Refusing to Smile for the Patriarchy: Jessica Jones as Feminist Killjoy

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In an early promotional poster for the first season of Netflix's *Jessica Jones* (2015–) the titular character Jessica (Krysten Ritter) glares at the viewer while standing in front of a grimy bathroom stall with the phrase "Fight like a Woman" scrawled across it. The ad foregrounds Jessica's angry persona; similarly, trailers for the show reveal Jessica as a fighter who uses her superhuman strength as a weapon against villainous men who get in her way. These images may operate as a thematic draw for the show, but Jessica's anger serves a far more important role. As Marvel's first women-led live-action superhero franchise—the show also follows Jessica's best friend and adoptive sister Trish "Patsy" Walker (Rachael Taylor) who is edging closer to taking on the mantle of her comic book identity Hellcat—*Jessica Jones* explores gendered counter-knowledge[1] by positioning Jessica as what Sara Ahmed calls the feminist killjoy: Jessica operates through anger and violence in order to draw attention to and ultimately stop various patriarchal abuses of power waged against those who are most vulnerable in society. In so doing, *Jessica Jones* outlines the damaging effects of both neoliberal postfeminism and toxic masculinity in our contemporary moment.

Jessica Jones: Postfeminist Killjoy

Jessica Jones is an adaptation of Brian Michael Bendis and Michael Gaydos's *Alias*, a twenty-eight-issue series published between 2001 and 2004 by Marvel Comics. The show (and the comic) follows Jessica, a former superhero turned private investigator engaged in a violent reckoning with Kilgrave (David Tennant), a supervillain who once used mind control to coerce Jessica into being his girlfriend. Season one follows Jessica's pursuit of Kilgrave (whom she thought she killed) as she tries to mitigate the damage he does in other people's lives while he tries to win her back. The season includes a series of

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violent events where Kilgrave aims to get closer to Jessica while she continues to try and destroy him. The season ends in a tense standoff at a ferry with many lives at stake, including Trish who is captive and under his spell. Jessica successfully kills Kilgrave and is seen by the public as a vigilante hero. The narrative arc in season one thus explores the possibility of women's survival from intimate partner violence, and as the season ends, Jessica is flooded with phone calls and voicemails of people seeking her help against abusers in their lives. This public recognition forces Jessica to reluctantly see the positive effects of her actions even as she struggles with the lives she has cost in the process.[2]

Melissa Rosenberg, the television series' showrunner and executive producer, explicitly frames *Jessica Jones* as a feminist show (Sperling); namely, while *Jessica Jones*'s initial release in 2015 predates the October 2017 viral uptake of Tarana Burke's 2006 #MeToo movement, the theme of a traumatized woman protagonist reckoning with her past abuses while forging a new future for herself resonates with issues central to #MeToo and addresses the real-world shifting currents of feminism. The cinematic style of the show also serves feminist goals by refashioning the *film noir* genre within the context of a superhero universe. The show shares with classic *film noir* and more recent 1990s *neo-noir* films a set of stylistic conventions including "voice-over narration, night time settings, low-key lighting, expressionist camera angles and movements, fractured storylines and a pessimistic mood" as well as an explicit use of color coding (Lindop 10). These stylistic effects are employed by the series to set up a world that is hostile to the central protagonist. For instance, similar to how *neo-noir* works with saturated reds, blues, greens, and yellows (Lindop 10), the show works extensively with a deep neon purple alongside the *noir*'s standard grey and black palette. The show manifests this aesthetic overlap by shading the entire world with an ominous purple-hue—i.e., Kilgrave's purple—that creates existential dread for Jessica while she fights against her abuser.

Jessica is positioned as an anti-hero as an explicit counterpoint to dominant representations of women within the *noir* genre. First, she is a gender reversal of the private eye in classical Hollywood, a figure who was set up to stand out against the dominant norms of masculinity in the 1940s and 1950s. In post-WWII America, the down-on-his luck detective in the gritty world of *film noir* offered a necessary corrective to the relentless optimism of musicals and comedies, providing a clearer barometer of the tensions and anxiety of the post-war culture. Classical *film noir* drew on "hard-boiled detective novels," several of which were developed from literature written by women (Lindop 6-7). Thematically, *film noir* also includes a "mixture of existentialism and Freudian motifs of paranoia and psychological disturbance" (Lindop 7). They draw on Weimar Germany's *Strassenfilm* (street film) which "charts the

path of a bourgeois male descending into the dangers of the city at night and of a proletarian female trying to escape from her life in the underworld" (Lindop 7). Stemming from the *Strassenfilm*, women's role in classic *film noir* as the *femme fatale* was "representative of deep-seated patriarchal anxieties stemming from cultural shifts in gender dynamics taking place in society at the time" (Lindop 1). In a majority of classical Hollywood *film noir*, the downfall of the male protagonists is often the lure of the working-class woman.

