth, death, marriage, incarceration, and property. The archive’s etymology immediately emphasizes

its role in safeguarding power in the documentation and transmission of official histories. In that same moment, then, emerges the felt knowledge that the official record is precarious, available to be contested, resisted, and rewritten. For Derrida, the archive is foremost suggestive of memory's inability to hold its own record, its impermanence and also its desire to be touched, held, known. When considered through the lens of memory's instability, the archive is pried wide open. This is when archive fever has a temperature problem.

In attempting to hold the temperature stable, the ice archive necessarily contends with its constitutive instability and looming threat of extinction. Breiding's observation that "machinery keeps it alive" through "routines of constant care" asserts the need for nontraditional systems of embodied knowledge and record keeping. This is the work of the counterarchive. Queer affect theorist Ann Cvetkovich populates the counterarchive with terms such as *ephemerality*. Hers is an explicitly political strategy to conceptualize what she calls "an archive of feeling," a method to catch but not capture the intensities and energies of social and historical life. For Cvetkovich, queer archives "are composed of material practices that challenge traditional conceptions of history and understand the quest for history as a psychic need rather than a science." What sensory methods, tactile techniques, or felt modes can be called upon to not merely know, but also to feel, the passage of time and thus to propel new visions of future time? In their polyspecies collaboration with earth's elusive derma, Breiding surfaces ice for its potential to go deep.

We cannot think ice without thinking water; much like Sycamore Bernstein's pairing of the ice cube and ice cube tray, this structuring dialectic gives meaning in plurals. In "Water, A Queer

Archive of Feeling,” cultural theorist Astrida Neimanis builds on Cvetkovich’s queer/feminist intervention into the trauma archive to theorize water’s bodied energy, following the flows of its surface and depth to theorize the temporality of intergenerational trauma and the affect of climate crisis. In water she finds a nonlinear communicative register to name collective memory and belonging. Memory is often compared to water, a promiscuous traveler, corralling thoughts and impressions from multiple eras. For psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud, water symbolized the collective unconscious, a dreamlike state that saturates our wake and sleep, holding us afloat as if in umbilical fluid. Freud famously described the unconscious through the language of archeology, referencing the work of the dig and the layers of subterranean substructure that give frame to the mind and body. The inevitable drive of human destruction, be it through warfare (as preoccupied Freud in *Civilization and Its Discontents*) or climate crisis, becomes for Neimanis a prompt to consider the dissolution, disappearance, and differential mattering of human life. She offers this provocation: “If water is an archive of feeling, it is also an archive of forgetting. Not all that is significant leaves a durable trace, nor should everything be remembered. Inscription is sometimes resisted.”

The title *Belly of a Glacier* suggests, as do Breiding’s visual propositions, the vital work of evasion as a political and aesthetic strategy. The belly of the animal is the vulnerable flesh, and with that comes a protective stance, a turning away from exposure. Theorist Édouard Glissant termed this gesture *opacity*. The context in which opacity comes to matter is the dominant mode of assimilation, the social and identitarian forces that seek to reduce, normalize, contain, and make similar categories of difference. Transparency is an effort to reduce one to the knowable, a push to visibility that makes the subject available for destruction. Riffing on opacity, Marquis

Bey writes in *Black Trans Feminism* that “Opacities shift and move depending on how various identities get positioned in a given context and also, perhaps more importantly, how identities get deployed in order to create opaque pockets that may become impenetrable to power.” Resisting transparency, solidity, and permanence, ice operates as one such “pocket,” or belly, that provides refuge.

Under the precarious conditions of the ice archive, in which there is immediate threat of disappearance, Breiding notes the caretaker performs an operation, “chisels a new landscape with scars.” This begs the question, is ice a kind of flesh? In *Sensual Excess: Queer Femininity and Brown Jouissance*, scholar Amber Jamilla Musser theorizes the “sensual excesses” of opacity. For Musser, the disruptive stance of opacity returns an ethics to the encounter of visual exchange. She conceives of “ethical opacity” as “forming the basis of ethical relations,” because it carries the “possibility of existing with difference without mandating transparency.” If “mandating transparency” sounds coercive, it is, functioning as a demand to be legible and held within the confines of stable meaning. This pressure is disproportionately demanded of minoritarian subjects for whom freedom of movement, identity, and meaning is not afforded. Opacity functions like a logjam against the regime of visibility and the fetishizing eye of the camera—or the scopophilic pleasure in looking that feminist film critic Laura Mulvey theorized in her 1975 field-defining text, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.”

In *Belly of the Glacier*, there is not simply a reversal of the gaze but a clouding of it, and then a bright burst of clarity, a rhythmic play on the atmosphere of looking. The camera often transitions the viewer between states, opening onto holographic color fields and light exposures

that saturate the eye with a disorientation that brings us someplace new. Archives tell us something not just about the past but also about what we hope we might leave behind, and what we can possibly bring into tomorrow. As Neimanis puts it, “We want that impossible future reader to tell us, and with both longing and regret, we want our archive in fact to insist that in this way, at least, we still are.”