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NECESSARY FICTIONS: Haunt(ed) Archives in Caitlín R. Kiernan's *The Red Tree* and *The Drowning Girl*

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ABSTRACT

Caitlín R. Kiernan's The Red Tree (2010) and The Drowning Girl (2012) are disquieting queer ghost stories about feeling bad and bad feelings—metafictional novels masquerading as journals or memoirs that present their "hauntings" as the afterlife of pain that echoes, repeats, and distorts space/time. This article argues, drawing from the work of Ann Cvetkovich, that Kiernan's novels self-consciously produce and serve as provocative archives of queer trauma. Through a shared emphasis on the concept of "necessary fictions" and the gathering-together of promiscuous or nontraditional archival materials, each novel centers feelings-oriented approaches to processing grief and isolation that are less readily addressed through normative therapeutic means. Processing traumatic experiences through the frame of affective truth—as opposed to testimonial or objective fact—is already an interpretive act. As such, novels like Kiernan's offer a uniquely experiential method for understanding the archive of feelings as at once a creation of knowledge and a practice of knowing, one that makes space for alternatives to the difficulties presented by accounting for a traumatic event.

KEYWORDS

Caitlín R. Kiernan, fiction, affect, queer trauma, archive of feelings

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Queer ghost stories haunted by bad feelings and feeling bad, Caitlín R. Kiernan's *The Red Tree* (2010) and *The Drowning Girl* (2012) are novels masquerading as journals or memoirs, presenting narratives about the afterlife of pain that echoes, repeats, and distorts space/time. On the surface, *The Red Tree* is traditional New England horror about a woman writer going mad in an isolated haunted house, while *The Drowning Girl* is "a ghost story with a mermaid and a wolf" (Kiernan 2012: 1) about a mad girl's amorous liaisons with monsters. In terms of their similarities, both protagonists are queer women writers whose relations to debility[1], whose capacities in the social and physical worlds, are complicated by often-unmet needs for domestic or emotional care. Both women have lost a previous lover to suicide and have begun fresh relationships but remain emotionally distant and resentful of their new girlfriends. The novels' framing as journal/memoir allows these protagonists to skim past the traumatic event of loss proper, to approach then avoid it—but glancing contacts aren't sufficient to process the bodily *feelings* of that trauma. The novels, therefore, stand as a conceptual duet married through a shared conceit: what the respective protagonists each refer to as "necessary fictions" (Kiernan 2010, 57, 315; 2012, 63). This term is used to describe the disturbing and disruptive short stories nested *within* the journals, which allow the protagonists to examine their traumatic experiences—experiences nonfiction journaling couldn't grasp, at least not in a manner supporting their survival. Necessary fictions, as fantasies resistant to "formulaic accounts of recapacitation" (Crosby and Jakobsen 2020, 77), ultimately come to serve as alternative means of knowing *through* negative affects[2] such as grief, pain, and isolation. These stories argue for the vital potentiality of acts of artistic creation, as opposed to or in conversation with traditional therapeutic interventions (Cvetkovich 2012).

Parsing (bad) feelings and their functions in *The Red Tree* and *The Drowning Girl* requires engaging the novels' own theoretical approaches to trauma. The novels propose nuanced understandings of the relationships formed between the experience of a traumatic event, the communication or integration of that event, and the broader socio-textual worlds that *create* an individual's sense of self. These relations are multidirectional; the weight of bad feelings is laid against ethical questions about externalizing them, passing them on, and consuming or being consumed by others' negative affects. As metafiction concerned with crafting internal theories of queer survival, the novels explicitly define trauma as a simultaneous noun and verb, then critique their attempts to contain or encom-

pass that trauma within archives. The core term Kiernan uses to fold together fraught questions of what the unstable archive contains as well as the ethics of its creation—a word that flickers spectrally throughout the novels—is *haunting*. To be haunted is to engage the echo of a past; the ghost within popular fiction is commonly a repetition or memorialization of a traumatic event, an intrusion of a bad affect into the present it no longer occupies. However, Kiernan scrambles the orientation of haunting: troubling the linearity of past to present to future with a sort of queer permeability, arguing that texts themselves are haunts—and that people, such as the reader themselves, are no more or less than a collection of haunt(ed) texts gathered within a body-archive.

Centering affect as a method for *knowing* self and world within these novels' promiscuous materials, searching for what is "emotionally meaningful about the story as opposed to what is factually true" (Cvetkovich 2003, 275), this article first approaches the texts' construction of an archive as an interpretive practice. While a significant amount of scholarship in affect studies deals with negative feelings[3], this article draws primarily from Ann Cvetkovich's "archive of feelings" and Sara Ahmed's phenomenological writings on orientation and disorientation as a means to understand the concept of 'necessary fictions.' The archive of feelings broadly explores "cultural texts as repositories of feelings and emotions," while archives of trauma serve as a "point of entry into […the] many forms of love, rage, intimacy, grief, shame, and more" (2003, 7) central to contemporary queer life. Characters Sarah Crowe in *The Red Tree* and India Morgan Phelps in *The Drowning Girl*, as writer-protagonists, construct textual archives of feeling within their journals—often through circular and self-conscious narration demonstrating the "unspeakable and unrepresentable" nature of their trauma, which is "marked by forgetting and disassociation" and strains against "conventional forms of documentation, representation, and commemoration" (7). Due to fracturing by loss and trauma, as well as their experiencing of the world as "differently cognating beings" (Chen 2014, 172) occupying differential class positions, Sarah and Imp are only able to develop a sense of self-knowledge—or a sense of emotional cohesion—in nonlinear fashion through their strange archives (Cvetkovich 2003, 7-14). Furthermore, the unresolvable conflicts arising between affective truths and objective facts regarding recollections of trauma are made explicit within the intertexts and the protagonists' narration—modeling, in an almost methodological form, Kiernan's overarching thematic project as represented *by* the novels. The textual structure, the archive itself, is key to these interpretations.