The return of *noir* in the 1990s also figured a host of *femme fatales* that equally reflected that decade's anxieties around women's increased visibility and power stemming from the women's movement (Lindop 2). In *Jessica Jones*, however, Jessica offers a curious amalgamation of different character tropes present in both classic *film noir* and its *neo-noir* counterparts. Jessica's character incorporates aspects of the *femme fatale* with the more traditional masculine role of the anti-hero. She is the private investigator who propels the story, but she is also a woman with a past she is trying to outrun. She is hard-drinking, scarred, cagey, and emotionally withdrawn like a hardened detective, but she is also haunted by her past as a superhero and consumed by grief and guilt. These more "emotional" attributes often threaten to ruin her and continuously drag her back into spaces of danger. *Jessica Jones* therefore operates on one level as a significant intervention into masculinist tropes found in classic *film noir* and contemporary *neo-noir* offerings.

While *Jessica Jones* may be reworking *film noir* and *neo-noir* motifs, this amalgamation of the different character tropes resonates with Sara Ahmed's work on the feminist killjoy and the feminist "snap," both of which are instrumentally useful for unpacking *Jessica Jones*. Ahmed notes that when feminists publicly raise issues of sexism and racism, they are labeled killjoys and are often blamed for creating the problem they are pointing out. What the killjoy is said to kill is "life as it is tied to happiness," although "*whose* joy she actually kills becomes the question" (Ahmed, *Feminist* 253). In other words, the killjoy is often thought to kill joy literally but comes to significance through how "she exposes violence" and is herself often seen as a "form of murder" because she is "calling for the end of" systems of patriarchy (Ahmed, *Feminist* 252). Ahmed also argues for the importance (when naming our personal genealogies of feminism) of the feminist snap—a breaking point that brings us to greater awareness, or brings about "a greater feminist urgency within us" (*Feminist* 188). She describes the snap as "the start of something, a transformation…a reaction" to a pressure bearing down on us (188-89). For Ahmed, this snap is a way of coming to feminism, and it is exemplified in *Jessica Jones* in the first episode "AKA Ladies Night" (1.1). Jessica is initially characterized as a dysfunctional loner who has walled herself off from other people through the fog of alcohol she uses to mitigate her personal pain. This changes, however, when Jessica, searching for a missing girl, Hope Shlottman

(Erin Moriarty), discovers Kilgrave is still alive. In a decisive moment, Jessica puts her own need to escape aside in order to save Hope from a similar fate of rape and coercion at the hands of Kilgrave. Toward the climax of the episode, Jessica returns to the scene of her own abuse, an upscale hotel to which Kilgrave takes his "girlfriends," in order to save the young victim. Hope physically resists Jessica because Kilgrave has ordered her not to move and she can't willingly break the command. The super-powered Jessica strong-arms Hope out of the hotel and to safety. Back at Jessica's place, they wait for Hope's parents to arrive and take her back home to Oklahoma. Jessica tries to lessen Hope's despair by asking her to repeat "It is not my fault" out loud for comfort. Hope's parents arrive for a happy, tearful reunion. Jessica sets them on their way and even permits herself a small smile of relief after Hope thanks her for saving her life. All hope is lost, however, when Jessica, still standing in her apartment hallway, sees Hope pull out a gun and shoot her parents dead as the elevator doors close. Running down to the main floor of her building, Jessica recoils from the violent mess of blood and bodies in the elevator. This becomes a site of further distress for Jessica when Hope turns to her from within the elevator and menacingly commands her to "Smile" in a voice directly sent from Kilgrave.

Jessica stumbles in horror onto the street and toward a cab to take her to the airport and somewhere far away to safety. As she hesitates at the door of the waiting cab, we see the moment of transformation, informed by past and present violence, that snaps her into a new mode of killjoy vigilante existence. Her *noir* voice-over narration repeats an observation from the start of the episode: "People do 'bad shit' all the time. Knowing it's real means you gotta make a decision. One, keep denying it, or two, do something about it." It is here we see Jessica snap as she shifts into a place of commitment that underscores her character's actions against Kilgrave for the rest of the season.

When Jessica permits herself a small smile of relief after Hope thanks her for saving her life, this act of recovering Hope seemingly functions for Jessica as a site of redemption for past violence and murder she committed while under Kilgrave's spell. This moment of relief is quickly overwritten as Jessica witnesses the violent scene in the elevator. Her internal struggle reflects those moments when we are confronted with the threat of violence, misogyny, and inequality, and we must decide to deny it or take action. This is what faces the killjoy after their snap, deciding what role they will assume. As a killjoy, "when you expose a problem, you pose a problem," one that "would go away if you would stop talking about it or if you went away" (Ahmed, *Feminist* 37). It is not just about what you are saying as much as it is that you are "getting in the way of something," namely patriarchal, capitalist, and white supremacist modes of being (37). Jessica's snap is a transformative moment: in not fleeing, she turns to fight against Kilgrave and get in his way, a decision that both names

a problem and poses a problem. She names Kilgrave's abuses; she becomes a problem due to her non-compliance; and his misogyny becomes her problem once again as she feels compelled to prevent his abuse of other women. This is the snap that turns her into a vigilante and compels her into violent actions, all of which stem from her own trauma and rage.

