

Introduction

Archives are powerful. On this, at least, historians agree. But when it comes to *why* they are so powerful and *how* that power should be used, a great deal is up for debate. Some see the archive as the bedrock of empirical work; if not objective, the archive is as close as we can get to a shared source base from which to tell authoritative histories. To others, the archive's power is wielded by those who assemble and oversee it—sometimes, against those whose names and lives appear within its boxes. Archives are fetishized and feared, at times by the same people; their boundaries can be policed with vigor or rendered porous through critique. But at the end of the day, they are powerful—and that is what keeps people coming back year after year, attempting to draw out their secrets or tear down their walls. It is almost harder to imagine history without the archive than to imagine a world without history.

This is one way of framing the dilemma of the archive; another would be to acknowledge the many senses in which researchers might be “in” the archive. Some—especially those researching histories of racial violence, dispossession, and displacement—often confront *themselves* in the boxes they call up, an experience that brings the dilemma of the archive to a fine point. How can scholarly norms of objectivity and distance be maintained when one's own history and identity are part of the materials out of which history is supposed to

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be made? And how can the lessons and methods produced in these moments transform the kinds of histories scholars are encouraged to produce?

Each essay that follows presents a dilemma of its own, offering reflections on what it means to wrestle with these issues alongside the need for new methodological and narrative approaches to overcome them. They evoke and even provoke the boundaries around “history” and “evidence,” exploring what Katherine McKittrick calls the “fictive perimeters” of science and its norms—as well as the power to breach them.¹ They grapple with the history of science’s incurable absences, haunting presences, and gaping wounds, making visible the affective labor necessary to document the unwritten and capture the unsaid. They remind us that history is never objective, much less an objective science, but is also (always) an instrument, a tool for getting along in the world. Whether that tool is wielded for domination and erasure or imagination and reparation is a political question—as, indeed, all matters of evidence, objectivity, and knowledge must be.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank Joanna Radin and Deborah Coen for inspiring and encouraging our collaboration in this issue.

1. Katherine McKittrick, *Dear Science and Other Stories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), 186.