The article next engages with the multiple representations of queer trauma—as toxin, as text, as haunting—these novels explore, as well as their ethical and recuperative approaches to those very same traumas. To locate *The Red Tree* and

The Drowning Girl within a queer public culture orienting around trauma is to simultaneously locate Kiernan's career-spanning artistic embrace of bad feelings there as well; these literary interventions participate in a larger counterpublic engagement with difficult or upsetting materials that contravene a wholesome or assimilationist understanding of queer feelings (Doyle 2013; Berlant and Warner 2013). Cvetkovich's suggestion that these forms of artistic production serve to "juxtapose cultural production and therapy […] to expand the category of the therapeutic beyond the confines of the narrowly medicalized or privatized encounter between clinical professional and client" (Cvetkovich 2003, 10) are also of use as broader contexts. Finally, when considered through the lens of public cultures, the author of a text lingers within their own archives as a sort of holy ghost. Kiernan, in particular,remains with the frame of their "necessary fictions," through extensive[4] blogs exploring the relations between their artistic labors and their experiences of medication, psychiatry, trans lesbian *be*ing, suicide, poverty, and the labor of making art as a neuroatypical person.

After all, an identical loss rests at the center of both novels and also within Kiernan's own dedications: a lover's death by suicide. The materiality of suicide—and the ways the women left behind process (or fail to process) the concomitant loss—is a lingering textual specter. Drawing from the disability studies works of Mel Y. Chen and Margaret Price, the article lastly reframes the implicitly negative connotations of the trauma archive: interrogating the haunting as a process that does permeate and poison, but *queerly*, as it produces alternate forms of knowing the self, or self-histories. The protagonists' methods of knowing are influenced by prescription medication (or lack thereof), alcohol, post-traumatic stress, depression, and schizophrenia, alongside the everyday wearing-out of queer bodies. The concept of cripistemologies[5] offers a vital connection between the trauma archive and the implicit goal of "necessary fictions": a way of getting through, living on after, the disorientation of trauma by coming to terms with how it *felt*—if not in the end, what really *happened.* However, the novels' oppositional endings complicate a direct correlation between the creation of trauma archives and therapeutic or rehabilitative outcomes. *The Red Tree* opens with an editor's preface informing the reader of Sarah's suicide at the farmhouse, rendering the protagonist a living ghost drifting through the text. Conversely, at the close of *The Drowning Girl,* a relieved Imp informs the reader that "we weave necessary fictions, and sometimes they save us" (2012, 319). These conclusions, one catastrophic and one hopeful, engage "different ways of thinking about trauma and […] a sense of trauma as connected to the textures of everyday experience" (Cvetkovich 2003, 3).

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Confounding Orientations: Constructing the Archive

The first encounter with these texts throws distinctions between authorship, textuality, and audience immediately into uncertainty through a fascinating muddle of paratextual attributions. Each novel contains two separate, differing title pages; sandwiched between those pages are separate dedications—as well as epigraphs, in the case of *The Drowning Girl*. The initial page of *The Red Tree* presents the novel's title in cursive script, followed by Caitlin R. Kiernan's name; following that page, a pair of dedications appears, one devoted to a woman significant to Kiernan who committed suicide[6]. A second title page comes after, attributing the text that follows in faux-typewritten script as "The Red Tree by Sarah Crowe and Dr. Charles L. Harvey." Two epigraphs then appear, one from Thoreau's *Walden* and the other from Seneca the Elder. *The Drowning Girl* tweaks the multiple-attribution formula, opening with a title page reading "*The Drowning Girl: A Memoir* by Caitlin R. Kiernan" and two dedications (one for Elizabeth Tillman Aldridge), then a short introductory lyric by Kiernan[7] as well as three short epigraphs. Only *following* the substantial front-matter attributed to Kiernan does the second title page appear, unattributed but repeating "The Drowning Girl: A Memoir" in a roughly identical font.[8] A 'reproduction' of a painting appears between this second title page and the manuscript's first page—however, it is a *fictional* painting existing exclusively within the novel.

These paratexts complicate the origin of the novel as well as the role of the writer or archivist. Their layering implies that the actual author of the interior textual material is *not* Kiernan, but the characters/protagonists Sarah or Imp. However, Kiernan isn't entirely effaced as she is the implied sender of the epigraphs and dedications preceding her protagonists' own directional gestures. Basic separations between author and text are complicated over and over. For example, though protagonist Sarah at first appears to be the chooser of the epigraphs in *The Red Tree*, even that is later confounded when the reader learns these are *also* the epigraphs of the manuscript Sarah finds in the farmhouse basement at the start of the novel. The manuscript—a research document on the haunting of the property that begins, in turn, to haunt *her*—belonged to Dr. Charles L. Harvey, a prior guest of the farmhouse who also committed suicide, and is similarly titled "The Red Tree" (2010, 75). The shift to fictional authorship purposefully changes the genre from a novel penned by Kiernan to a journal or memoir penned by Sarah or Imp. Outright generic manipulation invites the reader into a recursive relationship to the text's fluid fictionality. The initial collapse of novel within memoir within novel sets forward an unsettled orientation toward truth in the texts, signaling that *The Red Tree* and *The Drowning Girl* are undertaking a peculiar theoretical project—one fruitfully understood as an archive of trauma.