Jessica Jones also refuses the logic of a neoliberal postfeminist narrative that both apologizes for and punishes women for "trying to have it all" (Negra 10-12); instead, *Jessica Jones* is part of a larger emergent feminism[3] that favors instead failure, complexity, and moral ambiguity as ways of activating cultural critiques of gendered cultural expectations. As a gendered outgrowth of neoliberalism, postfeminism situates individuals "as entrepreneurial actors in every sphere of life," through their self-regulation, lifestyle choices, and competitiveness (Lindop 14). Rosalind Gill distinguishes between popular feminist discourses tied to neoliberal sensibilities of freedom and agency at the individual level and more activist feminist interests in collective efforts and long-term structural change (616). Gill is wary of a chirpy, optimistic version of popular feminism and cautions against the dismissal of feminism that is angry or full of rage (616). Gill is not alone in seeking the angry aspect within feminism: she is joined by both Halberstam and Ahmed.[4] Each theorist is deeply critical of a worldview that equates happiness and optimism as forms of feminist success; instead, all three scholars see value in the less sanctioned or accepted killjoy feminism as a necessary counter to neoliberal postfeminism.

As a flawed character pushed to her limits by enduring Kilgrave's escalating forms of abuse, Jessica is both sympathetic and resonant in the current moment where feminism must address its own flaws and history in the face of escalating threats to women's freedoms. In other words, Jessica is a character at odds with the benign optimism of women's contemporary "lean in" mandates. She is instead a more fraught figure that harbors rage and violent capabilities, evident from Netflix's earliest promotional materials. *Jessica Jones* therefore uses the feminist killjoy to offer a counter-narrative to neoliberal postfeminist ideals: Jessica is the unruly shadow sister to a postfeminism that eschews second-wave activism in favor of capitalist notions of empowerment tied to consumerist practices and self-branding (Keller and Ryan). Jessica's continued despair, self-criticism, cynicism, lack of hope, and obstinate perseverance, coupled with her role as an angry killjoy, reject shallow postfeminist ideals of girl power and capitalist imperatives to "live your best life."

In these ways, Jessica is at odds with the self-perfecting aims of neoliberal postfeminism; for example, she does not perform a stereotypical version of femininity, at least not willingly. Her style is confined to an androgynous uniform of jeans, tank-tops, boots, and leather jackets. She is not demure and does not acquiesce to men in struggles for power. This is put into stark contrast in the flashbacks to her time as Kilgrave's captive where she is dressed

in more stereotypically feminine clothing, including bright-colored dresses and make-up reminiscent of the 1950s, and forcibly encouraged to smile more. Beyond these flashbacks, the only time Jessica does enact a "traditional" femininity on purpose is to get information out of someone or gain access to a prohibited space. At these points, she hides her strength and power so as to manipulate and disarm the men that constrain her in order to gain access to where she wants to be. Her performance of accepted femininity as a tactic for access into male-dominated spaces directly critiques gendered cultural codes and the limited positions available to women in public. At the same time, Jessica negotiates the negative effects of her superhuman strength that set her apart and she tends to prioritize her individual needs over others. The way she grapples with these issues points out the shortcomings of neoliberal postfeminism, as the outcome of her self-protectionism and competitiveness make it impossible for her to be vulnerable or meaningfully engage with others.

Jessica's trauma and anger are not vilified but justified. Her validation as an angry, powerful woman gives audiences a representational outlet for their increasingly recognized frustrations. At the same time, her failings help engender her feminist challenges. After all, Halberstam argues that "feminine success is always measured by male standards, and gender failure often means being relieved of the pressure to measure up to patriarchal ideals, [which means] not succeeding at womanhood can offer unexpected pleasures" (4); therefore, *Jessica Jones* opens up new forms of viewing pleasure through the types of failure and alternative modes of being that Jessica's character manifests. Namely, where others see Jessica as a hero and a figure of hope, she only sees her power as destructive, a failure of what she ought to be as both a woman and a superhero. In writing on failure, Halberstam asks, "what do you do after hope?" (2). The answer for Halberstam is to recognize the failure as an important form of resistance wherein we lose the "idealism of hope in order to gain wisdom and a new, spongy relation to life, culture, knowledge, and pleasure" (2). Jessica is a clear example of the unexpected pleasure of failure within North American standards of what constitutes successful heterosexual white femininity, in part because of her powers but even more because she is an abuse survivor in a rape culture where abuse is a site for blame and shame—she failed to be a "good" girlfriend; she failed to like it. Jessica also struggles with PTSD, addiction, and has a non-conformist attitude toward beauty standards. As Gill suggests, in the face of neoliberal postfeminist self-branding there is a *need* for a failed woman, a misfit vigilante to grab hold of as an image of alternative possible imaginings. *Jessica Jones* presents a valuable contrast revealing how the failure to succeed on patriarchy's terms can become a promising yet complicated type of survival. It does not idealize the feminist killjoy anti-hero as a smooth path; it reveals the moral ambiguities and difficulties such women face. In the end, the world of *Jessica Jones* is

one of loss, moral ambiguity, and failure where even the characters we are rooting for have complex struggles with self-identity and power; at the same time, the show metaphorically reflects upon struggles within current feminist movements and the popular misogynist backlash that surrounds them, an element of contemporary society directly represented by Kilgrave.

