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Never Tell a Psychopath They're a Psychopath: Defamiliarizing the Queer Psychopath in *Killing Eve*

Ne dites jamais à une psychopathe qu'elle est psychopathe : Défamiliariser la psychopathe queer dans *Killing Eve*

Clare Sears, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Sociology and Sexuality Studies
San Francisco State University
clares@sfsu.edu

Abstract

"Psychopath" is a highly contested culturally constructed category of knowledge that has deep and durable ties to queerness. Multiple scholars have explored these ties in psychiatric and legal discourse, as well as in popular media that frames psychopathy as synonymous with monstrosity. Few studies, however, have explored media representations of the queer psychopath as a distinctly psychiatric type. To address this gap, this article explores representations of the queer psychopath figure in BBC America's hit television show *Killing Eve* (2018-2022). Rooted in historical and cultural analysis, the article documents close linkages between psychopathy and queerness during the twentieth century and explores *Killing Eve's* recent engagements with the queer psychopath trope. Using the concept of defamiliarization, the article argues that *Killing Eve* disrupts queer psychopathy as a category of knowledge in three specific ways: (a) multiplying and dispersing non-normative sexualities and psychologies across numerous settings, (b) deploying same-sex desires as a mechanism for psychopathy's undoing, and (c) destabilizing psychiatric authority and expertise. The article considers key inconsistencies within the show and concludes that *Killing Eve* actively – if unevenly – facilitates a reimagination of non-normative emotions, psychologies, and desires.

Résumé

Le « psychopathe » est une catégorie de connaissances culturellement construite et abondamment contestée, dont les liens avec l'identité queer sont profonds et tenaces. De nombreux scientifiques ont exploré ces liens dans le discours psychiatrique et juridique ainsi que dans les médias populaires qui présentent la psychopathie comme synonyme de monstruosité. Cependant, peu d'études ont exploré les représentations médiatiques des psychopathes queer comme une catégorie psychiatrique propre. Le présent article vise à combler cette lacune en explorant les représentations de la figure de la psychopathe queer dans l'émission télévisée à succès *Killing Eve* (2018-2022) produite par BBC America. À l'aide d'une analyse historique et culturelle, l'article documente les liens étroits entre la psychopathie et l'identité queer au cours du XX^{e} siècle et s'intéresse aux récentes explorations du stéréotype de la psychopathe queer dans *Killing Eve*. En utilisant le concept de défamiliarisation, l'article soutient que *Killing Eve* perturbe la psychopathie queer comme catégorie de connaissances de trois manières : (A) en multipliant et propageant les sexualités et psychologies non normatives dans un ensemble de contextes, (b) en utilisant les désirs homosexuels comme mécanisme de déconstruction de la psychopathie et (c) en déstabilisant l'autorité et l'expertise psychiatriques. L'article examine les principales incohérences de la série et conclut que *Killing Eve* facilite activement – quoique de manière inégale – une réimagination des émotions, des psychologies et des désirs non normatifs.

Keywords
Psychopaths, Queer, Television, Psychiatry, Killing Eve

Mots-clés
Psychopathes, queer, télévision, psychiatrie, Killing Eve

Introduction

Midway through the first season of BBC America's hit TV show *Killing Eve*, the two main characters, Eve Polastri and Villanelle Astankova, meet in a tense and iconic scene. The meeting occurs when Villanelle, a young and flamboyant Russian assassin, breaks into Eve's home. Although the women have barely spoken, they have already developed a mutually obsessive interest in one another: Eve as a middle-aged Korean-American woman and self-described fan of female assassins, recruited by MI6 to track Villanelle, and Villanelle as a bored and immature killer, enamored with Eve's attention. As the two women sit in Eve's kitchen, Eve tells Villanelle that she knows she's a psychopath. In response, Villanelle jokes: "You should never tell a psychopath they're a psychopath. It upsets them" ("I Have a Thing About Bathrooms" 2018). The statement becomes one of the show's most iconic lines, appearing on merchandise, marketing materials, and pop culture lists of top television quotes. It also gestures to one of the show's driving concerns: an exploration of "the psychopath" as a distinct psychiatric and cultural type.

At first glance, this is unremarkable. Psychopath characters are a staple feature of mainstream television, frequently appearing as cold-hearted killers and monstrous villains in crime shows and psychological thrillers. Moreover, *Killing Eve's* lead psychopath character, Villanelle, conforms to many of the stereotypical traits of fictional psychopaths: she is violent, manipulative, and explicitly queer, pursuing sexual desires and relationships that have long operated as signifiers of psychopathy in popular culture. On closer examination, however, *Killing Eve's* engagement with the psychopath in general, and the queer psychopath in particular, raises critical questions about psychiatric classification and psychopathy that are rarely explored on television. In this article, I draw from disability studies, mad studies, and queer studies to analyze *Killing Eve's* representations of psychopathy and to argue that the show actively - if unevenly - defamiliarizes the queer psychopath as a distinct psychiatric and cultural type.

