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# Kate O'Brien: Queer Hauntings in the Feminist Archive

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**Abstract:** The archive of Irish writer Kate O'Brien is a notable example of how queerness haunts the mainstream of feminist literary spaces. The 2019 Museum of Literature Ireland (MoLI) exhibition *Kate O'Brien: Arrow to the Heart*, which set out to restore this censored novelist's place in the archive of twentieth-century Irish writing, provides a case study of these dynamics. Queer and feminist perspectives on the archive, with a focus on affect, hauntings and Sara Ahmed's "queer use," illuminate the conflicting epistemologies regulating the O'Brien archive. Reading this exhibition as an Irish queer, affective experience collides with entrenched structures of power and knowledge, generating queer hauntings.

**Keywords:** queer, feminist, archive, haunting, epistemology, affect, censorship, museums, Irish writing

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Late in life, Kate O'Brien recalled the tumultuous reception of her first novel at the Presentation Convent in Limerick, where her aunts Mary and Fan were nuns. Her humorous description of the negotiations between her sheltered Aunt Fan and more worldly sister Nance serves as a concise illustration of O'Brien's difficult relationship with Irish society, in terms that are suggestive of the complex nature of questions of censorship and visibility in her life and work:

When my first novel came out, *Without My Cloak*, she wanted very much to read it. Nance explained to her that it was not reading for nuns, and that it would only upset and puzzle her. But still she fretted. So my kind sister took a copy, went through it and pinned certain pages together at several points. "Now, Fan," she said, "if you don't move the pins you ought to be all right." And Fan did not move the pins, and she was alright. (1963, 137)

The representation of sexuality in O'Brien's writing is at the root of her antagonistic relationship with mainstream conservative Ireland. This anecdote, however, also illustrates the intensely personal nature of these issues, connecting the public discourse around artistic freedom in the newly-independent state to the emotional life of a writer and her family. How must O'Brien, the wayward queer daughter, have felt when she heard about Nance's solution to her unpalatability back home? Though the anecdote is clearly included for its comic effect, the potential for double-edged sarcasm in "my kind sister," and the ironic tone of "and she was alright" hint at a deeply ambivalent relationship to the terms of her inclusion on the bookshelves of middle-class Ireland.

The image of pinned-together pages is particularly apt when considering the public life of O'Brien's archive. The reception history, up to the present, of this censored lesbian writer illustrates the marginalization of queerness in Irish women's writing. Even for writers hailed as feminist, queerness is placed in a position of haunting. This dynamic has long plagued queer and lesbian history, as theorized so succinctly by Terry Castle (1993) in *The Apparitional Lesbian*, "The lesbian is never with us, it seems, but always somewhere else: in the shadows, in the margins, hidden from history, out of sight, out of mind, a

wanderer in the dusk, a lost soul, a tragic mistake” (2). From this place of effacement, the apparitional lesbian troubles formulations of the category of “women’s writing;” her banishment outlines the contours of feminist projects of inclusion. O’Brien’s work and legacy provides an emblematic Irish example of queer hauntings in the feminist archive.

As this anecdote of the pinned pages makes clear, affect is a key concern in discussions of the ghosting of O’Brien’s lesbianism. Writing as an Irish queer, I start from a position of emotional implication in the dynamics of this particular archive. I experience the archival space created around Kate O’Brien, the exemplary “Irish woman writer,” as haunted, a site shadowed by the ghosts that exceed the knowledge systems regulating the space. I am acutely aware, because I am affected on some visceral level, of the politics of the gatekeepers of O’Brien’s public legacy, and the category of “Irish women’s writing” more broadly. This article takes one high-profile example of recent public narratives of O’Brien’s life and work, the 2019 exhibition *Kate O’Brien: Arrow to the Heart* at the Museum of Literature Ireland (MoLI), as a case study. An analysis of this exhibition through a queer and feminist lens, with a focus on affect and hauntings, renders visible the structure of the regulatory epistemologies that determine inclusion in mainstream feminist spaces in contemporary Ireland. Queerness continues to haunt these spaces.

### **Queering the archive**

Kate O’Brien (1897-1974) was a novelist, playwright and journalist who found herself at the centre of Irish debates around censorship in the mid-twentieth century, after the banning of her novels *Mary Lavelle* (1936) and *The Land of Spices* (1942) made her a test case for high-profile challenges to the 1929 Censorship of Publications Act (Walshe 2020). Her relationship to the new independent Ireland, and Irish nationalism in general, is deeply critical, rooted in rejection of the limited options available to women in the imaginary of the nation. In her novels, O’Brien writes back against the mainstream of modern Ireland through versions of the realist novel infused with romantic and polemical elements. Her writing constructed a model of the queer Irish woman and foregrounded the impossibility of her representation within the discourses of Irish postcolonial modernity.