Kilgrave as the Toxic Masculine

Whereas Jessica undergoes a series of struggles throughout *Jessica Jones*, Kilgrave is gleefully jubilant in the series as he uses his mind-control superpowers to turn anyone around him into subservient minions. He is competitive, selfishly individualistic, and devoid of all impunity as he moves freely throughout the world with access to unlimited pleasures and capital, perpetually preying on others in every way possible. Some of his victims kill themselves, some abandon their children, and others willingly mutilate themselves, are placed in publicly humiliating positions, or become addicted to drugs. In essence, Kilgrave parallels Jessica's function as a feminist killjoy, only in this case he has become a monstrous embodiment of contemporary toxic masculinity that flourishes under neoliberalism. As Andrea Cornwall argues, neoliberalism brings forward "new forms of abjection and privation, unspeakable inequalities and an insidious precarity that unsettles the very fabric of our communities" (1). A perversity of abjection, inequality, and precarity abounds in Kilgrave's wake, all of which have very real consequences for those he has put under mind control. In this way, the show uses Kilgrave's actions, and the entitlement he feels in using his powers for his own betterment, to critically allegorize the abuses of a neoliberal system, abuses that privilege an individualism celebrated by a misogynistic patriarchal order.

Kilgrave's actions mirror current forms of popular misogyny in the twenty-first century wherein "rape culture is normative, violent threats against women are validated, and rights of the body for women are either under threat or being formally retracted" (Banet-Weiser and Miltner 172). As noted above, Kilgrave's use of mind control to capture and constrain women as unwilling intimate partners speaks directly to the normalization of rape culture, violence, and control of women's bodies. The women Kilgrave takes as companions are turned servile, complacently performing an obedience that masks their lack of consent behind forced smiles. It therefore comes as no surprise that critics should find parallels between Kilgrave's actions and such contemporary mediated forms of misogyny as Gamergate,[5] which reflects some men's desire to have "the power to be anyone, be anywhere, and do anything without social repercussions" (Chu). Similarly, Rowan Kaiser suggests Kilgrave is a "living, breathing, threatening harassment campaign" who "sees the whole world as a game, himself as the player…and he is willing to try over and over again at the game until he wins." Kilgrave's actions, character flaws, weaknesses, and

explosively violent reactions to Jessica's rejection of his romantic advances echo this rise of a popular mediated misogyny that has drawn significant attention in the last several years, whether in the form of Gamergate, rape culture more broadly, or women's PTSD from sexual violence and emotional abuse. Kilgrave therefore embodies the monstrously toxic masculine that aligns closely with the self-identified incel males of 4chan and other "men's rights activists" online sites.[6] Lacking the features of classically celebrated masculinity, the slight and socially awkward Kilgrave, who is unable to form healthy relationships with women, must compensate for his weakened masculinity with his manipulative mind-powers, ill-gotten wealth, and unrestrained violence.

Kilgrave's power over Jessica (and women in general) is not only direct in his outright control of her but also multivalent insofar as his control is manifest "in a multitude of sexual and nonsexual but always gendered ways" (Peppard 164). Together these different forms of abuse offer insight into "the complicated nature of sexual abuse as an act that is once sexual, violent, gendered, and political, and that attacks not only a woman's body but also her claim to subjecthood" (Peppard 164). Consider Jessica and Kilgrave's first meeting (shown in flashback in Episode 5, "AKA The Sandwich Saved Me"): Jessica is saving a man from being beaten by muggers and Kilgrave comes upon her, enthralled by her superhuman strength. The scene reveals a cruel power dynamic wherein he trivializes her name, style, and ethics—i.e., her subjecthood—to assert his male superiority. After applauding her heroism, he demands she come closer so he can have a look. He objectifies her as a "vision" of hair and skin, but degrades her "appalling sense of fashion" that he concedes "can be remedied." Although he tells her that he's attracted to her because she is powerful, he still mocks her desire to help a stranger in need and then, after she tells him her name, he remarks that it is rather pathetic. He commands her to accompany him to dinner and she willingly follows. The flashback establishes this encounter as the start of a non-consensual relationship built on Kilgrave's use of mind control to keep Jessica captive, her submissive response at odds with the usually strong-willed personality we've witnessed in the preceding four episodes.