Killing Eve: Sex, Gender, and Psychopathy

Killing Eve premiered on BBC America in 2018 and its fourth and final season aired in 2022. The show was created by Phoebe Waller-Bridge who wrote and produced the first season, loosely based on Luke Jennings' novella series, *Codename Villanelle* (2017). Starring Canadian actor Sandra Oh and British actor Jodie Comer, the show was an international critical and commercial success, winning multiple industry awards in the United Kingdom, United States, Canada, Australia, and Spain.

Killing Eve centers on the relationship between two women: Eve Polastri, a forty-something Korean-American woman who lives and works in London for MI5, and Villanelle Astankova, a young white Russian woman in her mid-twenties who works as an assassin for a shadowy organization known as the Twelve. When Eve is recruited by MI6 to lead an off-the-books operation to track the prolific young assassin, the two women quickly develop a highly charged, mutually obsessive relationship, laced with sexuality, violence, and the interplay of the two. As they pursue each other through Europe in season one, and navigate an increasingly fraught relationship in subsequent seasons, their inexplicable obsession grows, and it is never quite clear if they will have sex with each other or kill each other (or both). Combining and subverting the psychological thriller genre with dark comedy, the show is primarily an exploration of the complexity and queerness of women's desires.

To date, most academic analyses of *Killing Eve* have focused on the show's sexual and gender politics. This is unsurprising. *Killing Eve* foregrounds complex and intelligent women who unashamedly pursue taboo desires, and scholars have lauded the show as a subversive disruption of crime show tropes and a feminist reclamation of "monstrous" women as a source of empowerment and joy (Black 2020; Grübler 2021; Miller, Atherton, and Hetherington 2021; Watson 2019). However, while these studies foreground characters' amoral and anti-social behaviors, they typically gloss over the show's exploration of such behaviors as psychopathic. Instead, scholars discuss Eve and Villanelle as villains, monsters, or femme fatales – terms that are analogous with psychopathy in the popular imagination but that sidestep the politics of psychiatry that make the term "psychopath" distinct. The oversight is notable because *Killing Eve* centrally explores psychopathy as a psychiatric category and directly takes up questions of definition, diagnosis, and professional expertise. Such questions are the forefront of recent work in mad studies that challenges psychiatry's dominion over mental illness (Aho, Ben-Moshe and Hilton 2017; Bruce 2021; Clare 2017; LeFrançois, Menzies and Reaume 2013). Centering the lived experiences of mad people, this scholarship interrogates the power dynamics at psychiatry's core and conceptualizes diagnostic categories as cultural constructions that mobilize and authorize significant harm. In this article, I center *Killing Eve's* representations of the psychopath and bring the show's feminist sexual politics into conversation with critical cultural analysis of psychiatric disability. To ground this analysis - and to contextualize the show's intervention into the politics of diagnosis – I first provide an overview of psychopathy as a psychiatric and cultural term.

A Brief Overview of Psychopathy

Psychopathy is a deeply contested, culturally constructed category that is firmly entrenched in psychiatric discourse and the popular imagination (Jalava, Griffiths and Maraun 2015; Shapland 2019). Similar to other psychiatric diagnoses, the category accrues significance through historical, social, and cultural processes and it imposes meaning upon the experience of living with an atypical mind (Aho, Ben-Moshe and Hilton 2017; Bruce 2021; LeFrançois, Menzies and Reaume 2013). In the early nineteenth century, psychopathy was used as an umbrella term for all mental disorders, but for the past century, it has referred to a narrower and allegedly more dangerous group – psychopaths – who fail to conform to moral, emotional, and relational norms.

Definitions of psychopathy vary across place, time, and institutional domains (Federman, Holmes and Jacob 2009; Shapland 2019). Currently, criminal psychiatrists dominate the field, conceptualizing psychopathy as a distinct personality disorder that is likely intractable and innate. Criminal psychiatrists use a range of indicators to diagnose psychopathy, including grandiosity, superficial charm, an inability to feel empathy, episodic short-term sexual relationships, proneness to boredom, persistent criminality, and persistent violation of social norms. In 1980, the American Psychiatric Association replaced psychopathy with antisocial personality disorder in the DSM-III, but criminal psychologists still utilize and promote the diagnosis, relying upon Robert Hare's PCL-R interview and checklist, which generates a psychopathy score (Hare 1991). The PCL-R is steeped in assumptions of conventional morality and emotionality, and diagnostic interview guides reference non-normative sexual practices, including bisexuality, sadomasochism, and promiscuity. While all psychiatric diagnoses carry stigma, psychopaths are a particularly despised group and many professionals believe them to be untreatable, viewing diagnosis as a risk assessment tool for law enforcement rather than a route to therapeutic care. In contrast, a small group of dissenters reframe psychopathy as a form of neurodiversity that describes atypical ways of processing emotional, relational, and moral inputs. This perspective remains marginal, however, and while public information campaigns attempt to reduce the stigma of other mental illnesses, no comparable efforts to rehabilitate the public image of psychopaths have yet occurred (Ramirez 2014; Shapland 2019; Thomas, 2022).