Genre is a gesture of orientation; narrators within a fictional text also offer orientation toward a certain time and space for the reader. By manipulating these gestures through the placement of the protagonists as their own writers, Kiernan complicates the reader's orientation to the text and the text's orientation to the world. Memoirs and journals perform a certain relationship to truth—a presumption of reportage from life experiences—which orients audiences affectively, despite the fact that these are *fictional* journals. Further proliferating para- and intertextuality creates a queer confusion that complicates attempts to parse real-world references from novelistic inventions, in addition to the already-disorienting conflicts between factual event and emotional truth within the novels' narratives. Sara Ahmed has argued that "queer does not have a relation of exteriority to that with which it comes into contact" (2006: 4) and that bodies "may become orientated in this responsiveness to the world around them, given this capacity to be affected" (9)–while *dis*-orientation serves as "a way of describing the feelings that gather when we lose our sense of who it is that we are" (20). Kiernan loses their sense of authorial self within the protagonists' authorial selves; Sarah and Imp lose their sense of being due to traumatic experiences neither has fully processed. The reader enters a state of disorientation as well, as the mimetic slides into the speculative, echoing with *bad feelings* embodied as ghosts, hauntings, and dreams or visions of violation. As the novels grapple thematically with affect archives and the ways feeling haunts their protagonists, so to do they enact these sensations and affects on their readers. For the audience as well as the characters, the experience becomes difficult.

And then so, too, does the audience grasp for reorientation alongside the protagonists after supernatural or psychic intrusions—a reorientation that is located through the process of creating archives of feeling through story-telling. These doubly-fictional archives orbit the affective truths of unknowable but "shattering" experiences which have persisted and become a crisis (Ahmed 2006, 157). Troubling distinctions between affective truths and objective facts are central to the novels' *feeling* of disorientation, as well as to becoming-orientated in the aftermath of trauma. However, on the audience and authorial tiers, the paratextual slippages of attribution imply these troubled distinctions are *also* central to the novels as material artifacts crafting arguments about the uses of fiction within the public cultural sphere. In *Depression: A Public Feeling*, Cvetkovich argues that the "notion of creativity as movement can also benefit from […] thinking about temporalities that move backward and sideways rather than just forward" (2012, 21). She then

poses a question that resonates alongside Sarah and Imp's struggles to orient themselves through their prose: "What is going on when you can't write?" (19). As expanded upon below, the stuck-ness of failing to write, of being *unable* to process through creation, echoes the stuck-ness of traumas that cannot be simply gotten past, lived on through… while the later crafting of necessary fictions offers vital alternatives for survival.

Before those stories come, though, there is a blockage of stories. The fictional editor's note which opens *The Red Tree* describes protagonist Sarah Crowe's arrival, struggles, and ultimate death at Wight farm as a "self-imposed exile" peppered with outgoing requests "for more time on a long overdue and never complete novel," during which she became "like the heroines of her novels, a haunted woman" wrapped up in "the shrouds of delusion and depression" (Kiernan 2010: 13). Sarah herself later echoes Cvetkovich's "fear that you have nothing to say, or that you can't say what you want to say, or that you have something to say but it's not important enough or smart enough" (2012, 18)—recording in her first journal entry that she has "written nothing, nothing at all, since leaving Atlanta" and taking herself to task for journaling about the pond rather than her nightmare the night before, "some alternate version of the night Amanda finally walked out on me" but in which "she doesn't die" (Kiernan 2010, 18-20). The traumatic event appears, front and center, as a disorientation.

The opening chapters of *The Drowning Girl* also foreground trauma, *stuckness*, and disorientation as central to the novel's feelings archive. After Imp informs the reader of her personal and familial history of madness and explains that she intends to write an intimate ghost story, she says:

> Before I wrote that and decided it was true, I would come into this room (which isn't the room where I paint, but the room with too many bookshelves) and sit down in front of the manual typewriter that used to be Grandmother Caroline's […] I would sit here in this chair for hours, and never write a single word. But now I've made my beginning, arbitrary though it may be […] (Kiernan 2012, 6).

Imp's initial grouping of objects and recollections are anchored through prose to orient her story, ranging from old paintings to the asylum her grandmother was hospitalized in. Once so-grounded, she writes that her project aim is to "go back to that night in July" when she "met the mermaid named Eva Canning," while simultaneously returning "to that other night, the snowy night in November" when she "came across the girl who was actually a wolf, and who may have been the same ghost as Eva Canning" (14). *The Drowning Girl: A Memoir* serves as an archival container for the disorientation produced by conflicting memories of the same woman; the central conflict arises from Imp's knowledge that only one of