This intimate relationship with the history of censorship in Ireland makes O’Brien an obvious choice for MoLI’s first temporary exhibition. The museum opened in 2019, in a climate of intense public debate about the place of women’s voices in contemporary Irish society following the referendum to repeal the Eighth Amendment, the Republic of Ireland’s constitutional ban on abortion, in 2018. Their permanent collection deals with the history of censorship extensively, positioning the museum as an ethical actor committed to making visible and setting right historic archival injustices. The museum therefore inserts itself into the discursive landscape of censorship, archiving and public representation, inviting analysis of its exhibitions in terms of visibility and erasure. For their opening exhibition, MoLI commissioned Kate O’Brien’s grand-niece, the actor Kathy Rose O’Brien, “to engage with and reintroduce Kate O’Brien to the public” (O’Brien 2020). Invoking the backdrop of punitive censorship, *Kate O’Brien: Arrow to the Heart* is presented as a landmark effort in shaping the public perception of O’Brien in the twenty-first century. Assuming that with this exhibition, “most visitors will meet Kate O’Brien for the first time” (O’Brien 2019) the museum appears to assume responsibility for recovering the voices of writers censored by the Irish State. In this article, then, I try to understand how queerness remains “edited out” (Walshe 1997) of a narrative that claims investment in a feminist project of inclusion. This landmark exhibition serves as a productive case study to think about both the dynamics of the O’Brien archive and the relationship between feminist and queer archival politics.

Outside of this exhibition, O'Brien is a prominent figure in the queer literary history of Ireland. Eibhear Walshe's (2006a; 2006b) biographical research has been invaluable in documenting the gay and lesbian circles in which O'Brien moved. His work explores the complex reasons that lay behind O'Brien's choice not to publicly describe herself as a lesbian, or any similar contemporaneous term, painting a nuanced picture of the social pressures and historical conditions of queer life in the early- and mid-twentieth century. With this complexity in mind, the archive of O'Brien's life and work—including her novels, her journalism, her relationships with younger queer writers and with readers—is a crucial part of the formation of a public queer culture in Ireland. Queer historiographical theory pays close attention to the affective dimensions of this kind of public queer history. As Carolyn Dinshaw (1999) put it, "queer histories are made of affective relations" (12). I cannot write about the archival politics of Kate O'Brien without acknowledging the intimate experience of kinship that shapes my response to her life and writing. Ann Cvetkovich (2003) has described the need for a different kind of archival process for queer history, a method to respond to "the traumatic loss of history that has accompanied sexual life and the formation of sexual publics" (241). Kate O'Brien, a writer who does not offer us any "proof" of the nature of her intimate relationships, is an emblematic figure. Queer archival methods "challenge traditional conceptions of history and understand the quest for history as a psychic need rather than a science" (268). What emerges is an "archive of feelings," a response to the psychic need of the researcher that acknowledges that archives are constituted and shaped by affect and identification.

This sense of history as a psychic need chimes with current discussions of archival justice in Irish public culture. Queer perspectives on archival erasure are in dialogue, here, with a long-running conversation about historic cover-ups and obstructions of archival processes by the State. The Justice for Magdalenes Research group and the Clann Project, formed to advocate for survivors of carceral institutions, are leading the way in nuanced exploration of archival justice (O'Donnell 2020). These discussions are more charged than ever in contemporary Ireland, as scholars and activists continue to hold institutions to account; the debate surrounding the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes is only one recent example (Crowe 2021). Queer studies is enriched by the insights of these scholars and activists, by their powerful analysis of how voicelessness is manufactured through institutional apparatuses and the control of archival processes. Their perspective, led by the voices of survivors and with an emphasis on testimony and lived experience, signals a revolutionary commitment to thinking about queer hauntings in an expansive way. Queer history's interest in analyzing the spectral qualities of marginalized voices departs from the figure of the apparitional lesbian with a view to opening up space for other apparitions. The conceptual malleability and fundamental unknowability of "queer" allows queer ghosts to function as a potential channel for other voices, or at least a reminder of what has been erased.