As a psychiatric and cultural category, psychopathy has deep and durable ties to queerness. In the United States, psychopathy operated as an elastic category during the first half of the twentieth century, encompassing a wide range of antisocial and immoral behaviors including homosexuality (Dennis 2018; Freedman 1987; Jalava, Griffiths and Maraun 2015). In Britain, psychopathy brought disability, gender normativity, and state interests together differently, to pathologize and deny state pensions to "cowardly" men who were unfit for battle in the World Wars (Shapland, 2019). From the 1890s to the 1960s, U.S. immigration law built on these linkages to exclude homosexuals from the nation on the grounds of "constitutional psychopathic inferiority," while state sexual psychopath laws led to the indefinite psychiatric detention of sex offenders, including gay men (Carro 1989; Freedman 1987; Stein 2005). These laws are no longer in force, but psychopathy's ties to normative morality persist and multiple psychiatrists have criticized the construct on these grounds (Gunn 1998; Jalava, Griffiths and Maraun 2015).

Popular culture also plays a key role in establishing and circulating knowledge of psychopathy. During recent decades, media representations of fictional psychopaths have increased and most people's beliefs about psychopaths stem from these sources, not from legal or psychiatric texts (Klin and Lemish 2008; Lopera-Mármol, Jiménez-Morales, and Jiménez-Morales 2022). In television and film, the psychopath is typically depicted as a modern-day monster: dangerous, evil, and oftentimes queer (Federman, Holmes and Jacob 2009; Jalava, Griffiths and Maraun 2015; Shapland 2019; Wilson 1999). Scholars have criticized the queer psychopath trope for framing same-sex desire as a parallel or precursor to evil, while also noting the transgressive joys of watching vengeful queer villains disrupt the status quo (Halberstam 1993; Russo 1981; Schildcrout 2014; Stockton 2007). Most of this work, however, treats psychopathy as a form of modern monstrosity, instead of a specific psychiatric diagnosis. The resulting gap in scholarship accurately reflects the parameters of media representation, but nonetheless naturalizes the psychopath as a category of psychiatric knowledge, suggesting that its definition, diagnosis, and implications are beyond the scope of cultural inquiry.

Defamiliarization

As a television show that examines the intense, obsessive, and erotic relationship of two women, one of whom is diagnosed as a psychopath and the other who develops a complex proximity to the classification, *Killing Eve* provides a novel opportunity to explore cultural representations of psychopathy as a psychiatric category, as well as possibilities for its undoing. In this article, I use the concept of defamiliarization to conduct such analysis, with specific focus on psychopathy's relationship to queerness. This approach draws from the work of Sami Schalk (2018) who employs defamiliarization to explore representations of disability, race, gender, and sexuality in black women's speculative fiction. As Schalk explains, defamiliarization refers to the multiple ways that art and literature can destabilize dominant cultural meanings by rendering taken-for-granted categories of knowledge strange, intriguing, or otherwise unfamiliar. Defamiliarization is particularly useful for troubling dominant understandings of disability and sexuality because it spotlights and challenges the presumed coherence and naturalness of these categories.

Unlike the texts that Schalk analyzes, *Killing Eve* is not a work of speculative fiction, but it nonetheless requires viewers to suspend reality as a condition of engagement. The show is located in a real-world setting, but its larger-than-life characters, lush cinematography, and outlandish plots invite audiences into an off-kilter milieu where the rules of social reality do not consistently apply. Throughout the show, absurdity and violence exist side-by-side and actions frequently take place without consequence or logic. Most notably, Villanelle engages in multiple theatrical kills, sometimes in front of large audiences, but these never attract legal attention, except from her love-interest, Eve. Despite its focus on spectacular violence, *Killing Eve* is wickedly funny, steeped in escapism, excess, and taboo thrills. Widely viewed as an off-beat queer love story, the show encourages viewers to root for the unlikely couple and carves out space for different imaginaries to emerge.