those sets of memories could be factually true, though she remembers both as real. Within both novels, Kiernan molds the performatively truthful form of journal or memoir around the fictional distance of speculative literature—aiming for a truth of affect (what depression, or schizophrenia, or suicidality, or queer trauma *feel* like) within promiscuous textual archives combining the mimetic, the *actual*, and the invented. Kiernan's public persona as a genre writer and horror critic informs her protagonists' prose-craft as well. The use of supernatural or fantastic materials within the queer trauma archive affords flexible, disruptive critical interventions on temporality and memory. Seeking alternatives to mainstream representations of trauma, Cvetkovich argues that she'd "like those forms of testimony to offer some clues about how to survive those conditions and even to change them"—but would "settle for a compelling description" of the feelings under consideration, "a task that calls for performative writing" (2012, 15). Using the example of Octavia Butler's speculative fiction, Cvetkovich argues that "imaginative fiction [makes] the complex choices of the oppressed more affectively intelligible" (124); the same orientation toward affectively intelligible truth is present within Kiernan's paired ghost stories as well. On another tier of genre, however, Kiernan's novels masquerade as nonfiction—memoirs able to "produce what Audre Lorde describes as forms of truth that are felt rather than proven by evidence" (Cvetkovich 77). Combinations of "memoir and critical analysis [...] offer open-ended conclusions" and "experiment with prose styles that may not be user-friendly"; memoir can function as a "research report, speculative fiction, and creative articulation of public feelings" (141). *The Red Tree* and *The Drowning Girl: A Memoir* are, in this sense, generic meldings that double the forms Cvetkovich argues are well-suited to articulate public feelings through cultural materials—simultaneously creating *and* arguing for the utilities of these boundary-crossing archives of lesbian trauma: feeling-archives which can be truthful without needing, necessarily, to be factual.

These archival intentions are made explicit through metafiction, as each novel collects materials and objects as referents to project affects to the audience. However, a productive complication arises even amongst those allusions, references, and intertexts. As with the fictional painting 'reproduction' preceding Imp's memoirs, a significant number of the materials referenced within these novels are *themselves* invented by Kiernan—but others *do* exist outside the text, and neither is differentiated from the other. The Phillip Saltonstall painting, also titled *The Drowning Girl,* which Imp says has haunted her from childhood does not properly *exist*, but at the same time, its fictional reproduction does. The work of artist Albert

Perrault is referenced in both novels and serves a central plot function within *The Drowning Girl*; the artist and his art are fictional. Short fiction written 'by' the protagonists appears set within the novels, doubling fictionality in a strange loop, and those pieces of short fiction provide an affective center for the characters' self-construction. However, the novels also contain extensive quotations from Lewis Carroll, often from the "Lobster Quadrille" (Kiernan 2010,257, 343, 346, 361; Kiernan 2012, 113, 166, 177–182), as well as materials from multiple iterations of "Little Red Riding Hood." Poe, Thoreau, and Joseph Campbell appear frequently in *The Red Tree* alongside the fictional manuscript by Dr. Charles Harvey, who within *that* manuscript quotes from the actual publication *Fortean Times*. The reader's orientation is as uncertain as the narrators'; neither is allowed the confidence of sorting fact from fiction, allusion from invention. These challenges to the audience's grasp of the real versus the unreal point toward the ways in which archives of trauma produce knowledge of the world, or of 'the truth,' gained first and foremost *through feeling*.

Said plainly, does it matter which intertextual materials originate in the "real" world of the human audience and which are an invention of the novel, or the protagonist… when the *function* of the materials is identical? Refusing to privilege objective, factual certainty over affective, experiential truth gives weight to alternate methods of knowing based within the protagonists' bodyminds[9], to borrow from the terminology of Margaret Price (2015). Narrating her first sighting of the Saltonstall painting, Imp writes, "a lot of my memories are false memories, so I can't ever be certain, one way or the other. A lot of my most interesting memories seem never to have taken place" (Kiernan 2012, 11). Journaling is a method for sorting her memories from the things that happened to her, though both are real within her mind. Despite Imp's otherwise laissez-faire approach, though, being unable to recall or parse the truth(s) of Eva Canning disturbs her. As she writes of her own memoir, "there's no point in doing this thing if all I can manage is a lie. Which is not to say every word will be factual. Only that every word will be true. Or as true as I can manage" (6). In contrast, Sarah is a far more caustic narrator whose journal is full of gaps and misattributed memories, including the central short story ("Pony") she has no recollection of drafting. Near the conclusion she writes of her missing time and confusion, "if my narrative is to be trusted—if my goddamn *memories* are something upon which I can continue to *rely*—then I must find some way to account for and reconcile this redundancy" (Kiernan 2010, 309). Sarah's tendencies toward drinking on top of her depression and seizure medication, as well as her continual suicidal ideation, render her cognitive world disruptive for the reader to immerse within. Given these difficulties of knowing, what function does the *dis*-orienting archive of feelings serve—and how might it offer a generative potential to these (fictional, real) women?

Haunt/ed/ing: Trauma as Permeation

The novels' trauma archives are both haunted *by* the materials they contain and vectors *of* further hauntings for those who consume them. However, haunts are less individualized than that infectious trajectory might imply: the world that spawns the trauma archive is a haunted world containing the material traces of homophobia, racism, and sexism, among other structures of oppression. Cvetkovich argues that the archive of feelings integrates affects containing the sociopolitical dimensions of trauma, those that sprawl past the limits of a neoliberal therapeutic focus on personal 'self-work' (2003, 33); she gathers materials that "don't look to either identity or the state as a means for the resolution of trauma" (16) and represent "trauma [as] affectively negotiated in culturally specific ways" (26). Kiernan's novels similarly tread the fine line between social and personal hurts in their archives of lesbian trauma as vexed sites, full of "ephemeral and unusual traces" (8) and artifacts embedded with pain. As with Cvetkovich's materials, *The Red Tree* and *The Drowning Girl: A Memoir* serve "as much to produce an archive as to analyze one" (8). The boundaries between the individual, the archive, and the social world are unstable; that instability creates a similarly unstable, unsettling archive.

