1 Foreword

It was 2018 in Trump's America, with the repeal of *Roe* v. *Wade* and the current wave of anti-LGBTQIA+ laws still in the future. I'd been reading, watching, and teaching female-centered crime narratives for the past thirty years, stories full of angry women, ranging from clear-eyed justice-seekers to self-destructive femme fatales.[1] But very little of my crime fiction nous helped me make sense of *Killing Eve*, a BBC series that debuted in 2018, featuring a global cat-and-mouse game between three women: an MI5 agent, an MI6 agent, and a psychopathic assassin. The show, based on a series of novellas by Luke Jennings, and helmed by a different female showrunner each season, is both violent and stylish, horrific and hilarious. It seemed to know, flaunt, and undermine all the rules of representing women in crime narrative.[2] While the genre of crime narrative is broad, as with any genre, there are conventions that shape our expectations.[3] As Lauren Berlant writes in *The Female Complaint*, "a genre is an aesthetic structure of affective experience, an institution or formation that absorbs all kinds of small variations or modifications while promising that the persons transacting with it will experience the pleasure of encountering what they expected" (Berlant 2008: 4). When transacting with crime narratives, even my most cynical self expects some kind of justice. *Killing Eve* dispensed with any of it: Who do you root for? Could this story have a moral? Could it possibly be a feminist moral? I hadn't been this confused since 1991, weeping as Thelma and Louise flew their convertible to certain death while my fellow theatergoers cheered.[4] *Killing Eve* recklessly plays with expectations around the boundaries between female anger and insanity, toying with the "crazy bitch" trope long used to dismiss the legitimacy of women's emotions. I had just finished watching the seventh season of *Homeland*, with its angry, bipolar female spy. My syllabus in the following years would include Natsuo Kirino's *Out* (1997; translated 2003), Oyinkan Braithwaite's *My Sister, the Serial Killer*

[1] I use the term "female-centered crime narrative" to represent works that center female characters and experience. The vast majority of works here are written by authors who identify as female.

[2] The showrunners for the four seasons of *Killing Eve* were Phoebe Waller-Bridge (2018), Emerald Fennell (2019), Suzanne Heathcoate (2020), and Laura Neal (2022).

[3] See Cathy Cole's *Private Dicks and Feisty Chicks: An Interrogation of Crime Fiction*, especially the first chapter, where she suggests that "writing about crime fiction entails defining and interrogating a genre which, like an uncooperative suspect, resists questioning" (Cole 2004: 10). What I call "crime narrative" includes fiction, television, and film, and, for all its variety, retains "its capacity to remain readable or audible across the field of all its variations" (Berlant 2008: 4).

[4] See Rita Felski's chapter "Identifying with Characters" in *Character: Three Inquiries in Literary Studies* (Anderson, Felski, & Moi 2019) for an analysis of complicated "collective identification" with the doomed characters in *Thelma and Louise*.

(2018), and Ottessa Moshfegh's *Eileen* (2015).[5] Madness and anger have long held hands in female-centered crime narrative, but something new seemed to be going on.

Or maybe we were just back where we started, in the messy sensation fiction of the 1860s.[6] In Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1987 [1862]), a wronged woman goes very wrong, solving her problems with (attempted) murder and arson. Feminists have debated her righteous anger or murderous madness almost ever since, most memorably in Elaine Showalter's second-wave roar: "Lady Audley's real secret is that she is *sane*, and, moreover, representative" (Showalter 1977: 167). But the clarity of that call has dissipated. The election of Trump in 2016 was an inflection point in the conversation about gender, anger, and justice, most pronouncedly in the US, but with reverberations around the world. Here is just a sample of the works written about female anger in the years following Trump's election, all of which contribute to my observations: Soraya Chemaly's *Rage Becomes Her: The Power of Women's Anger*, Myesha Cherry's *The Case for Rage: Why Anger is Essential to Anti-Racist Struggle*, Brittney Cooper's *Eloquent Rage: A Black Feminist Discovers Her Superpower*, Carol Gilligan's *Why Does Patriarchy Persist* (with Naomi Snider) and *Darkness Made Visible: Patriarchy's Resurgence and Feminist Resistance* (with David A. J. Richards), Kate Manne's *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny*, Laurie Penny's *Bitch Doctrine*, and Rebecca Traister's *Good and Mad*: *The Revolutionary Power of Women's Anger*.[7] If Trump's election was a primal scene of white-supremacist capitalist hetero-patriarchy (to use bell hooks's entirely apt term), then these works constitute a primal scream.