Kilgrave's insulting behavior is reminiscent of the type of "negging," or the tactical breakdown of a woman's confidence, that is currently promoted by many self-styled pick-up artists (Banet-Weiser and Miltner 172). Kilgrave thus reflects both long-standing and more recent forms of misogyny that makes the show a touchstone for current conversations around gender and feminism within popular media. Kilgrave quite explicitly wages a campaign of revenge against Jessica as the only "girlfriend" to reject him, or more precisely the only woman strong enough to break his mind-control. Jessica's rejection and her strength encroach on the one thing that makes him unique and powerful in the world, which fuels his hair-trigger emotions: he is alternately pouty and

sullen and then flips to vindictive and cruel. He becomes singularly focused on her suffering through sadistic acts against her, those she loves, and innocent people, and then like his real-world Gamergate compatriots, he angrily fixates on the prototypical alpha males he feels overshadow him. Kilgrave becomes particularly enraged over Jessica's budding relationship with Luke Cage (Mike Colter), a more conventionally alpha male figure who also happens to have superpowers: he possesses super strength and unbreakable skin. Using his mind control, Kilgrave gleefully pits Luke against Jessica in order to hurt her both emotionally and physically, culminating in Jessica having to shoot Luke in the head to save herself. Kilgrave's misogyny, violence, and tenacity mirror the kinds of manipulative tactics and irrational rage of men in online groups, particularly those supportive of real-life male shooters acting publicly in vengeance against feminism (Ging 2017).

The conflict between an unrepentant killjoy (Jessica) out to stop an exemplar of toxic masculinity (Kilgrave) from abusing any more women opens up a narrative means of directly addressing misogyny and rape culture by making these subjects central elements of the narrative. As Natalie Zutter argues, *Jessica Jones* "tackles the subject matter head-on, using the word 'rape' unflinchingly, asserting in nearly every episode what Kilgrave did to Jessica." What stands out is the way the show "presents us with [Jones's] rapist, over and over, and his belief that he did nothing wrong" (Zutter). In one tense dialogue between Jessica and Kilgrave in the episode "AKA WWJD" (1.8), she calls him a rapist to his face. The scene takes place in Jessica's childhood home, which Kilgrave, in a perverse attempt to prove his "love" for Jessica, has actually purchased at double its price (as opposed to simply taking it) and then painstakingly recreated from photos and his previous extractions of Jessica's childhood memories. He has fashioned the house to be an exact replica of what it looked like when she lived there before the death of her family. Jessica goes to the house to try and record Kilgrave confessing to killing Hope's parents so that Hope will be freed from jail, but he convinces Jessica to stay for a romantic dinner by ordering the housekeeper and chef he has hired to kill themselves if she leaves. She chugs a bottle of wine and storms away from the table to her childhood bedroom in response. The next morning Kilgrave reaches across the breakfast table and touches Jessica's arm, prompting her to forcefully push him away and yell, "I told you not to touch me." When he dismisses her objection by reminding her "[w]e used to do a lot more than touch hands," Jessica replies: "Ya, it's called rape." Surprised, Kilgrave asks, "which part of staying in five-star hotels, eating in all the best places, doing whatever the hell you wanted is rape?" Jessica answers, "The part where I didn't want to do any of it. Not only did you physically rape me but you violated every cell in my body and every thought in my goddamn head." When he claims that was not his intention, she states that it doesn't

matter. Kilgrave angrily (and petulantly) asks, "how was I supposed to know?," seeking sympathy for the fact that his words always hold the potential to coerce another person's free-will regardless of his actual intent. Jessica will not relent, even when he complains of not having a loving home to grow up in, and counters that even though she lost her parents at a young age, "you don't see me raping anyone."

This scene is notable for how it pushes back against a standard rhetoric of toxic masculinity and rape culture: it neither engages in victim-blaming nor eroticizes sexual violence against women. Jessica's direct language in unequivocally naming Kilgrave's actions as rape and the exploration of the long-standing effects of this violence without actually showing it on-screen were deliberate choices for showrunner Rosenberg:

> With rape, I think we all know what that looks like. We've seen plenty of it on television and I didn't have any need to see it, but I wanted to experience the damage that it does. I wanted the audience to really viscerally feel the scars that it leaves. It was not important to me, on any level, to actually see it. TV has plenty of that, way too often, used as titillation, which is horrifying. (Hill)

Not only does Jessica confirm her lack of consent as rape, she also does not let Kilgrave talk his way out of the accusation. While Kilgrave offers very stock answers to avoid blame, none of them hold up under her (or the show's) persistent glare. Tellingly, his excuses replicate tropes of rape culture tied to toxic masculinity. He weakly blames her for benefiting from the luxuries of capitalism—nice clothes, posh restaurants, five-star hotels—by asserting she should be thankful he gave her access to any consumer desires she may have had. She calls these out as *his* fantasies of what a woman wants rather than her own wants and desires, at which point he defends himself as ignorant, as not knowing what is and is not within the bounds of consent. Jessica also does not budge in outlining the ways in which he violated her both physically and mentally. Kilgrave's defensive language and denial echo rape apologists who "try to deflect and redirect blame, denying or failing to recognize their own power and responsibility" including their participation in "pressuring women to be sexual creatures, the expectation that sex is something to be cajoled out of a woman rather than granted by her consent" (Zutter). This is one example within the show of how Kilgrave's toxic masculinity becomes a site for working through the troubling practices of contemporary misogyny.