Killing Eve: Defamiliarizing the Queer Psychopath

In this analysis, I argue that *Killing Ev*e defamiliarizes the queer psychopath as a legible figure in three main ways. First, *Killing Eve* represents a wide range of non-normative psychologies and sexualities that are rarely attached to specific identities. This destabilizes the notion of a fixed normative psychology or sexuality against which the queer psychopath can be defined. Second, although the show ties together same-sex desires and psychopathic behaviors, it often does so in unexpected ways, deploying same-sex desires as a mechanism for psychopathy's undoing, rather than one of its constitutive signs. Finally, *Killing Eve* contains multiple diagnostic scenes that trouble professional authority. In these scenes, the question is not whether Villanelle or Eve is a psychopath, but on what grounds (if any) psychopathy can be known. Undoubtedly, *Killing Eve’s* depictions of psychopathy are inconsistent and sometimes reinforce dominant tropes. In this analysis, I acknowledge such inconsistencies, while retaining a central focus on the multiple scenes that disrupt taken-for-granted assumptions about psychopathy in general and queer psychopathy in particular.

“This Place is Psychopathic”

As a psychiatric category, psychopathy rests on the assumption that moral failings, improper feelings, and anti-social behaviors signify a distinct and disordered personality type. Such signifiers, however, are pervasive in *Killing Eve* where multiple characters engage in behaviors that flout moral reasoning and upend social norms. Psychiatric and popular discourse also link psychopathy to deviant sexualities, but these too permeate the show, reframed as an unmarked norm. By multiplying and dispersing all that is “wrong” about psychopaths across multiple characters and settings, *Killing Eve* questions the normative assumptions that underlie the category and troubles its status as a distinct psychiatric and cultural term.

Killing Eve is located in a cultural landscape where non-normative psychologies and sexualities abound. Notably, these expressions not only exceed the bounds of expected behavior, but also escape diagnostic classification. Eve’s MI6 boss, Carolyn Martens, for example, is one of the show’s most intriguing characters. A woman in her early 60s, Carolyn is brilliant, socially awkward, and emotionally detached, with a palpable loathing for small-talk, social niceties, and cultural conventions. In interviews, the actor who plays Carolyn, Fiona Shaw, has said that she envisions the character to be autistic, but this is never broached in the show (Ahr 2018; Snierson 2020). Occasionally the show directly comments on its loosening of the tie between behavior and diagnosis. In one scene, for example, Eve describes a recently murdered man as a recluse, only to be corrected by Carolyn: "Reclusive, not a recluse. Anti-social, let's say" ("Do You Know How to Dispose of a Body?" 2019). The only exception to the show's refusal to connect behaviors to diagnosis centers on Villanelle, whose identification as a psychopath simultaneously grounds the show and unravels as the storyline unfolds.

Villanelle is not the only character to engage in psychopath-coded behaviors, however, nor are these behaviors confined to her associates within the Twelve. Instead, *Killing Eve* rips psychopathy away from its familiar association with queer killers and crazed assassins to also locate its signifying behaviors in regular domestic settings. In one episode, for example, Villanelle stays with a man named Julian, who is introduced as a "good Samaritan" when he opens his home to Villanelle as she recovers from a near-fatal injury ("Nice and Neat" 2019). The safe suburban home, however, quickly becomes a site of danger and foreboding, as Julian traps his mother in the house, touches Villanelle invasively, and rips the phone from the wall when she tries to call for help. As a quintessential "normal" man, whose gentle exterior masks deeply controlling behaviors, Julian destabilizes the dichotomy between safe heteronormative domesticity and deadly psychopathic violence. As such, he illustrates Villanelle's claim from an earlier episode: "Never trust people on their looks… You can see scary people a mile away. It's the good people you have to worry about" ("Do You Know How to Dispose of a Body?" 2019).

Killing Eve also troubles psychopathy's foundational links to non-normative sexuality by featuring an extensive number of queer characters, beyond Villanelle and Eve. These include Eve's friend Bill, high-ranking government officials, several assassins and their bosses, multiple fleeting and long-term partners, and a vicar's daughter. The show also includes casual sex, threesomes, and consensual kink as regular parts of people's sex lives, and its depictions of heterosexuality frequently stray from heteronormative conventions. Eve's boss, Carolyn, for example, enjoys casual sex with multiple partners and she often quips about threesomes and the agility of her lovers. In fact, Eve is the only main character in a long-term monogamous heterosexual relationship — one that quickly collapses under the weight of her interest in Villanelle.

Although *Killing Eve* foregrounds queer sexualities as an unremarkable aspect of people's lives, these are never attached to specific identities, and on the rare occasion that sexual identity is invoked, its relevance is quickly dismissed. For example, when Eve asks Bill if he is gay after learning of his involvement in Berlin's queer fetish scene, he responds: "I just fall in love with whoever I fall in love with" ("Don't I Know You?" 2018). This separation of act from identity situates *Killing Ev*e within a queer cultural politics that emphasizes desire and fluidity over essence and stability. It also normalizes casual sex, kink, and same-sex desires, disrupting their links to a distinct psychopathic type.