Mobilizing the affective charge of queer historical methodologies, I examine the exhibition space of *Kate O'Brien: Arrow to the Heart* as a site where affective experience collides with entrenched structures of power and knowledge, generating queer hauntings. With activist calls for archival justice at the forefront of my mind, I posit that the ghostliness of queer history can lead to an ethics of solidarity with all the ghosts of the archive. The starting point for my reading of this exhibition is a feeling of what Sara Ahmed (2014) calls "queer discomfort," or "the effects of 'not fitting'" (155). Ahmed's affect theory, and her concept of "queer use," indicate why, for queer readers, the exhibition is more interesting for what it leaves out than what it includes. As queer people, we are not interested in feeling comfortable in spaces that are designed to exclude us. As a queer who feels a sense of kinship with Kate O'Brien, I am interested in unsettling the comfort of those who invoke her feminism without feeling able to claim her queerness. In this article I embrace this queer imperative to unsettle, to make those who inhabit the mainstream experience discomfort, in the spirit of Ahmed's "feminist killjoys" and "unhappy queers" (2010).

Queer discomfort serves an important critical function in public culture. Ahmed (2014) writes that “discomfort is hence not about assimilation or resistance, *but about inhabiting norms differently*” (155, original emphasis). In *What’s the Use?* (2019), she develops the idea of “queer use” to describe the methodology of following “fainter trails;” “A fainter trail is what is left behind when you leave the official routes” (20). A queer reading of the O’Brien archive lingers on the discomfort of the reader, picks up the “fainter trails” and highlights the gatekeeping mechanisms that have rendered them faint. Attention to queer use demonstrates that this 2019 MoLI exhibition has decided which version of O’Brien is “useful,” deserving of representation in the public archival space of the museum. This version is not the queer O’Brien. The exhibition feels to the queer reader, at first, like a process of consolidation of an official public version of O’Brien, one that preserves what is useful to a limited feminist project of redress. However, the exhibition also gestures towards a queer intervention in the archive, which picks up the fainter trails, the ephemera, the hints and gossip, indeed, the affective experience of the queer reader of O’Brien. This article first explores the knowledge structures at play in the exhibition space which render queerness illegible and queers uncomfortable. I then turn my attention to the queer hauntings generated by this conflict and explore ways of thinking feminist and queer responses to the archive together. As a significant, public event produced from the contested archive of a queer writer, this exhibition is a useful case study for the queer methodology of listening for, and *to*, the ghosts of the archive. As Ahmed (2019) writes, “when we describe the world from the point of view of those not accommodated, a different world appears” (220). In this spirit, I attempt to provide a channel for the insights of “those not accommodated.”

### **Editing out queerness**

The Museum of Literature Ireland (MoLI) has a very specific origin story. Its website describes how the museum was conceived as “a creative alliance between two unique assets—the NLI’s (National Library of Ireland) Joyce collections and UCD’s (University College Dublin’s) most significant historic property, Newman House.” Despite this link with the National Library, MoLI is not a free, public institution; a standard adult ticket costs €10. Though innovative and accessible in many ways in terms of museum design and event programming, it has nevertheless been imagined with a certain type of visitor in mind. Most obviously, someone who is able to travel to south central Dublin, and who has adequate disposable income (or perhaps a research grant) to spend on entry. In more subtle terms, someone who feels comfortable in cultural institutions with imposing Georgian facades, someone who may not notice or care that they are greeted throughout by an all-white team of staff members. MoLI is interesting as an archival space because it is so culturally specific and so highly selective. Unlike the Kate O’Brien Collection at the Glucksman Library in Limerick, which might seek to record a wide range of materials about the writer, or the Limerick Literary Festival in honor of Kate O’Brien, which has taken place annually since 1984, the task of this exhibition is to present and archive a partial, curated, public version of O’Brien at one moment in time. The space of the museum, what it looks and feels like, is an important factor in determining which version of O’Brien is chosen.

