

## Dream House as Prologue

In her essay "Venus in Two Acts," on the dearth of contemporaneous African accounts of slavery, Saidiya Hartman talks about the "violence of the archive." This concept—also called "archival silence"—illustrates a difficult truth: sometimes stories are destroyed, and sometimes they are never uttered in the first place; either way something very large is irrevocably missing from our collective histories.

The word *archive*, Jacques Derrida tells us, comes from the ancient Greek ἀρχεῖον: *arkheion*, "the house of the ruler." When I first learned about this etymology, I was taken with the use of *house* (a lover of haunted house stories, I'm a sucker for architecture metaphors), but it is the power, the authority, that is the most telling element. What is placed in or left out of the archive is a political act, dictated by the archivist and the political context in which she lives. This is true whether it's a parent deciding what's worth recording of a child's early life or—like Europe and its *Stolpersteine*, its "stumbling blocks"—a continent publicly reckoning with its past. *Here is where Sebastian took his first fat-footed baby steps; here is the house where Judith was living when we took her to her death.*

Sometimes the proof is never committed to the archive—it is not considered important enough to record, or if it is, not important enough to preserve. Sometimes there is a deliberate act of destruction: consider the more explicit letters between Eleanor Roosevelt and Lorena Hickok, burned by Hickok for their lack of discretion. Almost certainly erotic and gay as hell, especially considering what wasn't burned. ("I'm getting so hungry to see you.")<sup>1</sup>

The late queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz pointed out that "queerness has an especially vexed relationship to evidence. . . . When the historian of queer experience attempts to document a queer past, there is often a gatekeeper, representing a straight present." What gets left behind? Gaps

where people never see themselves or find information about themselves. Holes that make it impossible to give oneself a context. Crevices people fall into. Impenetrable silence.

The complete archive is mythological, possible only in theory; somewhere in Jorge Luis Borges's Total Library, perhaps, buried under the detailed history of the future and his dreams and half dreams at dawn on August 14, 1934. But we can try. "How does one tell impossible stories?" Hartman asks, and she suggests many avenues: "advancing a series of speculative arguments," "exploiting the capacities of the subjunctive (a grammatical mood that expresses doubts, wishes, and possibilities)," writing history "with and against the archive," "imagining what cannot be verified."

The abused woman has certainly been around as long as human beings have been capable of psychological manipulation and interpersonal violence, but as a generally understood concept it—and she—did not exist until about fifty years ago. The conversation about domestic abuse within queer communities is even newer, and even more shadowed. As we consider the forms intimate violence takes today, each new concept—the male victim, the female perpetrator, queer abusers, and the queer abused—reveals itself as another ghost that has always been here, haunting the ruler's house. Modern academics, writers, and thinkers have new tools to delve back into the archives in the same way that historians and scholars have made their understanding of contemporary queer sexuality reverberate through the past. Consider: What is the topography of these holes? Where do the lacunae live? How do we move toward wholeness? How do we do right by the wronged people of the past without physical evidence of their suffering? How do we direct our record keeping toward justice?

The memoir is, at its core, an act of resurrection. Memoirists re-create the past, reconstruct dialogue. They summon meaning from events that have long been dormant. They braid the clays of memory and essay and fact and perception together, smash them into a ball, roll them flat. They manipulate time; resuscitate the dead. They put themselves, and others, into necessary context.

I enter into the archive that domestic abuse between partners who share a gender identity is both possible and not uncommon, and that it can look something like this. I speak into the silence. I toss the stone of my story into a vast crevice; measure the emptiness by its small sound.

1. Eleanor Roosevelt to Lorena Hickock, November 17, 1933.