



DIVERGING THE POPULAR, GENDER AND TRAUMA AKA THE JESSICA JONES ANTHOLOGY

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“Tell Us Which One of Us Was Truly Violated”: Disrupting Narratives of Trauma, Rape, and Consent

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In 2016, North American culture bore witness to unprecedented discussions of sexual assault and consent on social media, in news outlets, and in popular culture. From the portrayal of rape on shows such as *Game of Thrones* (2011–19), *Orange Is the New Black* (2013–19), and *Outlander* (2014–present), to major media coverage of the trials of Jian Ghomeshi and Brock Turner, social discussions of sexual assault—including what constitutes sexual assault and how it is portrayed in popular culture—have never been more relevant or necessary (Opam 2015). Against the backdrop of a post-feminist era in which “the media has become the key site for defining codes of sexual conduct” (McRobbie 2009), Western society is experiencing a resurgence of feminist discourse in popular culture, an increase in celebrities identifying as feminist, and a surge of online communities who hold the film and television industries accountable for their portrayals of rape. In the midst of these sexual assault trials and depictions of rape that make a spectacle of sexual assault, these communities encourage conversations about rape, consent, and trauma in society and in popular culture, and demand better from the industries providing popular entertainment. Situated within this cultural context is *Jessica Jones*, a Netflix original program that took the world by storm for its refusal to portray rape on screen and for appropriately addressing rape and rape culture in Western society (Opam 2015; Sarkeesian 2015; Young 2015). In the series, Jessica’s rape is never shown—neither in the act nor in flashbacks. Rather, the show focuses on how Jessica copes with life following her traumatic experiences.

In *Jessica Jones*, we first meet Jessica in a world she later describes as “after Kilgrave.” Kilgrave, played by David Tennant, is a villainous man from Jessica’s past who can control minds; when he meets Jessica, he becomes enthralled by her superhuman strength and takes control of her mind, forcing her into a relationship with him and, as we learn, raping her over and over again until she breaks free from his control. As a woman with superhuman strength, however, Jessica is not physically weaker than Kilgrave; rather, she is vulnerable to Kilgrave’s power of mind control. Throughout the series, the show uses this initial disruption of normative conceptions of the limits of the human body to push the conversation beyond notions of “fighting back” to interrogate and question common narratives of trauma, victimization, and consent, and to create space for new conversations on trauma, rape, and victimhood in society. Additionally, through discussions of rape and trauma found within the series—in particular, in episodes 1.07, “AKA Top Shelf Perverts,” and 1.08, “AKA WWJD?,” with Kilgrave telling Jessica in the latter episode, “Watch this and tell us which one of us was truly violated!”—*Jessica Jones* creates space within which common narratives of trauma, consent, and violation in Western society can be critiqued, unpacked, and restructured. Ultimately, the representation of Jessica’s body and Kilgrave’s mind control, and the juxtaposition of Jessica’s and Kilgrave’s traumatic experiences, create space for discussions of consent (and consensual “grey areas”), trauma, and definitions of violation—contributing to a widening of cultural narratives and understandings of rape, consent and trauma in North America.

Jessica Jones: A Hard-Drinking, Short-Fused Mess of a Woman

When the audience first meets Jessica Jones, she is a heavy-drinking (arguably alcoholic) and short-tempered woman working as a private investigator at Alias Investigations, which she runs out of her home office. Jessica wears the same grungy clothes every day, she has no friends of note except Trish Walker—a child TV star whose mother adopted Jessica as a publicity stunt after Jessica’s family died in a car crash—and she suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a result of being held captive and repeatedly raped by Kilgrave. Jessica sees hallucinations of Kilgrave on the subway and in her apartment; to calm herself during these traumatic flashbacks, she recites the street names surrounding her childhood home: “Birch Street, Higgins Drive, Cobalt Lane.” Jessica repeats the phrase numerous times throughout

the season. A coping technique provided to Jessica by a therapist she used to see, this is “a grounding mechanism that Jones relies on to pull her back to reality, to quell the trauma that still haunts her. Yet it is also a persistent reminder that she’s a woman who has unwillingly come undone” (Edwards 2015). This depiction of Jessica’s trauma and her attempts to survive each day show a refreshingly honest image of the long-term effects of sexual violence. Jessica drinks too much, she cannot sleep, and she experiences flashbacks, all harsh realities that many survivors of sexual assault must endure. Jessica is, as Luke Cage says, a “hard-drinking, short-fused mess of a woman” (ep. 1.06, “AKA You’re a Winner!”). She is, however, a mess of a woman who possesses superhuman strength and who used to be a superhero.