By including a wide range of moral ambiguities, non-normative psychologies, and queer sexualities, independent of classification, *Killing Eve* defamiliarizes the category of psychopathy, refusing to establish a normal ground against which the psychopath can come into view. This destabilizes psychopathy's link to queerness and, more importantly, raises the question of what constitutes normative psychology in the first place. It is against this backdrop, where non-normative psychologies and sexualities exist without attribution, that the show takes up – and takes apart – the psychopath as a psychiatric category.

"I Want to Feel Like That"

In psychiatric discourse, psychopathy is a clearly bounded personality disorder defined by shallow emotions and an inability to feel empathy or guilt. At almost every turn, *Killing Eve* destabilizes this definition through Eve and Villanelle's relationship. The women's bond is complex and unconventional, marked by palpable queer desires that are consistently routed through violence, voyeurism, objects, and other people. Across multiple seasons, supporting characters question Eve and Villanelle about their dynamic: "What's the deal with you and Villanelle?" Eve's coworker, Hugo, asks her ("Desperate Times" 2018). "What intrigues you about Eve?" Carolyn asks Villanelle ("It's Agony and I'm Ravenous" 2022). On a surface level, these questions highlight the strangeness of the women's relationship, but they also point to a deeper and more fundamental question that animates the show: What does it mean to experience complex emotions as – and for – a psychopath? *Killing Eve* does not answer this question directly, but as Eve and Villanelle engage with the problematic on their own terms, they fundamentally disrupt what they as characters and we – as presumptively psychonormative viewers – think we know about psychopaths.

Villanelle's initial appearance in the show suggests she is a relatively straightforward, recognizable cultural and criminal type: a psychopath. As a trained assassin with a penchant for style, Villanelle engages in regular flamboyant violence, killing at least one person per episode. Villanelle derives quasi-erotic pleasure from killing, laughing and gasping as she watches life drain from her victims' eyes. Her kills are unique, highly stylized, and frequently reliant on feminized objects. For example, she stabs one victim in the eye with a designer hairpin and kills another with poisonous perfume, after using a tampon to gain entrance to her hotel dressing room. Other kills, however, are simply brutal, as she slashes throats, shoots guns, and beats people to death with her hands. Villanelle also displays a profound lack of empathy. In one scene, Eve tells her, "I have lost two jobs, a husband, and a best friend because of you," and Villanelle casually replies, "yeah, but you got some really nice clothes out of it" ("God, I'm Tired" 2018). While such scenes are played for humor, they also mark Villanelle as a clearly recognizable psychiatric type: she is a psychopath.

Alongside these behaviors, however, Villanelle exhibits a deep longing for connection and belonging that complicate such classification. Significantly, these desires are firmly rooted in her attraction to women, most notably Eve. Initially, Villanelle's pursuit of Eve conforms to popular and psychiatric understandings of psychopathic sexuality. Villanelle watches Eve from afar with voyeuristic pleasure, she has sex with other women while pretending they are Eve, and she sends Eve romantic gifts that double as threats, including sexy clothing as an apology for murder, lipstick laced with a hidden blade, and funeral flowers that spell Eve's name. Moreover, when Villanelle and Eve meet in person, their interactions are loaded with sexual tension and danger. In one scene, for example, Villanelle breaks into Eve's home, admires her naked body, and pins her to the fridge at knife point, threatening to "push it in slowly" ("I Have a Thing for Bathrooms" 2018). When Eve later reciprocates with violence of her own, stabbing Villanelle as they lie in bed, Villanelle interprets it as a romantic gesture, stating "when you love someone you will do crazy things" ("Do You Know How to Dispose of a Body?" 2019).

As her relationship with Eve develops, however, Villanelle's interest in normalcy, connection and belonging intensifies, stretching in ways that cannot be contained within dominant understandings of psychopathy. For example, after Eve kills a man to save Villanelle's life, Villanelle offers to cook her dinner and then suggests they flee to Alaska: "We could get a cabin. Nobody would bother us there. We'd be normal" ("You're Mine" 2019). The fantasy is cut short as the pair spiral through domestic longings and deadly violence at dizzying speeds. Nonetheless, when they reunite at a ballroom the following season, they share a tender slow dance and Villanelle returns to her fantasy of normality, tearfully telling Eve, as they watch elderly couples dance together: "It's nice to watch them. They seem happy, carefree… I want to feel like that" ("Are You Leading or Am I?" 2020).

Across multiple seasons, Villanelle's desires for Eve defamiliarize the psychopath as a clearly recognizable psychiatric type. Notably, Villanelle does not quit her psychopath-coded behaviors but claims an expanding range of emotions through her attachments to Eve. Rather than mark Villanelle as a psychopath, then, same-sex desires hint at the limits of the classification, pulling her towards a wider set of emotions that trouble its terms. At the same time, Eve's character arc disrupts the meaning of psychopathy even more fundamentally, as her feelings for Villanelle upend the category entirely, triggering a series of actions that destabilize psychopathy as a fixed and knowable trait.