Killjoy Failures: Refusing to Smile as an Act of Survival

In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf remarks that women are often positioned as a looking-glass that can reflect men "at twice [their] natural

size" (35). In the original context, Woolf questions why men are so angry at feminists and why they feel compelled to write so slanderously—in academic treaties, journalism, and public conversation—against women's character (31-35). Woolf read this discursive violence as being "a protest against some infringement of his power to believe in himself," and, under the scrutiny of women's critique, "the figure in the looking-glass shrinks" (36). Woolf's foundational insights still apply to contemporary gendered experience. For example, Kilgrave is a lonely man and an outsider. He is disenchanted with a world he easily dominates but is also not accepted by. He is transfixed by his inability to dominate Jessica, who he knows is his equal but cannot accept lest the sense of superiority that props him up is undone. He seeks her consensual desire for him as a way of proving his self-worth. In a world where Kilgrave has unlimited access to people willing to do his bidding, he needs Jessica to desire him on her own terms beyond his mind-control. Jessica is Kilgrave's looking-glass, and in this fashion, *Jessica Jones* stages a key tension for women: the cultural expectation that women perform a compliant femininity for men's benefit *with a smile*. Hope's demand (under Kilgrave's control) that Jessica smile is the first of Kilgrave's incessant commands for Jessica to smile, a common "suggestion" misogynists and toxic masculinists often demand from women. These moments recall the various requests they receive to smile in their daily life. As Lili Loofbourow argues, "Kilgrave's obsession with smiling is a pointed comment on the widespread phenomenon of men hectoring women to smile on the street, and the point of comparison is to drive home that the difference between 'be happy' and 'look happy' is vast."[7]

Kilgrave's commands for Jessica to smile show the impossible expectations put on Jessica (and women more broadly) to perform femininity according to masculine expectations or desires; yet, this failure to smile, a failure to perform, can have productive outcomes. For example, in the episode "AKA The Sandwich Saved Me" (1.5), we see the second instance where Kilgrave commands Jessica to smile for his pleasure. This occurs during her first phone conversation with Kilgrave after Jessica left him for dead over a year earlier. In the scene, Kilgrave does all the talking, making excuses for turning Jessica's neighbor Malcolm into a junkie: he provided Malcolm with a daily dose of heroin in exchange for photos of Jessica. Kilgrave makes a deal with Jessica that he will leave Malcolm alone if she agrees to send him a selfie every day at ten a.m. She hangs up without comment. He then texts her the same request. She sends a selfie to keep Kilgrave away from Malcolm, but in the image, she refuses to smile. This moment shows Jessica's resolve to both protect those who care about her and also refuse Kilgrave's continued solicitations for her compliance to a performed femininity.

It is perhaps no accident then that Kilgrave's desire to see Jessica smile becomes an even more important narrative point in the final episode of season

one, "AKA Smile" (1.13). In preparing for her final stand-off with Kilgrave, Jessica agrees to let Trish help her take him down. Kilgrave has manufactured more of the serum that gives him his mind-control powers and has taken a large dose in the hopes that he can once again fully control Jessica's mind. Jessica and Trish decide they have to come up with a code word, something that she would not usually say, to signal that she not under Kilgrave's mind-control. Jessica half-jokingly decides on the code phrase "I love you" because such an utterance is not in keeping with her character. This phrase becomes an important counterpoint to Kilgrave's attempted command over Jessica in their last encounter at the ferry dock. To facilitate his escape onto a yacht, Kilgrave threatens Jessica that a large group of innocent bystanders that he had previously ordered to kill one another will resume their murderous intent unless he escapes with Trish as his mind-controlled hostage. He threatens that if Jessica follows him and Trish, he will order Trish to slit her own throat as his "ultimate contingency plan." Jessica is frozen in place, a consequence of Kilgrave's order to everyone to STOP, and Kilgrave approaches her, believing that her inaction to save Trish is evidence that he has regained control over Jessica. In his victorious state, he tries to convince Jessica to leave with him, assuring her that in time she will come to love him as he does her. He asks her to begin by giving him a smile. She does so, fixing a taut grin across her face, just convincing enough for Kilgrave but not for viewers. Emboldened by her compliance with that command he orders her to say "I love you." Jessica subtly shifts her gaze to Trish standing behind Kilgrave and willingly says "I love you," their code word to signify she is not under Kilgrave's control. The spell is broken for good. Jessica quickly picks Kilgrave up, holding his face in her hands. She commands him, with utter contempt in her voice, to "smile" before she snaps his neck and drops him dead on the ground.