Ahmed’s (2019) theory of use is vital for understanding how the choices made throughout the curatorial process and the construction of the institution shape the conditions of legibility, “how it is through small acts of use that possibilities become restricted, how histories becomes concrete, hard as walls” (212). The museum’s relationship with James Joyce, that ultimate canonical figure of Irish writing, is an illustrative case. Cited as the *raison d’être* of the entire institution, Joyce sets the terms for inclusion in the public archival project underway here. He is literally *built into* the institution: the whole building is structured as a kind of shrine to Joyce, a pilgrimage to visit “Copy No.1” of *Ulysses* on the top floor. This

focus on singularity, on a vision of the writer as an individual figure of genius, sets out a path to inclusion in the museum that must be followed by other writers. “The more a path is used, the more a path is used. The more he is cited, the more he is cited” (Ahmed 2019, 167). At the same time, as a result of Joyce’s centrality, the institution becomes keenly aware of the need for an appearance of “balance” in its collections, to insulate itself from the kind of criticism received by the Abbey Theatre in 2016 from the “Waking the Feminists” campaign (O’Toole 2017). A female contemporary with equivalent historical links to the site (both O’Brien and Joyce attended University College Dublin at Newman House), who espouses this same individualistic vision of the artist in her published work, is the obvious choice. The exhibition offers no revision of the criteria that make a writer canonical; it simply argues for O’Brien’s inclusion in the public archive of canonical Irish writing. Women are called upon to occupy the space temporarily, provisionally, tokenistically (other exhibitions have introduced the public to the queer writers Eva Gore-Booth and Nuala O’Faolain); this provides “evidence” that the work of inclusion and diversity has been done, and thus obscures the structural nature of the problem, as Ahmed (2012) notes in *On Being Included*.<sup>1</sup> O’Brien serves as a kind of “non-performative” (Ahmed 2004; 2012), as the temporarily-exhibited female artist who assuages the guilty feminist conscience of the institution.

Through this analysis, the dominant knowledge structure of the exhibition is revealed as a conservative quasi-feminist investment in parity and the singularity of exceptional female artist figures. Press coverage of the exhibition and public events (see Limerick Literary Festival 2021) indicate the archival priorities chosen by the curatorial team for public dissemination, giving an extended insight into Kathy Rose O’Brien’s (2020) articulated vision for the project. Promoting the exhibition in *The Irish Times*, for example, she emphasizes “relevance” and finding common ground with her relative. The familial relationship between subject and curator is highlighted as an innovative intervention. This signals an interest in the affective economies of the archival space that resonates with queer theories of history. The curator’s experience of misogyny in the cultural sphere, as an actor, orients her towards an axis of relevance structured by feminist concerns and the role of the artist. She describes how she came to understand the relevance of O’Brien’s work through personal reflection on the limited employment opportunities open to women in the contemporary theatre industry. As a curator, Kathy Rose O’Brien (2019) foregrounds an awareness of the affective economies of the archival space, noting her initial aversion to her “unrelatable,” outspoken relative and her “surprise” when she found they “were speaking the same language.” Their shared “values” across generations are invoked to make the point that Kate O’Brien was “absolutely a feminist,” and to insist that, as a writer, “she is so unbelievably contemporary” (Limerick Literary Festival 2021). Kathy Rose O’Brien’s method of narrating the choices behind her curation highlights the insight that archival space is not neutral. The exhibition is a product of her ability to relate emotionally to its subject and to draw parallels between their experiences.

At the centre of the exhibition, then, is an image of the embattled female artist. Kate O’Brien’s resistance to censorship is enlisted into a narrative about making space for female writers in the canon on the same terms as male writers. The curatorial focus on affect is less about highlighting “touches across time” in the style of queer history (Dinshaw 1999, 3) or feminist affect theory, but rather a part of the institution’s interest in singular, exceptional artists. Thus, the introductory wall text describes the exhibition’s central theme as “O’Brien’s vision of art,” a vision “symbolised by the ‘merciless beauty’ of the Spanish bullfight.” Inspired by a climactic scene from the novel *Mary Lavelle*, this is the structuring image of the exhibition space, the floor of which is taken up by a print evoking the bloodied sand of a bullring. This signals an overriding preoccupation with asserting O’Brien’s status as an artist, a defensive stance against the backdrop of the misogynist literary establishment that has canonized (and continues to canonize) a vastly greater number of male writers. With Joyce hovering in the background, it is as if only one deviation from the norm is permitted; O’Brien is legible as female, but her queerness is one step too far.