"Define Relationship"

At the beginning of the series, Eve is stable but stagnating in her job and marriage to a loving if dull man who teaches at the local school. Eve is ambivalent about their relationship, confiding in friends that she is bored, but clinging to the marriage as an anchor to normality. In early episodes, Eve says that she has never been sexually attracted to women, even as her friends suggest that her deep interest in female assassins has a sexual dimension. This suggestion becomes one of the show's driving forces, as Eve embarks on an obsessive, dangerous, and increasingly erotic relationship with Villanelle that both reinforces and destabilizes the queer psychopath trope.

Throughout the show, Eve pursues Villanelle with a mix of professional curiosity, morbid fascination, and sexual desire. In season one, Eve describes Villanelle to a police sketch artist in sensuous terms, leading her coworkers to tease her for being attracted to Villanelle ("Don't I Know You?" 2018). When Villanelle sends Eve gifts that straddle the line between seduction and threat, Eve willingly accepts and enjoys them, establishing herself as an equal participant in their dangerous game. Eve even uses an MI6 surveillance earpiece to listen to Villanelle masturbate for her, initiating sex with an unsuspecting coworker as Villanelle whispers encouragement in her ear. Eve regularly jokes that Villanelle is her girlfriend and when a criminal psychiatrist asks if she is in a relationship with Villanelle, she replies "define relationship" ("Wide Awake" 2019).

As Eve's interest in Villanelle grows, she engages in a range of increasingly impulsive and violent actions that blur the line between desire and destruction, normalcy and psychopathy, her and Villanelle. At the end of season one, for example, Eve breaks into Villanelle's apartment and trashes her belongings in cathartic fury. When Villanelle enters, the dynamic shifts: Eve confesses her obsessive feelings for Villanelle and the two women lie together in bed, in a clear prelude to sex, only for Eve to stab Villanelle with a hidden knife. Eve appears to regret her actions, but her disturbing behaviors escalate and by the end of the series, she has kidnapped a child, gouged out a woman's eyes, and killed three times: axing a man to save Villanelle, deliberately stepping on an injured woman's chest, and shooting a man in cold blood.

By suturing Eve's complex queer awakening to violence – and Villanelle – the show treads dangerous ground, reproducing a queer psychopath trope that frames same-sex desires as a precursor to violence and moral decline. In contrast to its other main characters, *Killing Eve* provides little information about Eve's backstory and her psychopath-coded behaviors emerge in clear tandem with her attraction to Villanelle. At the same time, however, multiple aspects of Eve's character complicate and defamiliarize this trope.

First, Eve has a peculiar fascination with female assassins and violence that precedes her encounters with Villanelle. At home, she keeps books, newspaper clippings, and computer files on women killers and psychopaths. When she sees the gory crime scene photographs of Villanelle's first featured kill, she describes the violence as "cool" and attempts to recreate it on her own body, cutting into her thigh with a knife ("Nice Face" 2018). And when Carolyn asks how she knows so much about female assassins, Eve replies "I'm just a fan" ("I'll Deal With Him Later" 2018).

Second, although Eve engages in multiple behaviors that could trigger a psychopathy classification, she is not immediately legible as a distinct psychopathic type. In large part, this is because Eve's behaviors exist in a context that mutes their recognizability. Like Villanelle, Eve is bored, violent, self-centered, and lacks empathy. However, as a middle-aged married presumptively heterosexual woman, with a government job in law enforcement, these behaviors have radically different meanings. Eve's boredom, for example, appears to signify typical midlife drudgery, while her interest in violence is contained, at least partially, by her career. Moreover, as a middle-aged Korean-American woman, Eve does not fit the femme fatale image of the young white queer psychopath that Villanelle enacts with ease (Grübler 2021). Significantly, *Killing Eve* rarely addresses characters' racial identities in meaningful ways. One exception occurs in season two when Eve hypothesizes that a new assassin is an immigrant woman of color who uses the low status of service workers to move undetected through corporate spaces. When Eve's hunch proves correct and the assassin is revealed to a middle-aged Korean woman named Jin, the implication becomes clear: similar to Jin, Eve is overlooked and underestimated, as “the kind of woman who people look at every day and never see” (“Nice and Neat” 2019). This has clear significance for Eve’s ability to escape diagnosis, as well as for the category of psychopathy as a whole.