Furthermore, the novels also propose ethical arguments about trauma archives and their effects on public culture, using the frame of *haunting* as a queer permeability that renders the self as much an archive as the texts. The belief in a coherent self with a normative cognitive grasp of the world, an observing subject that consumes or controls outside objects, collapses into a queer proliferation of knowledge(s) that continually contradict, superimpose, and reconstruct the self. The clearest intra-textual definition of *haunting* appears in a discussion of Imp's fixation on Saltonstall's "The Drowning Girl" as she writes,

> Ghosts are the memories that are too strong to be forgotten for good, echoing across the years and refusing to be obliterated by time. I don't imagine that when Saltonstall painted The Drowning Girl, almost a hundred years before I saw it for the first time, he paused to consider all the people it might haunt. That's another thing about ghosts, a very important thing—you have to be careful, because hauntings are contagious. Hauntings are memes, especially pernicious thought contagions, social contagions that need no viral or bacterial host and are transmitted in a thousand different ways. A book, a poem, a song, a bedtime story, a grandmother's suicide, the choreography of a dance, a few frames of film, a diagnosis of schizophrenia, a deadly tumble from a horse, a faded photograph, or a story you tell your daughter. […] Too often, people make the mistake of trying to use their art to capture a ghost, but only end up spreading their haunting. (2012, 12-13)

Imp also fears her own haunting manuscript propagating itself with the same irrepressible power. Another example she gives is the Suicide Forest. She argues "that all this trouble in the Sea of Trees didn't begin until Seicho Matsumoto, a Japanese detective and mystery writer, published a novel, *Kuroi Jukai* (The Black Forest, 1960). In Matsumoto's book, two lovers choose Aokigahara as the most appropriate place to commit suicide. And people read the book. And people began going to the forest to kill themselves" (88–90). While archival materials are often considered inert objects, *haunting* presents the archive as a creature of virality—a fitting association in a queer novel that deals deeply with mortality.

Creating an archive externalizes the ghosts of traumatic events; however, in Kiernan's frame of contagious permeability, that act of creation might also result in the haunting of the person who later consumes it. These haunted/haunting materials are queerly toxic, in terms of Chen, and are perhaps best understood as "interspersals, intrinsic mixings, alterations, [that favor] interabsorption over corporeal exceptionalism" (2011, 272). Queer toxicities flourish with ethical complexity; rather than pure destructive threat, the permeable body communing with a toxic world reveals sociality and interdependence—without abandoning the realities of pain or damage that simultaneously arise from exposures (Chen 2012). Sarah writes near the end of her journal, after reproducing long sections of Harvey's once-dead, now-revenant research manuscript on the property's own haunting, "Jesus, it's got to be some kind of neurotic me sitting here transcribing this outlandish manuscript, a suicide's obsession. Has it become my own obsession? In touching and reading these pages, in my trip to the tree and my exploration of the vast basement below the house, have I become infected by this same *idée fixe*?" (Kiernan 2010, 255). Her transcription has also passed on the infectious manuscript to the reader. Though these archival materials all translate traumatic experiences through affect for reorientation toward the world, they simultaneously *infect* others through their (re)production of sensations and feelings that linger.

While textual materials are one haunt contained within the novels, there are other ghostly presences—such as the actual traumatic events, unspeakable but irrepressible, at the core of each protagonists' conflict. For example, Sarah consistently references the suicide of her lover, named Amanda, in the journal entries while skirting the subject of her death via sardonic misdirections ("Are we back to writing as an act of exorcism? Wait, don't answer that question" [144]). When Constance, the woman renting the top room of the farmhouse, asks Sarah about Amanda she replies, "Amanda is my own private haunting. She's nothing I want to share. And she's nothing you need to hear about" (297). Along the same lines, in *The Drowning Girl* Imp says the stories of her institutionalized mother and grandmother haunt her—but so does her erstwhile lover, Eva. Past occurrences

permeate the present; events that produce strong affective responses surge forward and backward through time. Cvetkovich suggests the past upwelling into the present or future is central to the trauma archive, drawing on "postmemory as it applies to the children of survivors [of the Holocaust], who have an uncanny relation to their parents' experience, which continues to mark subsequent generations" (2003, 29). The work of Avery Gordon also echoes through this ghostly temporality as a project that, rather than offering "generalizations about capitalism, racism, or globalization […] conjures ghosts who demand not just that something be known but that something be felt and done, […and] because ghosts are both visible and invisible, the local evidence [they] provide is not just empirical" (44). Focusing on *haunting* as a productive concept isn't unique to Kiernan, but does provide linkages between her protagonist's sense of their archives, their trauma, and their methods of *coming to know* their ghost stories (or trauma stories).

Being able to know themselves, after their experiences of disorientation and shattering, means being able to live on *as* themselves—or, as another version of the self, one capable of survival. Their intimate senses of self have been scattered, well beyond their previously practiced capacities for processing cognitive disruption—capacities that arose, already, from lived experience as disabled women. Their constructed archives then accrete as each attempt to unearth different capacities, searching for affective truths that "couldn't be articulated in a single coherent narrative" and are "much more complicated than the events of what happened, connected to other histories that were not [their] own" (Cvetkovich 2003: 2). The farmhouse Sarah ultimately dies in is warped around the titular red tree and its brutal histories—local ghosts that haunt her alongside her personal specter of a girlfriend lost to suicide, echoing across time in the form of the hallucinatory experiences she records in her journal. Similarly, Imp is driven to despair and psychic dissolution by the conflicting memories she carries of the doubled Eva Canning creatures—memories she processes through artistic creations that approach the reality of the matter: Eva was neither a literal mermaid nor a literal wolf but a lover who walked into the sea to her death as Imp watched. Furthermore, the novels *themselves* function as archives of feeling crafted by Kiernan—sensational stories that work "as an alternative form of knowledge to the abstractions of systemic analysis" (44)—with their own loss of a lover to suicide framed through the dedications to Elizabeth Tillman Aldridge.