As "smile" becomes the final word Jessica utters to Kilgrave, her face twisted in rage, she makes good on the promise of the angry riot-grrrl-esque rock song that opened the climactic scene: Alexis Krauss, lead singer of indie noise-rock band *Sleigh Bells*, screams on "Demons" that "you're gonna pay for it…demons, come on…." Kilgrave indeed does "pay for" all the ills he's unleashed, including his desire for Jessica to smile, to pretend she loves him, to acquiesce to his need for control and ownership over her, and his demand she sacrifice both desire and agency. The demand for a smile functions in this final moment as a vital tipping point for Jessica, enabling her to access her most violent act of refusal yet. The narrative use of the smile in season one of *Jessica Jones* links a seemingly benign act—the smile—to a larger normative structure of power imbalance and shows how the need for a woman to smile masks for some a desire for the woman's compliance to index men's control. The popularity of *Jessica Jones* as part of the larger MCU contributes to this contemporary strand of emergent feminist discourse and gives audiences

permission to be a killjoy in their own experiences, particularly with this common brand of street harassment and patriarchal control.

Conclusion: New (Old) Feminist Futures

We are at a moment where dominant postfeminist ideologies propagate versions of women's success that are tied to heteronormative and largely white neoliberal forms of capitalism. What we need is a sense of what kinds of new wisdoms and new pleasures are available when we fail neoliberal and postfeminist ideals. Shows like *Jessica Jones* tackle this discord, particularly in the face of current social and political challenges. The show doesn't treat Jessica's various forms of failure as a problem to be negated and contained, nor does it offer simple solutions to her insistence on remaining a willful outsider. All of Jessica's choices to fight for a better future come at great cost and sacrifice for herself and others. And yet, they open her up to new forms of being that may be obscured otherwise. It may not be in the purview of *Jessica Jones*, or any cultural text, to single-handedly build long-term structural change, but cultural texts offer us a site where our fantasies and deepest fears are writ large for public consumption, dissemination, and reformulation.[8] Such texts let us think symbolically and in imaginative ways about what we desire to see differently in the world, what we grapple with, and what makes up our snap.[9] Watching larger-than-life characters removed from our own contexts allegorically shoulder our pressing political and existential questions opens a space for us to make sense of as well as negotiate and resist our everyday worlds. Scholars, audiences, and fans have found in the figure of Jessica Jones a productive avatar who reveals a "different way of being in the world and in relation to one another than those posed by the liberal and consumer subject" (Halberstam 2).

From the explicit calling out of rape culture, to the pernicious sexism enacted through Kilgrave's command for Jessica to smile, *Jessica Jones* is a murderous killjoy who brings about the end of Kilgrave and levels a symbolic blow to the toxic masculinity that he personifies. The character of Jessica Jones mirrors for women a superhero-themed fantasy of how they might counter the oppressive sexism in their everyday lives, twisting these questions into a launch point for feminist vengeance narrative. As a feminist killjoy, Jessica Jones finds good company among her fans and viewers as she symbolically twists the many-headed hydra of patriarchy (Halberstam 19) for our viewing pleasure. In this, Jessica fully fails at the types of feminist enactments required of women under neoliberalism.

Finally, beyond the failings of her personal character, Jessica Jones is always failing in her actions as well. While there is a consequence that her repeated failures to thwart and outsmart Kilgrave result in the deaths or coercion of others, these setbacks and her continued refusal to be held back resonate

for those who experience similar stops and starts, forward movement and troubling regressions in political aims toward social justice and more equitable social landscapes. *Jessica Jones* gestures toward the new wisdom that can be gained from failing to comply with the parameters of dominant culture that are pertinent in the current public landscape. Many women are openly mourning and protesting the erosion of women's and marginalized people's rights under current political administrations in the US and globally. There is a large sense of anger circulating across feminist and other activist spaces, an anger that brings many forms of unease and uncertainty both within these spaces and beyond them. As *Jessica Jones* obliquely demonstrates, the angry feminist of 1960s second-wave lore re-emerges today as a vexed figure who refuses to comply with the constraints of present-day global conditions. In their rejection of the politics of respectability required by postfeminism, this newest rising tide of angry feminists, and Jessica as their killjoy, are failing to maintain a polite face—they will not smile.[10]

Notes

1. In his book *The Queer Art of Failure*, Jack Halberstam argues that the types of knowledge afforded by popular culture provide scholars and audiences "a way out of the usual traps and impasses of [gender] binaries" (2). He argues that the "counter-knowledge in the realm of popular culture as it relates to gender and sexuality" (19) both subtly, and sometimes not so subtly, critiques notions of success "tied to heteronormative and capitalist production" (2).

2. Although my focus for this article is on season 1, there is a clear shift in focus in season 2 toward more structural forms of oppression and the fraught tensions between the women negotiating them. While the second season is "a portrait of female rage" (Donegan), it also amplifies the more intimate sites of women's subjugation through a look at women's struggles with their careers, addiction, medical pathologization, media, marriage, and mother-daughter relations. See my forthcoming book *Utopic Refusals: Feminist Media Against Postfeminism* for more details.