Throughout the show, Eve acts in increasingly psychopathic ways, but the question of whether she is a psychopath remains unanswered. This creates conceptual space between behavior and diagnosis that troubles psychopathy’s status as a clearly bounded category, as well as its taken-for-granted application to Villanelle. From the start, Eve’s assessment of Villanelle’s psychopathy is complex, coming less from her official position as an off-the-books government agent with an undergraduate degree in criminal psychology, and more from her personal interests as a self-described fan. Early in the series, Eve describes Villanelle in complementary terms to a coworker, appreciating the style and skill that she brings to her kills, before noting that she likely scores “high on the psychopathy scale,” a reference to the PCL-R (“I’ll Deal With Him Later” 2018). As Eve gets to know Villanelle better, she continues to view her as a psychopath but persistently prods at the category’s boundaries to reshape it as one component of complex variable personhood instead of an overriding pathology that negates all else. This trajectory culminates in an emotional scene on Tower Bridge in the season three finale, where Eve refuses to echo Villanelle’s negative assessment of herself as a monster, instead insisting that Villanelle is “many things” and that everybody has terrible impulses, only some are better able to keep theirs at bay (“Are You Leading or Am I?” 2020). This statement challenges dominant understandings of psychopathy as a distinct and all-encompassing disorder and displaces psychiatrists as the sole arbiters of truth.

“Stupid Word”

Within professional and popular discourse, criminal psychologists exert significant power over the psychopath diagnosis: they determine the category's parameters; produce and administer diagnostic tests; consult and testify in criminal cases; appear on true crime shows and podcasts; author mass-market books for public consumption; and consult on television shows that feature psychopath characters (Jalava, Griffiths, and Maraun 2015). Criminal psychologists' claims of expertise, however, are highly contestable, and considerable debate exists within and beyond psychiatry concerning the legitimacy of the diagnosis. Popular culture typically ignores such disputes and depicts the psychopath as an absolute and irrefutable type. In contrast, *Killing Eve* presents several scenes that trouble professional authority and the expert knowledge that psychiatrists produce.

For example, the show features several psychiatric sessions that differ from typical treatments or assessments. In the first of these, Villanelle is assessed by a psychiatrist from the Twelve ("I'll Deal With Him Later" 2018). The session inverts the logic of regular psychiatric assessment, as it seeks to establish that she is sufficiently psychopathic to continue working as an assassin. Villanelle appears to pass the test with flying colors, showing no emotion as she looks at gruesome violent photographs and describes her recent kills. At the end of the session, however, Villanelle is visibly shaken when the psychiatrist hands her a drawing of a woman's face, who is later revealed to be Villanelle's former schoolteacher with whom she had an affair. The scene works to establish the diagnostic criteria for psychopathy, while also raising the potential for same-sex desire to be its undoing. Moreover, the scene draws attention to the politics of diagnosis, alluding to the investment of at least some psychiatrists in the existence of a knowable, classifiable, psychopath type.

In a later episode, Eve's own clear if contradictory desires for Villanelle lead to a second psychiatric scene that also undoes psychiatric authority and destabilizes psychopathy as a clear and self-evident category of knowledge. In this scene, a psychiatrist hired by MI6 presents a slideshow on psychopaths at Eve's work ("Smell Ya Later" 2019). The presentation itself is corny and full of mistakes. The title word "psychopath" appears in cartoon lettering over a picture of a red sports car, and the psychiatrist fumbles with words and objects as he describes symptoms against a background of ridiculous animations. Although viewers later learn that the presentation is a test designed to assess Eve's state of mind in light of her obsession with Villanelle – one that she notably fails – it also works to destabilize psychiatric authority over its object of knowledge.

For example, Eve asks the psychiatrist whether it's possible to manage a psychopath for a short amount of time. When he says that he doesn't know, Eve presses: "Aren't you the expert on psychopaths?" Here, the psychiatrist replies: "Yes, I am. So, I know. And what I'm saying is we don't know." This admission captures the real uncertainty surrounding psychopathy as a diagnostic category within psychiatry, an uncertainty that is often overwritten with popular myths and sweeping generalizations that offer the illusion of knowledge. This becomes clear later in the presentation when the psychiatrist explains that the best way to understand a psychopath is to imagine a person lacking all the characteristics that make us human:

> Just take it all away. They're like facsimiles. Copycats. You might as well try to understand a wasp or a stapler, you know hole punch, telephone.

This dehumanizing view cuts immediately to a scene of Villanelle in a hotel room, resting her head in the lap of a young man who just delivered her room service. At her instruction, he strokes her hair and confides that he is lonely, as it is difficult to find the right person for a relationship. Villanelle agrees with him, clearly and visibly sad, as she contemplates life without Eve. Certainly, Villanelle's actions in this scene are not "normal," but they also stand in stark contrast to the psychiatrist's comparison of psychopaths to inanimate objects. Taken together, these scenes not only cast doubt on Villanelle's psychopathy but on the category as a whole, as the women's queer desires for each other undercut the integrity of the diagnosis.