How do we understand these archives of trauma as methods for surviving or flourishing rather than performing repetitions of the initial wound? The permeable boundaries between materials, events, archivists, and audiences tangle around one

another in a constant loop; separation is impossible, as each creates and is created by their respective haunts. That permeability gestures not toward dissolution, but toward a relational and proliferating form of orientation. As Margaret Price argues, "[N]euroatypicality is often marked not by limitations but by excesses: of fantasy, speech, awareness, sense, or sensitivity. What if we took our cure from bodymind theory to suggest disability as proliferation instead of limitation?" (McRuer et al. 2014: 153). The archives gathered by the protagonists of these novels are not *limited* by their proliferating, unstable materials; rather, the narratives, metaphors, songs, images, trees, ghosts, monsters, and deaths juxtaposed offer knowledge through accretion as opposed to delineation—a mess of affects springing *from* and speaking *to* Imp's false memories and Sarah's lost time. If the monadic, boundaried self is dispensed with in favor of a haunted/ing being—if self-concept is constructed through circulating, permeating affective truths—then the collection of strange materials functions as *orientation* rather than pathological repetition. Haunting floats "between inside and outside" as "a mood, an atmosphere, or a sensibility"—serving the dispersed and particulate function of toxin, building-block, or art. If traumatic events travel unmoored through experiential time, and if the archive of feelings contains its own animacy, then the trauma archive possesses a haunt's potential to *change* creators and their publics in the process.

Integration and Dis-integration: Archives of Survival

Difficulties arising from their attempts to gather up their ghosts in affect archives lead the protagonists, finally, to the thematic center of the novels: the creation of "necessary fictions." The novels simultaneously *are* and *contain* these fictions, enacting the same project of survival their internal thematic arguments propose. Journals are already limited constructs, being textual representations of inherently fallible memories; as Sarah says, "Nevermind if I don't genuinely recollect even half the shit I've written down here, if I've just made stuff up to fill in the gaping mnemonic crevices. […] A necessary fiction, and if the facts are compromised by my lousy memory, I don't think the *truth* is any worse for it" (57). Kiernan's protagonists consistently refer to the conflict between memoir presented as fact and the reality that *all* memories are fluctuating, fictionalized, and intended to provoke or manipulate certain affects. As a result, the challenge of narrating events 'factually' to exorcize their lingering miasma proves unresolvable—due to the nature of traumatic memories and the limitations of the prose form. For example, while Imp's multiple memories are factual, she knows it's *technically* impossible for both sets of recollections with the mermaid and the werewolf to be real. Sarah's missing time, too, is inaccessible within her journal. Lost memories are absent both from her mind and her archive—an absence which, as Cvetkovich

argues regarding historical archives lost to social trauma (such as the gay and lesbian archive, or the archive of chattel slavery), might be best imagined through the "reconstruction of ghost stories and other fictions" (2012, 129).

Where testimonial fact fails, the fantasies of fiction aim for the *felt* truth of the matter—a strategy Cvetkovich forwards within her depression archive, as well as her archive of lesbian trauma. Kiernan's novels offer a similar conceptual approach, condensed within the phrase linking *The Red Tree* to *The Drowning Girl*: "necessary fictions" crafted to address painful archival gaps. "Necessary fictions" evolve from the journals as archival processes but refer to the short stories the protagonists each write and place *within* those journals. These fictions-within-fictions ultimately locate affective truths of traumatic experiences that raw reportage couldn't approach or render meaningful—archiving the *feeling* of those events as occurrences placed outside of (though drawn from within) the creator through the distance of narrative fiction. However, the novels' endings maintain an uncertainty regarding the possible *outcomes* of using the archive of necessary fictions for re-orientation and self-construction. While the potential for adaptation to trauma through coming to *know* it with fictional creation is significant, that potential remains fraught; placing haunted affects onto the page, after all, does not always serve to drain their lethal toxicity from the host.

The phrase "necessary fiction" appears for the first time in *The Drowning Girl* as Imp recalls meeting Eva Canning on the side of the road. As a preface, she says, "I think maybe now I'm ready to try to write it out in some semblance of a story […] A story is, by necessity, a sort of necessary fiction, right? If it's meant to be a true story, then it becomes a synoptic history" (Kiernan 2012, 63). Later on, once she has parsed the doubled fictions of werewolf and mermaid Eva Canning into one human, the Eva Canning who died by suicide, she writes, "We weave necessary fictions, and sometimes they save us. Our minds, our bodies" (319). Sarah also uses the phrase "a necessary fiction" (Kiernan 2010, 57) in *The Red Tree* to refer to the practice of telling stories, given that even retellings aiming for factuality are necessarily fictional due to perception and transmission. Sarah then repeats the phrase again near the close of the novel, observing, "I am once more forced to admit that much of these recollections are approximations. Necessary fictions" (315). The contrasting tones of the protagonists recall Cvetkovich's discussion of Dorothy Allison's writing, shifting as Allison does between fiction and nonfiction writings on incest and lesbian existence—a maneuver Kiernan also

employs through her narrators and their representation of the work as *truthful,* if not factual. As Cvetkovich argues, "Allison's commitment to storytelling as emotional rather than literal truth applies to both, thereby undoing conventional distinctions between fiction and nonfiction," wherein "the story becomes the thing needed" (2003, 109). The story is needed; the fiction is necessary.