3. Jessalynn Keller and Maureen Ryan explain that emergent feminisms in the last decade map an "increase in the presence of feminist politics in the public sphere," specifically in the areas of celebrity feminism, digital spaces and practices, and activist campaigns (1-2).

4. See Ahmed's *The Promise of Happiness* for more details.

5. Gamergate describes a coordinated public harassment attack on prominent feminist critics of sexism in gaming culture that began in the summer of 2014 (Hathaway). Initially, Zoe Quinn was the movement's central focus, but the tactics of doxing as well as violent rape and death threats by self-identified members of the gaming community have also made Brianna Wu and Anita Sarkeesian, among others, the focus of their ire (Dewey).

6. Incel is a shortened version of the term "involuntary celibate" which has been taken up in recent years as an identity within men's rights culture, particularly on Reddit, to convey forms of anger and violence against "normies" or the women who are sexually unavailable (called Stacys) to them and the male partners they chose to be with (Chads). (For more on this term, see Debbie Ging and Zoe Williams). Sarah Banet-Weiser and Kate M. Miltner argue, that "[w]e are in a new era of the gender wars…that is marked by alarming amounts of vitriol and violence directed at women in online spaces" (171). Evidence of this can be found in the sexist, racist, antifeminist pronouncements of trolling culture, including doxing, meme circulation, 4chan, and subreddit communities. These forms of "networked misogyny" respond to a perceived threat that feminists are encroaching men's "rightful place in the social hierarchy" and more specifically "the incursion of women and people of color into what were previously almost exclusively white, male spaces" (Banet-Weiser and Miltner 172). Defining themselves as disenfranchised victims of feminism, 4chan participants employ the platform to "organize a campaign of revenge against women," "social justice warriors," and the "alpha males" who had deprived them of sexual success" (Ging 2017). They articulate what Michael Kimmel calls an aggrieved entitlement (2015).

7. See also Nussmaum.

8. See also Hall and Ryan and Kellner for added details.

9. See Wood and Ahmed for added details.

10. Explicit refusals of street harassment that include the imperative to smile are plentiful in feminist media production. These include countless YouTube videos of women responding negatively to their harassers. And a popular episode of the comedy series *Broad City* where the two protagonists Abbi and Ilana push the corners of their mouth up into a smile with their middle fingers when a man on the street says, "You girls are so pretty, you should smile" ("St Mark's," season 2, episode 10).

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Abstract

This article considers how season one of Netflix's *Jessica Jones* functions as a feminist revenge narrative that situates the titular protagonist as a survivor of patriarchal abuses at the hands of her ex-boyfriend and supervillain Kilgrave. The article explores how Jessica embodies Sara Ahmed's concept of the feminist killjoy. Jessica is a feminist anti-hero who provides an alternative, angry, superhumanly strong avatar of women's everyday negotiations with misogynist excesses. The article reads her as a flawed character who importantly fails the perfectionism tied to postfeminist and neoliberal requirement of contemporary women. This makes her both sympathetic and resonant in the current moment of feminism. As both a symbolic figure and a site of catharsis, the article considers Jones's journey to greater forms of agency in her fight against Kilgrave.

An Account of a Lost Geography: "Of Beleriand and Its Realms"

Cami D. Agan

> This is the fashion of the lands into which the Noldor came, in the north of the western regions of Middle-earth, in the ancient days; and here also is told of the manner in which the chieftains of the Eldar held their lands and the leaguer upon Morgoth after the Dagor Aglareb, the third battle in the Wars of Beleriand.
>
> —J. R. R. Tolkien

Like the larger published Silmarillion, "Of Beleriand and Its Realms" derives from numerous passages of Tolkien's unpublished writings—now available as *The History of Middle-earth*—which Christopher Tolkien, along with Guy Gavriel Kay, compiled and arranged in response to the success of *The Lord of the Rings*. With its publication, *The Silmarillion* provided an account of the Elder Days that Christopher Tolkien likens to "a compendious narrative, made long afterwards from sources of great diversity [. . .] that had survived in agelong tradition [. . .] (viii). Thus, the text contains "condensations of the history of the Elder Days" (*Tales* 7) for readers both inside and outside the literary world. Likewise, in the chapter's opening passage—whether written by a later scribe or viewed as an editorial frame—"Of Beleriand and Its Realms" reflects this sense of compilation and furthers the task of making real the geography and tales of the First Age: it will detail a specific era of the First Age ("after the Dagor Aglareb") as well as the peoples ("the chieftains of the Eldar") and locations ("in the north") associated with those "ancient days" (118). Generally true to this structuring, the account appears to offer very little narrative to offset geographical details, and includes a map of Beleriand alongside the textual descriptions of the Eldar's kingdoms.

Apart from general agreement that geography-landscape plays a central role in Tolkien's sub-creation, and a focus on the process of its compilation from Tolkien's extant writing, the chapter has garnered minimal critical