While anger in female-centered crime narrative is and has been about many things, it is clear today that women are angry about the precarity of justice in a world in which women "compose 70 percent of victims killed by an intimate partner" (Burke & Clarke 2021: 6).[8] The explosion of the True Crime genre has been connected to a loss of faith in the ability of the criminal legal system to

[5] The primary and secondary sources I use in my classes and in this Element are drawn from the Anglosphere, for the obvious reasons of my own English-language limitations, but also because of the outsize role English has played in the critical conversation around crime fiction. This is changing, as both crime fiction and scholarship outside the Anglosphere are recognized as shaping the field and altering our sense of literary history; see Stewart King (2014). While most of my texts were written originally in English, I discuss two in translation: *Out* and Gu Byeong-Mo's *The Old Woman with the Knife*.

[6] Peters (2018).

[7] And the list goes on: Since first writing this manuscript, I now have Elizabeth Flock's *The Furies: Women, Vengeance, and Justice* (2024) and Victoria Smith's *Hags: The Demonisation of Middle-Aged Women* (2023) on my desk.

[8] When this Element uses the words "female" and "woman," it means people who identify as women.

render justice. A significant majority of the consumers of True Crime, often featuring graphic descriptions of female victims, are women.[9] It is also true that 47 percent of white women voted for Trump, and that we tend especially to follow crimes in which the victims are young, pretty, and white.[10] Women are complicated. And even if feminist anger at patriarchal injustice seems straightforward, anger is complicated. Alison Jagger explores the "epistemological privilege" of anger (Jagger 1989). Brittney Cooper explains that the costs of rage "are directly proportional to the amount of power any given woman or girl has when she chooses to wield it" (Cooper 2018: 167). From the stereotype of the Angry Black Woman and its roots in "misogynoir" to the many ways that anger disguises itself, women's multiple social positions and varying cultural backgrounds compound and complicate the expression of anger.[11] But while emotions are messy, the role historically played by Black and working-class writers in demanding more from our anger is clear. Just as Black women, such as Stacey Abrams and Fani Willis in Georgia and Letitia James in New York, have been at the center of the political resistance to Trump, Black women writers have kept us focused on anger's connection to justice from the genre's first stirrings in Pauline E. Hopkins's *Hagar's Daughter* (2021a). Section 1.1 presents a theoretical frame around gender, anger, and justice, drawing from multiple understandings of how female anger has been and continues to be understood, and from arguments about crime narrative's representation of this experience. Section 1.2 provides a brief overview of the sections that follow.

1.1 Structures of Seething: Gender, Anger, and Justice

What is the proper affect for justice in female-centered crime narratives? Anger seems like an obvious answer. Many theorists of anger begin with Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*: "the man who is angry at the right things and with the right people . . . is praised" (quoted in Fisher 2002: 173). Myisha Cherry writes that "long before philosophers like me were born," philosophers understood "anger's uses for preventing injustice and pursuing justice" (Cherry 2021: 62). But as Sianne Ngai explains in *Ugly Feelings*, "while numerous thinkers have

[9] See Cruz 2015; Burke 2021b. See also Laura Browder, who explores female readers' allegiance to True Crime as a mechanism for coping with patriarchal violence (Browder 2006).

[10] The figure is often given as 52 percent, but that was based on less reliable exit polling. See Molly Ball's October 2018 article in *Time* magazine: "Donald Trump Didn't Really Win 52% of White Women in 2016" (https://time.com/5422644/trump-white-women-2016/). Gwen Ifill coined the term "Missing White Woman Syndrome" to explain the disproportionate attention given to white female victims of crime; see https://bit.ly/3JvEH5s). Lenika Cruz (2015) asks "when was the last time the victim in a true-crime story was a young unarmed black man?"

[11] Moya Bailey coined the term "misogynoir" to describe the intersection between misogyny and anti-Black racism (see, e.g., Bailey 2021).

valued anger for its connections to justice, its *justifiability* seems always in question" (Ngai 2005: 182). Or, as Cooper puts it, "owning anger is a dangerous thing" (Cooper 2018: 2). If female anger has, in the words of Anna Bogutskaya, a "toxic unruliness," how do we get the power of disruption necessary for justice without the toxicity (Bogustskaya 2023: 131)? In other words, can we use anger without losing it? Crime writer Megan Abbott, in a 2018 interview, explains that there is

> a lot of rage on all sides that have bubbled to the surface. I think the moment for women's crime fiction is going to last a lot longer than it might have otherwise but then again could it have arrived at any other time? As with everything in literature, something is present before it is quite articulated, and then someone identifies it, gives it a name, and the unconscious becomes conscious.