*Kate O'Brien: Arrow to the Heart* fits into a long history of queer erasure in the O'Brien archive and in the wider archive of Irish writing. Kathryn Conrad (2001) argues that homosexuality has been a particularly troubling presence in nationalist formulations of Irishness, represented as "foreign" to the nation. Just as Roger Casement could not simultaneously be an Irish nationalist hero and a queer ancestor, Kate O'Brien's afterlife has been contested on the grounds of sexuality. This sidelining of queerness has been deeply intertwined with efforts to assert O'Brien's status as an artist. The most notable example of the kind of straight defensiveness that has marked O'Brien's reception history is related in Eibhear Walshe's 1993 collection of essays:

During the 1988 Kate O'Brien Weekend, the keynote speaker, John Jordan, drew attack from O'Brien's family on the subject of her sexuality. In an article entitled "Family defends writer's reputation," *The Irish Times* reported Jordan as saying that the novelist had certain problems of her own in that she was mannish in her ways and had difficulties in personal relationships. It was possible that she even had a child, and after her divorce from her Dutch husband she made more friends among women. At this stage, Ms Mary O'Mara, whose mother-in-law, she said, was Kate O'Brien's sister, denied the implications of what Mr Jordan had said. She was in possession of all the relevant legal documents which dismissed such a possibility. Other speakers defended the Limerick novelist and the chairman of the session said that Kate O'Brien's high status as an author will continue. (One wonders exactly what legal documents existed to dismiss the possibility that Kate O'Brien was "mannish"!). (3-4)

As Walshe notes, the significance of this episode lies in the idea that in defending O'Brien against the accusation of lesbianism, her family are protecting her reputation as a writer. Queerness becomes gossip, knowledge that is unremarkable to O'Brien's gay friends and angrily rejected by her family. As Gavin Butt (2005) has argued, "gossip, and other informal modes of talk, perpetuate narratives of artists' sexual lives which fail to be resolved as truth or falsity" (5). In contrast to the "legal documents" offered as evidence by Mary O'Mara, the gossipy details offered by Jordan ("mannish in her ways," "more friends among women") hold a "decidedly *queer* epistemic status" (Butt 2005, 6). Gossip is "illicit" knowledge, "working to methodologically queer normative conceptions of historical materials and methods" (VanHaitsma 2016, 136). In O'Brien's archive, gossip erupts in a disruptively queer refusal of conclusiveness or control. This incident provides crucial background information for the 2019 MoLI exhibition, curated by another member of O'Brien's extended family. In many ways, the exhibition perpetuates the idea that O'Brien's "high status as an author" cannot coexist with her lesbianism, and upholds conventional evidential standards that fail to account for queer life.

The feminist politics of the exhibition are constrained by the desire to assert O'Brien's writerly brilliance, to prove her contemporary "relevance," and to adhere to notions of proof that are legible to a (presumed) straight public. The curator collects quotations from O'Brien's journalism, portraying her as "uncompromising" in her exploration of "the objectification of women and the gender pay gap." The quotation in question reads, "Until women are to some extent in charge of the world's money, we, the females, will have no voice worth hearing in men's greedy wars." Elsewhere, the curator highlights O'Brien's view of the "opportunity for entrepreneurship and empowerment afforded to women through religious careers." Another panel establishes a dialogue with twenty-first century Irish feminist activism: "O'Brien's 1958 novel *As Music and Splendour* describes sixteen-year-old Clare Halvey as 'a vessel, a battlefield' and recalls disputes being played out in every corner of the world about women's position in society." The word "vessel" resonates powerfully with recent reproductive rights campaigns in Ireland (Amnesty International 2015), but then our attention is directed away from specifically Irish political concerns in an attempt to attribute universal relevance to O'Brien's politics. Rather than taking up the

opportunity to examine Clare Halvey as a groundbreaking depiction of an Irish lesbian, the text concentrates on asserting O'Brien's global relevance as a feminist, "in every corner of the world." The result is that the only mention of queer sexualities in the text is couched in the conservative language of freedom of expression:

The book [*Mary Lavelle*] also features a lesbian character, Agatha Conlon [*sic*], who declares her love for Mary [...] Mary's empathetic response to Agatha reflects O'Brien's openness to treating all relationships with the same humanity. In love, as with art, you must be allowed to be yourself. Without freedom of expression, "heart after heart" will "be in pain."

O'Brien's queerness is neutralized by this emphasis on the sameness of lesbian and straight relationships and by the language of universal humanity as expressed by the visionary author. The knowledge systems that uphold Joyce's *Ulysses* as a universally-relevant masterpiece underpin this gesture. In order to maintain her importance as a writer, O'Brien must not be writing from personal experience: to do this would be to confirm misogynistic beliefs that women can only write about female experience. The reaction is an overcorrection, disavowing *any* personal investment in her subject matter as a strategy to maintain O'Brien's precarious place in the canon.