The audience first witnesses Jessica’s superhuman strength in the first episode, which occurs in the world “after Kilgrave.” In the episode, Jeri Hogarth, a lawyer for whom Jessica works on a freelance basis, hires her to serve a summons to a strip club magnate named Spheeris. Jessica follows Spheeris as he leaves a club without his security guards and gets his attention by asking for directions, and then keeps him from leaving by lifting the back end of his car with one hand when he tries to drive away (ep. 1.01, “AKA Ladies’ Night”). Jessica successfully serves Spheeris with his summons and even threatens him with her laser eyes (a power she does not actually possess). Within the first twenty minutes of the season, then, the audience is aware of Jessica’s physical prowess and her ability to defend herself against cars, let alone predatory men. In contrast to centuries-long debates about evolutionary gender differences, and women’s putative status as the physically (and mentally) weaker gender, Jessica Jones is a force to be reckoned with (Heyward, Johannes-Ellis, and Romer 1986; Miller et. al 1993). Further enforcing this point, Jessica lives alone in New York, often without a functioning door—something Hope Shlottman’s father comments on when hiring Jessica to find Hope, who has been kidnapped by Kilgrave—and she is fully capable of defending herself and others.

When Kilgrave first meets Jessica, as depicted in a flashback, Jessica is using her superhuman strength to save Malcolm from a group of muggers (ep. 1.05, “AKA The Sandwich Saved Me”). The scene opens in the present day with Jessica stopping Malcolm’s drug dealer from shooting him, and Malcolm yelling at Jessica, “You can’t save me again.” The scene fades into a flashback in which Jessica walks down the street and witnesses two muggers assaulting Malcolm while demanding his wallet. “Just end it, bro,” the first mugger says.

“He saw our faces.” Jessica intervenes by throwing the first mugger across the sidewalk, fighting off the second mugger, who is brandishing a knife, and then fighting off the first mugger again, who is now charging at her with a lead pipe (ep 1.05, “AKA The Sandwich Saved Me”). Jessica displays feats of immense strength in the scene as she throws one mugger over a car and the second one through a door of a nearby building.

Clearly, Jessica Jones is superhuman and quite possibly a superhero; most definitely, her body and her abilities do not conform to societal narratives and definitions of human bodies, let alone (argued to be weaker) female bodies. Even the category “superhuman” suggests that Jessica is something more than human. In season 2, her powers are revealed to have come from experiments conducted on her by IGH, a secret research laboratory and genetic technology clinic that conducts illegal human experimentation. Jessica Jones’s body is a hybrid—part human, part genetic technological experimentation—and this hybridity places her body in a “grey area” in which she cannot be classified as entirely or only human. Jessica could be considered a cyborg, an identity that is “predicated on transgressed boundaries” such as those between human and superhuman (or, more traditionally, non-human) (Balsamo 1996, 32). The genetic experiments Jessica undergoes work to transgress not only the boundaries of the human body writ large, but also the boundaries of normative representations of female-gendered bodies more specifically. Instead of a woman who is physically weaker than (and thus succumbs to) her attacker, we are presented with a superhuman who could easily fight off Kilgrave in a physical altercation but who cannot fight off his mind control. Other than Kilgrave’s ability to control her mind, Jessica’s superhuman strength means she is not normally vulnerable to physical attacks by humans. Thus, Jessica’s superhuman body transgresses boundaries and exists outside of normative narratives of the human body and female-gendered bodies.

Jessica’s immense physical strength not only positions her as superhuman and outside normative narratives of female-gendered bodies, but it is also what first makes her attractive to Kilgrave. When Jessica attempts to check on Malcolm after she has fought off the muggers, Kilgrave appears in a scene flanked by three beautiful women. Kilgrave claps and commends Jessica on how amazing she is, commenting, “Here I am, just debating where to eat and then, bam! There you are, performing feats of heroism. . . . You’re a vision, hair, skin . . . appalling sense of fashion, but that can be remedied. And underneath it all the power . . . just like me” (ep. 1.05, “AKA The Sandwich Saved

Me”). This scene, in which Kilgrave refers to Jessica as a collection of those parts of her body of which he approves (hair, skin), is the moment in which Jessica’s violation begins. Kilgrave takes control of Jessica’s mind and free will. The fact that Kilgrave has taken control of Jessica is evident in her changed disposition: she goes from fighting off two muggers to ensure the safety of a stranger, to snapping to Kilgrave’s attention and going for Szechuan with him, leaving Malcolm lying injured in the street. Because of our prior knowledge of Jessica’s physical strength, the audience can presume that if Kilgrave did not have Jessica under his powers of mind control, she could successfully fight him off, stay with Malcolm, and, later on, prevent Kilgrave from committing rape. This fact, in itself, works to disrupt the normative script of sexual violence and helps push the conversation past conceptions of what it means to fight back. The question then becomes not whether Jessica physically fought off her attacker—a question commonly posed to survivors of sexual assault—but whether Kilgrave’s use of mind control and manipulation to force himself on Jessica *counts* as rape (Campbell and Raja 1999; Maier 2008). To Jessica, the answer is a resounding yes; to Kilgrave, the answer is not quite as clear.