Villanelle also questions the validity of the psychopath category, while never denying her involvement in behaviors that qualify her for the diagnosis. In the iconic scene that opens this article, for example, Eve tells Villanelle what she knows of her, leading with positive qualities, such as intelligence, determination, and hard work ("I Have a Thing About Bathrooms" 2018). When Eve adds that she knows that Villanelle is a psychopath, Villanelle jokes: "You should never tell a psychopath they're a psychopath. It upsets them." Although Villanelle makes light of this by pulling a facial expression that parodies feeling upset, she also states with more sincerity that psychopath is a "stupid word." *Killing Eve* encourages viewers to take this seriously. Maybe "psychopath" is a stupid word that only offers the illusion of knowledge, and that obscures more than it reveals.

Conclusion

Within criminal psychiatry and popular culture, psychopath is a loaded term, operating on dual registers as a metaphor for evil and an official diagnosis of disordered personality. Mainstream media regularly features psychopath characters as monsters and villains but rarely engages the politics of psychiatry that make the category distinct. Within *Killing Eve*, in contrast, the psychiatric category of psychopath is central, structuring the show's narrative as much as queer desire or feminist subversion. Significantly, *Killing Eve* does not deny or rehabilitate psychopathy, but stretches and tests the category's meanings to remake it as more capacious and fluid, and less rooted in expert knowledge and diagnostic truths. Similar to mad studies scholars, the show frames psychopathy as a multi-dimensional "unruly object" that encompasses lived experience, psychiatric impositions, and violations of psychosocial norms (Aho, Ben-Moshe and Hilton, 2017, 294; Bruce 2021). In these ways, *Killing Eve* defamiliarizes psychopathy, pushing viewers to question what they know about psychopaths and to reflect on how this knowledge coheres.

Undoubtedly, *Killing Eve's* depictions of psychopathy are inconsistent and sometimes reinforce dominant tropes. Most strikingly, in the show's final minutes, Villanelle is killed by a sniper, shortly after she and Eve have committed to each other, shared a long-awaited romantic kiss, and defeated the Twelve ("Hello, Losers" 2022). Shrouded in religious symbolism, the ending attracted widespread criticism for negating the premise and promise of *Killing Eve* and for reproducing television's "bury your gays" trope, which kills queer characters as soon as they consummate their relationship (Hannemann 2022; Jaworski 2022; Jennings 2022; Still 2022). Psychopath characters are also routinely killed on-screen, and in post-finale interviews, season four writer Laura Neal emphasized Eve's need to be free of the monstrous Villanelle, contradicting the show's earlier defamiliarizing work (Nemetz 2022; Zalben 2022). On occasion, the show also suggests that Eve's same-sex desires are a pathway to violence, linking queerness and psychopathy in predictable and problematic ways. Finally, despite featuring a Korean-American main character, the show pays very little attention to race, and intersections of Asianness, queerness, and psychopathy are left unexplored, squandering the chance to meaningfully contribute to cultural conversations about Asian women's sexuality on screen (Shimizu 2017).

Alongside its omissions and inconsistencies, however, *Killing Eve* presents many scenes that disrupt dominant understandings of psychopathy and carve out space in mainstream media to reimagine non-normative psychologies and desires. Notably, the show has prompted considerable debate within entertainment media about the parameters and stability of the psychopath diagnosis. Oftentimes, this discussion reinstates psychiatrists as indisputable experts and refamiliarizes psychopathy as a naturalized category, illustrating media's ability to disseminate and popularize psychiatric knowledge for lay audiences (Voronka 2008). Some newspaper and magazine articles, for example, feature criminal psychiatrists who assess Villanelle and Eve as psychopaths, even using the PCL-R to determine a psychopathy score (Bond 2019; Dixon 2019; Heaney 2019). Other articles, however, trouble these terms of debate and present more expansive or contested perspectives on psychopathy (Baskin-Sommers 2022; Heym 2020; Thomas 2022). Podcasts, blogs, and social media fan sites bring additional complexity to these discussions, often incorporating the perspectives of neurodiverse fans (Autistic Film Critic 2019; Mad Chat 2019; Sociopath World 2020). In these settings, people discuss and dissect the questions that *Killing Eve* raises about psychopaths, oftentimes in relation to psychiatric expertise, queerness, and the broader media landscape.

Killing Eve is fundamentally an escapist show, steeped in twisted humor, fantastical violence, and the strange seductive romance of Eve and Villanelle. The show is not an accurate reflection of reality, and its representations of queer psychopathy are implausible beyond the screen. Nonetheless, these representations do important work by troubling taken-for-granted assumptions and prompting different imaginaries. At its best, *Killing Eve* defamiliarizes the figure of the queer psychopath by disputing professional authority and questioning psychopathy's coherence, specificity, and stability as a psychiatric and cultural term. In these ways, *Killing Eve* actively – if inconsistently – interrupts reality to facilitate a reimagination of non-normative emotions, psychologies, and desires.

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