



Susi K. Frank, Kjetil Jakobsen, eds. *Arctic Archives: Ice, Memory and Entropy*. Culture & Theory Series. Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2019. 350 pp. \$45.00, paper, ISBN 978-3-8376-4656-6.

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Arctic Archives is an impressive and wide-ranging collection of scholarly essays that examine the meaning and efficacy of using “ice” as a memory medium to study the polar regions and particularly the Arctic. Co-editors Susi K. Frank and Kjetil A. Jakobsen contend that polar ice and permafrost has preserved not only the geological and climatic history of Earth, including the histories of past and present life forms, but also the history of the human condition itself. Moreover, the editors suggest that ice and the natural archives of the Arctic offer a window into the history of modernity and the typical human attitude toward control and transformation of nature. As a result, the discourses and imagery of polar conquest that typify modernity ground both the content and analysis at the core of this original and insightful volume.

Several chapters in the collection originated from papers first delivered at a conference titled “Archives of the Arctic: Ice, Memory and Entropy,” which took place at the Humboldt University of Berlin in November 2013. The volume’s editors, who co-organized the conference, welcomed contributions from scholars working in such diverse fields as art, literature, geology, and computer science. “Taking the concept of the anthropocene seriously, is to acknowledge that conventional distinctions between the arts and sciences no longer

apply,” write Frank and Jakobsen in the introduction. “The antropocene is,” they continue, “an epochal concept designating the commencement of significant human impact on the Earth’s geology and ecosystems” (p. 15).

The volume has three equal sections, each with chapters exploring a key concept under the overarching theme of Arctic and archival studies. Section 1 defines and examines the concept of the “natural archive” in contrast to cultural archives and related forms of both written and digital record keeping and memory preservation/shaping. Georg Toepfer traces the etymology of the term “archive” across several disciplines, noting that “the archives of the earth had to be *deciphered* and *interpreted*” (p. 26). In the context of the Arctic, polar ice contains objects (life forms, fossils, rocks) that provide knowledge about the past and now extinct creatures. But Arctic ice is more than a “burial ground,” notes Toepfer, who suggests that natural archives act similarly to cultural archives by preserving raw data about the past (p. 29). Ulrike Spring and Johan Schimanski pick up on this theme, arguing that Arctic nature and particularly polar bears function as a symbol of world heritage that must be protected against the existential threat of technology. “To conserve the Arctic is to treat it as a museum or an archive, both as a repository of a past state and a storage of memory and

information,” they explain, “but the Arctic archive is a fragile one” (p. 51). Framing their analysis in relation to the rhetoric of climate change, the co-authors astutely note the dual-function of polar ice both as a record of the past in frozen form and as an instrument of knowledge for shaping the future. Indeed, as Sven Spieker points out in his contribution, the term “archive” (in general but also in relation to Arctic ice) resists a single model or precise definition.

Section 2 pivots from the theoretical discussion of the concept of the natural archive to an in-depth examination of that very same archive in practice. Rather than define and debate what exactly is a natural archive, the chapters in the volume’s second section are case studies of human interactions with the Arctic as an archive. Each contribution is theoretical nonetheless. As Knut Ebeling and Harald Østgaard Lund explain in their chapter, “the conditions of the visibility of the arctic lie not only in the arctic itself, in its geographic, cartographic or scientific situation—but also in its publication, which undoubtedly produce a certain visibility” (p. 136). Characterizing the visual archive of the Arctic as an active (rather than passive) agent, the co-authors stress the so-called two-sidedness of the Arctic archive—“to be simultaneously authentic *and* medially reproduced, to be always already medially mediated and real at the same time” (p. 141).

The third and final section investigates ice as a memory medium, offering additional case studies that are representative of the wide and diverse human experience of various Arctic histories and recent/ongoing issues. Contributing further to the volume’s subtle focus on gender in polar studies, Lisa E. Bloom’s chapter uses the contemporary works of Swedish artist Lina Selander and US artist Amy Balkin to highlight feminist and environmentalist art in the context of “critical climate change” scholarship (p. 270). Using ice as a prism to view, read, and interpret natural and human history is an old approach with deep, cross-disciplinary

roots. To the editor’s credit, though, neither they nor the contributing authors lay claim or ownership to the theoretical concept that provides the foundation for the analytical discussion at the core of this volume.

Notwithstanding the engaging and insightful attention paid to the theoretical concept of the “Arctic archive,” the volume offers a balanced mix of scholarship. Anka Ryall’s fascinating chapter documents her findings in an archive housed at the Norwegian Polar Institute, where she studied women connected with the Norwegian state-sponsored Svalbard expeditions that began in 1909, the Norwegian Svalbard and Arctic Ocean Survey that occurred between 1928 and 1948, and the affairs of the Polar Institute itself after 1948. Although the archives illustrate the “peripheral or auxiliary position of women” connected with the institution and polar activities more generally, Ryall traces such notable “pioneers” as botanist Hanna Resvoll-Dieset (1873-1943), the first woman scientist to conduct fieldwork in Svalbard in the early twentieth century, as well as lesser-known women like Wanny Woldstad (1895-1959), the wife of a trapper who wintered in Svalbard and northwest Greenland during the 1930s and 1940s (p. 178).

Other chapters in the volume derive from original research conducted in the Arctic as well. Peter Hemmersam and Janike K. Larsen document their September 2013 travels to Murmansk and the Kola Peninsula in northwest Russia, where a research group from the Oslo School of Architecture and Design explored “modes of journeying and collaborative landscape reading—mapping natural, transformed and built-up landscapes while moving through them” (p. 70). They approached geology from a multidisciplinary perspective, observing and studying water, vegetation, rock, soil, and various other materials through the lens of social science, literary and media studies, urban studies, and related disciplines.

Although some chapters recount and discuss the firsthand experiences of researchers who trav-

eled north to study the “Arctic archives” in person, the volume lacks the perspective of northern residents and peoples who live above the Arctic Circle and call parts of this vast region of the world their home. In a similar vein, this highly theoretical volume is suited almost exclusively to an academic audience and will appeal less to general readers with an interest in precisely what is the natural archives of the Arctic and how might those archives be mined for historical, scientific, and sociocultural studies alike. Nevertheless, boasting an impressive collection of literary scholars, theorists, and scientists from several disciplinary backgrounds, this thoroughly researched and engagingly written volume provides an excellent foundation for future work on an intriguing and worthwhile subject.

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