The search for "relevance" that started with an affective connection between two women artists has been tactically subsumed into a vision of the artist who transcends specificity to become an unmarked voice. The insights of feminist, queer and critical race theories over several decades have demonstrated that this unmarked universal always refers to a straight, white man. The text labors to grant O'Brien entry into this category, leaving the default universal unchanged. Ahmed (2014) writes that "comfort is the effect of bodies being able to 'sink' into spaces that have already taken their shape" (152). As I have outlined, the space at MoLI has been formed for a particular (white, male, "genius") model of the writer. The exhibition molds a version of O'Brien to fit into this normative space, but the discomfort this creates is palpable. As Ahmed writes, queer subjects do not "sink" into heteronormativity; their discomfort produces "a feeling of disorientation: one's body feels out of place, awkward, unsettled" (148). Discomfort resounds through the exhibition's awkward phrasing, "you must be allowed to be yourself." This process of not-sinking-in can be described as a "queering of space" (Ahmed 2014, 152). O'Brien queers the museum space, bending it out of shape by her inability to conform to its epistemological demands. Through these breaks in the pristine surface of the institutional container, the ghosts that are banished from the space might find a way to enter.

### **Queerly affective hauntings**

A queer writer like Kate O'Brien makes visible the structure of the epistemologies that regulate inclusion in institutional literary spaces in contemporary Ireland. Her utility to the conservative feminist project of the exhibition depends not only on overlooking her sexual dissidence and queer gender expression, but also on failing to mention her racism, classism, and elitist worldview. The "feminism" envisaged here is confined to a single-issue approach advocating surface-level inclusion. The gatekeepers of O'Brien's archive have been pinning pages together, literally and metaphorically, since the publication of her first novel. *Kate O'Brien: Arrow to the Heart* continues this approach, but in a context where this kind of selective erasure is becoming increasingly uncomfortable. The introduction of even a limited, conservative feminist politics into the institutional space of Irish writing puts pressure on the pins keeping dissenting voices silent. The queering of space that occurs in this exhibition generates an experience of haunting, where affective experience collides with the knowledge structures built into the institution. This is what I have termed

“queer hauntings in the feminist archive,” a situation where the stated feminist investments of a conservative space function to obscure queerness. As a case study in the O’Brien archive, this exhibition offers ways of thinking feminist and queer theories of the archive together, to refigure what feminist archival priorities look like if they are attuned to queer affect.

The discomfort I experience as a queer visitor to this exhibition feels like a state of haunting and being haunted. The archival space created at MoLI is shadowed by the ghosts of those who exceed the knowledge systems regulating the space. I use haunting in the sense outlined by Avery Gordon (2008), to refer to “an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known” (xvi). Queer histories reveal how the social violence of homophobia is compounded by the violence of erasure, especially in relation to questions of censorship and visibility. The process of archiving queer history requires a willingness to listen for ghosts, or what Ilana Eloit and Clare Hemmings (2019) have called a “spirit of openness to presencing the precluded” (352). A queer response to the O’Brien archive makes an effort to “not only repair representational mistakes, but also strive to understand the conditions under which a memory was produced in the first place, toward a counter-memory, for the future” (Gordon 2008, 22).

I have outlined above an understanding of the institutional conditions that constrain the feminist claims of this exhibition. As many theorists have shown, however, feminist archiving does not have to take the reductive form of elevating forgotten women to the same unproblematized status as canonical male authors, but can instead be invested in deconstructing the epistemological foundations of cultural institutions. This strand of feminist thinking is better equipped to engage with the complex politics of O’Brien’s archive, and to produce a form of counter-memory as feminist resistance. Pamela VanHaitma (2016) regards gossip as a “speculative methodology indispensable to feminist and queer ways of relating to the past” (136). Holly Pester’s (2017) theory of archive fanfiction also highlights the importance of episodes like the 1988 argument over O’Brien’s “mannishness,” showing how “female and queer histories are already archived in gossip, in unsubstantiated rumours” (121). For O’Brien’s family, gossip and rumor are threatening, queer forms of evidence that must be dispelled by legal documents. As José Esteban Muñoz (2009) wrote, queer experience breaks apart “the laws of what counts as proof” (65). In Muñoz’s terms, the suggestion, the “trace” of gendered difference is what queers O’Brien, makes her legible as sexually dissident, though the link between the two is unsubstantiated by conventional notions of proof. Taking this queer evidence as a starting point, Pester (2017) proposes “archive fanfiction” and fabulation as feminist epistemologies, taking inspiration from feminist and anti-racist science fiction. The fan is a central figure, with their loving, respectful but also irreverent and intensely desiring approach to the research subject. “The radicalising work of fan fiction reveals the desire for mimetic identities in readers,” a desire that is analogous to and often overlapping with the desire of queer historians and readers (Pester, 123).