One way of envisioning this unruly, not-quite-articulated rage is "structures of seething." Riffing on Raymond Williams's concept of "structures of feeling," "structures of seething" allow us to think about a female anger made messy by the many different problems and possibilities contained in and expressed by this rage. Introduced in Williams's 1954 *Preface to Film* and developed in his 1961 *The Long Revolution* (and elsewhere), "structures of feeling" denotes the interplay between the tangible and intangible aspects of the culture of a period, both the visible surface and those unconscious aspects bubbling underneath and, occasionally, up. Williams suggests that structures of feeling register "evidence of the deadlocks and unsolved problems of the society," that are "often admitted to consciousness for the first time" in ephemeral popular culture (Williams 1961: 48). Tangible things, like published literature, can show up in an archive and tell a particular story about the culture and, in Williams's words, its "public ideals," such as justice or democracy. But Williams understands that the canonical texts that tend to stand in for various historical moments do not fully capture "structures of feeling." I suspect readers of Elements in Crime Narratives would concur. Williams's framework holds space for the "intangible," what he knows is there but can't be seen. He understands that art reflects "public ideals," such as justice, as well as the "omissions" from those public ideals, such as injustice struggling to become visible (Williams 1961: 63). Denise Mina agrees. Writing recently about her deal with the Raymond Chandler estate to write three new Philip Marlowe novels, she argues that commercial crime fiction's ability to "mirror a moment . . . potentially imperils a book's longevity" but also provides "the chance to change the way we speak collectively about a moment and become a powerful driver of social change" (Mina 2023).

Being left out of public ideals, such as equal representation under the law, is part of why women are mad as hell. It is not just women; we live in an angry

time.[12] In the US, from contested election results to insurrections and mass shootings, it is impossible to ignore male anger. The expression of female anger is traditionally less visible. As Sara Robinson explains, "Women's rage has been so sublimated for so long that there's simply no frame for what happens when it finally comes to the surface" (quoted in Traister 2018: 241). "Structures of seething" is the frame I've chosen because it apprehends several key aspects of the history, experience, and representation of female anger and attempts to make anger's messiness more legible without requiring clarity or closure, as previous theories of anger have done. "Structures of seething" connote anger's connection to structural violence and power, though, as we will see, one way structural violence functions is by individualizing anger. The use of *structures* indicates that, as Kimberlé Crenshaw has taught us, there are multiple forces that compound to shape an individual's access both to her anger and to justice.[13] A "structure" suggests regulation and containment, as does "seething": one is always "quietly seething."[14] Seething also then suggests a sense of waiting, of biding one's time, which contains the possibility of, to use Sara Ahmed's formulation, a "feminist snap." A snap is "a quick, sudden movement," but, Ahmed explains, it is "only the start of something because of what we do not notice . . . When a snap is registered as the origin of violence, the one who snaps is deemed violent" (Ahmed 2017: 189). Today's violent antihero is less the swaggering hard-boiled sleuth who fights for justice by her own rules with some questionable choices (such as Kate Winslett's Mare in the 2021 TV show *Mare of Easttown*), and more one who has abandoned "public ideals" altogether. As Sarah Hagelin and Gillian Silverman note about today's television antiheroes, women increasingly "want raw naked power . . . or even worse, absolutely nothing" (Hagelin & Silverman 2022: xii). We have seen this coming, from the rise of domestic noir to rape-revenge stories like Emerald Fennell's *Promising Young Woman*, from Lisbeth Salander in the *Millenium Trilogy* to June/Offred in the *Handmaid's Tale*, to the often inscrutable texts on my syllabus.[15]

[12] See Robinson (2023), in which he considers recent feminist writings on anger as well as the question of right-wing anger. A much-reviewed recent work, Pankaj Mishra's *Age of Anger: A History of the Present* (Farrar Straus Giroux, 2017), provides only a cursory consideration of women's anger.

[13] Crenshaw (1991).

[14] In thinking about affective structures, I have been influenced by Manne's *Down Girl* and her understanding of misogyny as a "*systematic* social phenomenon" that thinks about misogyny in terms of "what it *does* to women" as well as what ideologies it upholds and how its "mechanisms of enforcement vary widely, depending on the overall social position of differently situated girls and women" (Manne 2018: 21, 13).

[15] Bogutskaya has an extended reading of *Promising Young Woman* and its demand that we look "directly into an ugly kernel of anger that is both righteous and self-destructive all at once" (Bogutskaya 2023: 130).

Is there a way out of this story somewhere in between compliance and dismemberment? Or is it time to realize that believing in justice has always been for women, to use Berlant's phrase, a "cruel optimism," a continued attachment to something that is hostile to one's flourishing. To be clear, actual justice would never be hostile to one's flourishing; the point here is that to continue to work for it without results (from the criminal legal system to crime narrative) might be.[16] As Rita Felski says about the detective story in *The Limits of Critique* (2015), when "matters of the law have very little to do with matters of justice" the critic "may prefer to side with the figure of the criminal" (Felski 2015: 101). *Killing Eve* demonstrates this truth; it also wonders, in this post-snap world, if it even matters if one is angry, insane, or so angry that you are driven insane.

