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A Word About the Cover Art

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A Word About the Cover Art

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While searching for an appropriate cover image for the volume, we wanted something that evoked the themes present in the discussions of archives. The image we chose, titled “Skeleton of the Missouri Leviathan” (c. 1842), does this in both form and history. The skeleton in the painting was owned by 19th-century fossil showman Albert Koch. In 1840, Koch purchased several mastodon fossils from a Missouri farmer. Eager to differentiate his exhibit from other curiosities of the time, Koch combined the bones of his mastodon with extra vertebrae and ribs from other mastodons. He took his now 32-foot long skeleton on tour, charging crowds fifty cents per view. The painting itself is based on a lithograph for one of Koch’s showings. The existence of the Missouri Leviathan brings up issues regarding the ownership and knowability of the past, entanglements of archives and capitalism, and the materiality of archival substance.

Then there is the painting itself. The description of the painting on the Wellcome Collection website is as follows: “the skeleton is shown standing in a pastoral setting, with a Native American shown seated on an elephant to indicate scale, while another Native American and a man in Western dress look on.” The painting, then, foregrounds how power, race, and geography are the bedrock on which archives are built. Who in the painting owns the skeleton? What past does it represent? Who benefits from its display? The Native Americans or the man in ‘Western dress’? As the Missouri Leviathan reminds us, and as the works in this volume go on to explore, the digging up, organization, and display of the past is never neutral.