Pester’s proposal to put gossip and fanfiction alongside institutional archives suggests a productive way forward for the project of listening for hauntings in the O’Brien archive. For Pester, radical archive enquiry is about declining to privilege any epistemology over another. It is a “gesture of decolonisation” that works to “reveal and displace informational hierarchies” (127). A closer look at *Kate O’Brien: Arrow to the Heart* indicates that efforts to mediate between different epistemologies are a core part of the curator’s vision. A series of creative curatorial interventions open up space for affective experience, facilitating a space for the queer affect that comes up against such forceful erasure in the text of the exhibition. The effect is to “reveal and displace informational hierarchies” and it is this displacement that makes visible the ghosts in the archive. With reference to her theatrical training, Kathy Rose O’Brien devised three installations to occupy the centre of the exhibition floor. There is a school desk inspired by *The Land of Spices*, which is set in a fictionalized version of O’Brien’s own convent boarding school in Limerick; a cafe table drawn from *Mary Lavelle*, evoking the gathering-place for the Irish governesses in

the town of Altono; and finally a packed trunk imagined to be Mary Lavelle's luggage for her journey to Spain. By encouraging the visitor to step into O'Brien's novels in this way, to sit in a cafe reading Spanish newspapers like *Mary* and *Agatha*, or to try on items of clothing imagining ourselves travelling across Europe in the 1920s, or to read the novels stashed away by Anna amongst her schoolwork, bookmarked by a Votes for Women ribbon, the curator encourages a personalized interpretation of the archive led by the senses, a form of fanfiction in the imagination of the visitor.

Though there is no direct relationship with the queerness of the exhibition's subject, some notable resonances with queer methods mark these installations as queer interventions in the O'Brien archive. First, their positioning within the exhibition juxtaposes textual interpretation and visitor-led, playful, sensory interpretation as opposing epistemological systems. The former is associated with conventional museum spaces and academic methodologies, and affixed to the rigid boundary walls of the space, while the latter floats more freely in the open space between the walls. Placing these within the printed "bull-ring" on the floor that signifies O'Brien's "vision of art" is a contestation of archival ownership, challenging the elevated status of the writer and displacing the hierarchy that figures the visitor/reader as a passive consumer. A final touch is the use of window-seats, where the visitor can look out of the building, across the gardens and the city beyond, while listening to excerpts from O'Brien's writing through headphones. Situating the disembodied voices of the characters in the liminal space of a window-seat suggests an understanding of the constraints of institutions, their inability to capture the affective dimensions of literary texts. This liminality reflects the position of queer communities in Kate O'Brien's work, as Amy Finlay-Jeffrey (2020) has argued. The in-between space of the window captures something of the queer epistemic status of gossip, rumor and affect, escaping the fixity of conventional epistemological regimes (Butt, 2005).

Second, the embodied experience of the visitor who engages with these creative installations—the curatorial emphasis on touch—recalls Carolyn Dinshaw's (1999) theorization of queer historical methods as "touches across time" (3). The props and costumes enable a literal touching that stands for the imagined touch across historical periods. This is what Dinshaw might term a "queerly historical" act, a gesture that establishes "a relation across time that has an affective or an erotic component" (50). These imaginary touches are at the core of the queer historian's work. In this exhibition, we are encouraged to pause and experience the affective components of our understanding of Kate O'Brien and her work. The curator recommends an epistemology of feeling as a supplement to her own academic reading of the archive. In these installations, a space is left open that can be put to queer use by the visitor. There is even a typewriter that visitors are encouraged to use to leave a printed record of their impressions, in a direct invitation of fanfictional response. Drawing on her background as a performer, Kathy Rose O'Brien provides a stage for alternative performances, alternative ways of inhabiting the archive.