Central to the material-affect archives in *The Red Tree* and *The Drowning Girl* are short stories 'written' by the protagonists and containing oblique though powerful relations to the novels' permeating traumatic events. While Sarah and Imp fail to parse their experiences through testimony, either for themselves or the audience, the internal short stories strike the heart of the matter. The story at the center of *The Red Tree* is "Pony" (Kiernan 2010, 200), whereas there are two (reflecting the doubled Eva) in *The Drowning Girl*; the first is called "The Mermaid of the Concrete Ocean" (2012, 127) and the second is "Werewolf Smile" (239). These stories are set in different fonts from the main text and, in the case of *The Drowning Girl,* are sectioned without chapter headings. The short fictions themselves enter into the novels' game of disorienting attributions: a fictional narrator creating a secondary piece of fiction within their journal, which is in actuality a novel, archiving otherwise unrepresentable traumatic experiences… experiences ultimately archived by Kiernan, obscured through the orientations of genre and narrator but nonetheless participant in public culture as unsettling stories of lesbian relationality.

Kiernan's novels fit within "lesbian subcultures that cut through narratives of innocent victims and therapeutic healing to present something that was raw, confrontational, and even sexy" (Cvetkovich 2003, 4)—frequently melding the violent, monstrous, and erotic. After Constance informs Sarah that she crossed an unspoken boundary by reading the short story Sarah is "supposed to have written" (Kiernan 2010, 191) though, she does not remember doing so, the pair have sex; following the awkward and disconnected encounter of bodies Sarah reads her own work for the first time. The piece "Pony" features a pair of women who are lovers; the women are exploring a field when they see a startling horse-woman creature in the distance. However, following this disorienting unreal event, the protagonist denies ever having seen the creature. Later, as their relationship fizzles due to her dishonesty, the protagonist comes home to find her lover engaging in pony-play with another woman. The lover, in turn, discovers the protagonist's paintings of the horse-woman, revealing her deception. The piece's affective resonance contains the truth Sarah cannot otherwise approach or accept: a shattering experience of betrayal compounded by *further* betrayal, leading to the loss of a loved one. Amanda's suicide echoes as the unrepresentable trauma at the core of Sarah's psychic deterioration alongside her faltering career and

the wearing-out of her body as a poor, unwell queer woman. The erotic need, emotional abuse, and relational damage that haunt "Pony," ghosting through its sensual attachments and connotations, reveal a truth to Sarah—but she refuses the "transparently autobiographical" (216) story after reading it, recoiling from its affects and implications. Rather than embracing the "necessary fiction" contained within the piece, she becomes obsessed with the idea that perhaps Constance is purposefully tormenting her by creating the illusion of haunting in the house; as a result, Constance leaves her alone at the house, where she later dies.

Conversely, Imp approaches the paired short stories in *The Drowning Girl* as purposeful projects of affective truth-telling. "The Mermaid of the Concrete Ocean" appears in the first half of the book as one of Imp's published pieces; she shows it to her new girlfriend, Abalyn, as a performative explanation of her felt relationship to debility and art. However, the story's central image of a half-eaten corpse washed ashore on a beach becomes significant to the reader at the end of the novel, when Imp reveals that Eva's remains were similarly recovered after her walk into the sea—as a dismembered corpse that Imp also paints for herself, privately, in another form of externalization. "Werewolf Smile," the second piece of short fiction, is the more revealing of the two. The memories and affects permeating it are a provocative instance of prose that "gives rise to new theoretical articulations of the relation between sex and trauma as forms of bodily violation that destroy the self's integrity […] discourses that fearlessly and shamelessly explore the imbrications of pleasure and danger in sexual practice provide a model for approaches to trauma that resist pathologizing judgments" (Cvetkovich 2003, 35). One of the doubled memories Imp relates through the seventh chapter, during a period in which she is unmedicated, revolves around the wolf Eva, whom she met on the side of the road—unmoored from human flesh and turned into a "long-leggedy beast" that she allows to fuck her. She describes the sexual encounter in a poetic and animalistic collection of phrases: "I lay down, and she climbed on top of me. She glared down at me, all iridescent crepe-paper crimson eyeshine appetite, insatiable and wanton, and I spread my legs for the wolf she'd always really been. Her wet black nose snuffled my welcoming sex, her lolling mottled ice-cream licking me apart before she roughly rolled me over onto my stomach and wounded breasts and mounted me in the fashion of a wolf" (Kiernan 2012, 214). The memories of the werewolf woman haunt her, as much as the siren-mermaid version of Eva, who might also be a river monster, and so she writes them outside of herself through the second necessary fiction.