But it does matter. There has been a long feminist and especially Black feminist tradition of arguing that anger is essential to the recognition of injustice. Audre Lorde wrote in "The Uses of Anger" that every "woman has a well-stocked arsenal of anger potentially useful against the oppressions, personal and institutional, which brought that anger into being. Focused with precision it can be a powerful source of energy serving progress and change" (Lorde 1981: 8). More recently, in *The Case for Rage*, Myesha Cherry argues that anger "makes us attentive to wrongdoing and motivates us to pursue justice" (Cherry 2021: 31). But she carefully distinguishes "Lordean rage" from other types of rages (such as "rogue rage" or "narcissistic rage") that can veer toward violence and chaos; indeed, the need for multiple categories for anger illustrates its unruly nature. Lorde herself qualifies that anger must be "focused with precision." Complicating matters further, if the focusing of women's angry feelings are key to justice, regulation of them is also instrumental to patriarchy.[17] As Soraya Chemaly explains, "abandoning our anger is a necessary adaptation to a perpetual undercurrent of possible male violence" (Chemaly 2018: xix). So when does regulation serve justice and when does it serve the status quo? That is a hard question to answer. The essays in bell hooks's *Killing Rage* suggest that anger, however righteous, can have a "maddening impact," blurring the line between madness and justifiable anger at, say, structural racism, homophobia, or patriarchy (hooks 1995: 23). Laurie Penny writes in *Bitch Doctrine* that rage might look different over time: "when resistance fails to produce relief . . . rage finds outlets wherever it can" (Penny 2018: 375). Carol Gilligan describes "protest" as a natural reaction to injustice, but "when protest proves ineffective . . . despair and then detachment" follow (Gilligan & Snider 2018: 14).

[16] Marcie Bianco makes a similar argument about feminism and equality in her recent book *Breaking Free: The Lie of Equality and the Feminist Fight for Freedom* (2023).
[17] See Manne 2018.

This is all too unruly for Martha Nussbaum, who does not agree that anger is an effective vehicle for justice.[18] In *Anger and Forgiveness*, Nussbaum writes about the two stories of the Furies in Aeschylus's *Oresteia*: the familiar one of fury and violence, and the lesser known one of the incorporation of these mad women back into the social order. She writes, "unchanged these Furies could not be part and parcel of a working legal system in a society committed to the rule of law. You don't put wild dogs in a cage and come out with justice. But the Furies do not make the transition to democracy unchanged" (Nussbaum 2016: 2). Democracy requires a regulation of feeling: The Furies are transformed into "the Kindly Ones" and therefore allowed to be part of society.[19] Nussbaum is concerned that anger is always backward-looking, always about payback: It is too hard to use it and not to lose it. This position is not without merit. Oscar Schwartz, writing about #MeToo, explains that "call out culture" both "achieve-[s] social justice where traditional institutions fail to deliver it" and can also mete out "disproportionate and unregulated punishment" (Schwartz 2018). Clarity where anger is concerned is a big ask.

Crime fiction, despite the stereotype of an all-knowing Great Detective who wraps everything up in the final pages, is not a space of clarity. It is a place where cultural meanings get contested, where, pace Raymond Williams, we might catch a glimpse of our inchoate feelings. Part of anger's messiness is that it is sometimes not easily distinguishable from a range of other feelings that don't have its traditional connections with justice or action. Ngai writes about these "ugly feelings," characterizing irritation as "a conspicuously weak or inadequate form of anger" (Ngai 2005: 35). The feelings that Ngai considers, such as irritation and envy, are "*a*moral and *non*cathartic, offering no satisfactions of virtue, however oblique, nor any therapeutic or purifying release" (Ngai 2005: 6). Allison Pease, writing about boredom and Modernist women's writing, sees boredom as a "manifestation of repressed anger" (Pease 2012: 86). When women feel angry, it can not only look like other things – boredom, guilt, madness – but it can be hard even to know. "The taboos against our feeling and expressing anger are so powerful, that even *knowing* when we are angry is not a simple matter," explains Harriet Goldhor Lerner in *The Dance of Anger*,

[18] It's not just Nussbaum. The idea that justice would be tainted by emotion is built into our notion of justice as blind. Writing in *Why Does Patriarchy Persist*, Naomi Snider explains that in her legal training, "I was schooled in the need to separate reason from emotion and to hide vulnerability. I was taught that emotions – making things personal – polluted the pursuit of justice" (Gilligan & Snider 2018: 103).

[19] Gilligan and Richards call out the patriarchal logic of this move: "The argument for democracy is thus at the outset deeply flawed along gendered lines . . .. Athena enforces the patriarchal gender binary and hierarchy that elevate reason (masculine) over emotion (feminine) and force the suppression of women's anger in the name of rationality and kindness" (Gilligan & Richards 2018: 11).