In the end, then, the touches across time enabled by these installations intervene in the temporal dynamics of the exhibition space. The ghosts that call out to the queer visitor through the experience of discomfort are granted an opening to speak through this disruption of linear temporality. Gordon (2008) writes that haunting "alters the experience of being in time, the way we separate the past, the present, and the future" (xvi). As the visitor enters a scene from one of O'Brien's novels, the separation is abolished, past, present and future are collapsed into a single moment, along with the boundary of fiction and reality, and coalesce around the body of the visitor. The installations allow the visitor to sit with discomfort and disorientation, to focus on how our bodies feel in the space. They are a form of "speculative methodology" (VanHaitsma) or "archive fanfiction" (Pester) that make interpretation radically contingent on the personalized encounter with each individual visitor, never decided in advance. Gossip, trace, sensation, discomfort; all are valued as epistemic modes. Through this theatrical curating, Kathy Rose O'Brien creates the potential for an archive of feelings, in the queer style of Cvetkovich, to exist alongside her more conventional reading of the archive of O'Brien's life and work. It is up to the visitor to listen for the ghosts,

to bring the queer experiences that the curator has not felt compelled to explore back into the archival record.

My experience with the installations inevitably produced a disorienting feeling of connection with the Irish lesbian community invisibilized by institutional notions of respectability and propriety. I visited with my mother, and Anna's school desk became a locus for our complex relationship with the convent school we both attended, thirty years apart, while the packed trunk came to signify conflicting feelings about emigration, queerness and home. I found myself reflecting on my first reading of Kate O'Brien as a twenty-year-old student in Paris, just starting to untangle the repressed queer feelings of adolescence, feeling an uncanny similarity with O'Brien's university-bound, middle-class Irish girls finding themselves in Europe. Like the characters haunting these installations—present but invisible—my experience of leaving Ireland has been inextricable from my queer identity. Discovering Kate O'Brien was my route to reconciling Irishness and queerness. The affective economies of the museum space invoke deep-rooted feelings of shame and stigma that cannot be named in the self-consciously progressive space of this exhibition, which positions itself so adamantly against censorship while continuing to censor. Paying attention to affect in this space disrupts the linear temporality of progressive politics. With Heather Love (2007), I argue that lingering on discomfort, on negative affect, is imbued with queer political significance:

The invitation to join the mainstream is an invitation to jettison gay identity and its accreted historical meanings. Insofar as that identity is produced out of shame and stigma, it might seem like a good idea to leave it behind. It may in fact seem shaming to hold on to an identity that cannot be uncoupled from violence, suffering, and loss. I insist on the importance of clinging to ruined identities and to histories of injury. Resisting the call of gay normalization means refusing to write off the most vulnerable, the least presentable, and all the dead. (30)

The epistemological structures of this exhibition continue to position queerness as a haunting presence in Irish women's writing, a presence that cannot be named, that remains associated with shame and stigma. In contemporary Ireland, where white middle-class gays are welcomed into the nation as symbols of modernity, identifying with these violent histories of erasure is a way of standing in solidarity with queer subjects seen as "least presentable" to the self-congratulatory ethos of Irish institutions.

Queer hauntings in the feminist archive force us to confront the limits of what we can know. Representation is not a teleological process, where the visibility of a feminist Kate O'Brien will pave the way to recognition of her queerness, which will in turn lead to better representation of other marginalized identity categories in whatever inevitably hierarchical order we might construct. This normalizing process is perhaps all that conventional institutional representation can offer. However, as I have shown, creative disruptions of traditional epistemologies can provide a channel for queer affect and open the space out to new uses and realizations. Haunting produces a "something-to-be-done" (Gordon 2008, xvi), a refusal to settle for the impoverished present (Muñoz 2009, 27). Confronting my disorientation through engaging with these installations reaffirmed my commitment to building queerer alternatives outside the institution, but also to being an unsettling presence in progressive spaces, an unhappy, queer feminist killjoy. Ahmed (2019) reminds us that "it is possible for those deemed strangers or foreigners to take up residence in spaces that have been assumed as belonging to others, as being for others to use" (228). This paper is an effort to take up space *as a queer reader* in the institutional space that sets the priorities for Irish literary culture. It is my hope that outlining my path along the fainter trails of O'Brien's queerness will leave them more visible to the next reader looking for affective connection with an Irish lesbian past.

## Notes

1. It is relevant to note that in October 2020 (a few months after the global Black Lives Matter uprisings of summer 2020), MoLI launched a digital exhibition about the Black abolitionist writer Frederick Douglass entitled "Frederick Douglass in Ireland." <https://exhibitions.moli.ie/en/frederick-douglass>

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