Significantly, Imp sets out to *purposefully* write "Werewolf Smile" after having returned to her doctor and medication regimen, as well as reconnect with Abalyn after their initial relationship dissolution. The story itself follows a young woman whose lover, Eva Canning, falls in with the edgy and abusive painter Albert Perrault and then acts as the model for his disturbing taxidermy-and-sculpture series showing the Black Dahlia murder victim transforming into a wolf. Eva ultimately kills herself; the protagonist is left unsure of what she could have done to prevent this outcome, but still haunted by the knowledge that she allowed Eva to go to Perrault, knowing it would likely destroy her. Afterward, she says of the tale,

> It came out as it needed to come. Because I couldn't manage a recitation of false facts, I managed a recitation of truth. I was worried Dr. Ogilvy might question the utility of having written a story about the wolf that was only indirectly my story of the wolf. But she didn't, even when I suggested I'd only set one box within another, that all I'd accomplished was the creation of a fiction to contain another fiction. […] I'm never going to try to sell it to a magazine. It belongs to no one except me. (238)

Through the fantastical frame of a fiction, Imp approaches her *felt* sense of guilt (and loss, and affection, and helplessness, and culpability). As a result, she is able to integrate an understanding—though unstable and fuzzy—of the actual events behind her complex set of memories: Eva was her lover, she drove them to the beach together, and she could not prevent Eva from walking into the sea. The disorienting, disruptive ghost of the troubled and troubling Eva, who herself suffered unmanageable, intense trauma, does not disappear. Rather, she merges into the trauma archive, her haunting given place and space among other specters. Imp then closes the memoir on a hopeful note—that *sometimes* it's possible to save oneself—though that "sometimes" recollects the lethal ending suffered through by Sarah in *The Red Tree*. The archive of trauma doesn't aim to prevent or erase its contents; instead, it makes the pain a public feeling, shareable and dispersed among the broader life-worlds of queer women in a contemporary culture full of violence, love, loss, and need.

Conclusions

The Red Tree and *The Drowning Girl* together narrate an approach to understanding, processing, and communicating stories of queer trauma that values the construction of truth around affect—a method that allows alternate forms of knowing to flourish. At the same time, the texts themselves enact the same project proposed thematically within them. The simultaneity of being-and-doing allows the reader to be open to the possibilities of the archive of feelings, perhaps to the potential for creating necessary fictions of their own, while viscerally *experiencing* the collected

affects—negative though those might be—Kiernan, through the journals of their protagonists, has released into the public culture as hauntings. Cvetkovich argues that "more vivid than concrete memories of the actual events are the emotional memories that convey a sense of traumatic experience" (2003, 258). Her own scholarship contains such diverse materials as a drag cabaret performance, knitting and crafting work, and Gregg Bordowitz's AIDs documentary film *Habit*—creating an "archive of feelings that helps me make the turn from depression to the reparative work of daily living" (2012, 26). As archives of feeling, Kiernan's novels center on stories of queer women processing their emotions through materials including fiction, paintings, monsters, histories, song lyrics, and hauntings, both literal and metaphorical. The protagonists are disoriented and shattered by trauma, seeking re-orientation in the world through the texts that create them and that they then create in an endless recursion. Affects that *feel bad* such as "incomplete mourning, a holding on to the past that keeps the dead with us, can be a resource" (Cvetkovich 2003, 208) or a stifling weight. However, these archives of feeling, attempt to "enable the acknowledgment of a past that can be painful to remember, impossible to forget, and resistant to consciousness" (241) while also aiming toward the creation of a livable future. The queer traumas permeating and radiating from *The Red Tree* and *The Drowning Girl: A Memoir* enter the broader culture through their publication, brimming with ugliness but also erotic and relational energies that refuse to retreat from fear or danger. Kiernan's necessary fictions stand as an analytical framework and functional archive, offering the potential for survival and the integration of traumatic experiences through a complex collection of affective truths.

Endnotes

1. As per Jasbir K. Puar, debility is employed in this article as a concept distinct from "the term 'disablement' because it foregrounds the slow wearing down of populations instead of the event of becoming disabled" (Right to Maim, xiii).

2. Affect here is conceived of along the loose, permeable lines suggested by Cvetkovich (2012) in a "generic sense" encompassing" affect, emotion, and feeling ... impulse, desires, and feelings that get historical constructed in a range of ways" (4).This aligns with a queer feminist history of emotion work, including examinations of feeling as a somatic and social process (Hemmings 2005; Fischer 2016), rather than autonomic or presocial intensities (Massumi 1996, 2002).

3. For example, the approach to "feminism as sensational" presented in Sara Ahmed's *Living a Feminist Life* argues that political consciousness often arises from traumatic experiences (2017: 21-22); the "depressive position" and racial performativity in José Esteban Muñoz's connection of "feeling down" to "feeling brown" (2006) leans in a similar direction. Bad feelings present avenues to identification and knowledge. However, queer bad feelings are also elsewhere linked to neoliberal attachments to institutions such as marriage (Berlant 2011), or the support of state violence enacted in the name of protecting select queer populations (Haritaworn 2015).

4. The author has maintained an active (Livejournal) since 2004; posts under the tag ("Elizabeth") explore Kiernan's ongoing relationship to Aldridge's suicide.

5. As Jack Halberstam notes, "if conventional epistemologies always presume a subject who can know, a cripistemology will surely begin and end with a subject who knows merely that his or her ability is limited" (McRuer et al. 2014: 152).

6. "In memory of Elizabeth Tillman Aldridge (1970-1995). Sic transit gloria mundi."

7. "This is the book it is/which means it may not be the book/you expect it to be."

8. The tagline "a memoir" does not appear on the external cover—only the internal title pages.

9. A materialist-feminist disability studies concept that encompasses an understanding that "mental and physical processes not only affect each other but also give rise to each other" (Price 2015: 269); bodymind in Price's use opens questions of desire, pain, and lived realities within complex states of being and knowing.

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