Inside Kilgrave’s Head: Top Shelf Perverts

In episode 1.07, “AKA Top Shelf Perverts,” Jessica has become so traumatized by Kilgrave’s relentless attacks on the people she cares about that she resolves to take matters into her own hands: she enters a police station and claims to have manually decapitated Ruben, one of the twins from her apartment complex. In truth, Kilgrave has forced Ruben to commit suicide out of jealousy because Ruben admitted his (unrequited) feelings for Jessica when he caught Kilgrave in Jessica’s apartment. Now, Jessica is using Ruben’s dead body to have herself committed to a supermax prison. Once inside, Jessica hopes to gain video evidence of Kilgrave using his powers to reach her through the multiple levels of security. However, Kilgrave, who has been monitoring Jessica’s movements, comes to the station and uses his powers to prevent the police from arresting her. In their first face-to-face meeting in the series, Kilgrave tells Jessica he has only been trying to make her see the obvious: that their becoming a couple is inevitable.

Kilgrave: I have absolutely no intention of controlling you. I want you to act on your own accord.

Jessica Jones: Act how? Suicide? Is that why you've been torturing me?

Kilgrave: [*Laughing*] Oh my god. Jessica, I knew you were insecure but that's just sad. Torturing you, why would I? I love you.

Jessica Jones: You have been ruining my life—

Kilgrave: You didn't have a life.

Jessica Jones: . . . as a demented declaration of love?

Kilgrave: No! Obviously, I was trying . . . to show you what I see. That I'm the only one who matches you. Who challenges you. Who'll do anything for you.

Jessica Jones: This is a sick joke. You have killed innocent people.

Kilgrave: Well, that . . . that . . . milquetoast little man-boy? He interrupted me while I was leaving you a present, which apparently you didn't even find. Come on! You cannot pretend he didn't irritate you too. I wanted to slap him after thirty seconds! [*Leans in close*] I know. I realize this will take time. But I'm going to prove it to you. (ep. 1.07, "AKA Top Shelf Perverts")

In this exchange, Kilgrave employs a number of tactics often used by perpetrators of domestic violence to control women. Firstly, by following Jessica's every move and appearing at the police station where she is trying to confess to murder, Kilgrave is displaying his significant power over Jessica: no matter where she goes, Kilgrave will be following closely behind. Secondly, by breaking into Jessica's apartment and leaving a "present" for her, he is engaging in stalking and harassment, and he violates the one place Jessica is supposed to feel secure—her home. Thirdly, by insisting that he is going to prove the inevitability of their love to Jessica, Kilgrave is reminding Jessica that he will pursue her until she succumbs to his advances. Kilgrave removes any prospect of a safe space for Jessica: he is everywhere, at all times, he can reach her through anyone, and he is relentless in his pursuit of her. As writer Arthur Chu notes, Kilgrave "may be just one man, but he can act through an army of servants, of which he has a limitless supply" (2015). Just like many women

experiencing violence today, there are no safe spaces or safe people for Jessica Jones (Sarkeesian 2015). Anybody and everybody could be, as Jessica calls it, “Kilgraved.”

Taking this one step further, by laughing at Jessica’s analysis of the situation, calling her insecure, and questioning her recollection of events, Kilgrave engages in gaslighting. As Kate Abramson frames it, the term “gaslighting” refers to “a form of emotional manipulation in which the gaslighter tries (consciously or not) to induce in someone the sense that her reactions, perceptions, memories and/or beliefs are not just mistaken, but utterly without grounds” (2014, 2). Instead of genuinely listening to what Jessica has to say, Kilgrave dismisses her complaints as a sign of her own insecurity. In doing so, he absolves himself of any wrongdoing and places the blame for Jessica’s trauma on her. The key message here is that if Jessica were only confident in herself, she would be able to see that Kilgrave’s actions are declarations of love and not forms of abuse. This undermines Jessica’s ability to think rationally and positions her not just as the token “madwoman in the attic” in need of a mental health practitioner, but also as someone who is ruled by her emotions and in need of Kilgrave’s rationality to properly understand the situation (Munford and Waters 2014). Consciously or not, Kilgrave’s dismissal of Jessica’s account positions her as misremembering and misidentifying events, unjustifiably reading his actions as abusive, and failing to see that they are living in a love story—she just has not realized it quite yet.

Kilgrave’s repositioning of events works to cast doubt on Jessica’s memories of abuse—memories that are already subject to intense cultural scrutiny. Women who experience domestic violence or sexual violence are often called upon to accurately narrate their traumatic experiences, whether in the courts, to police, or to friends and family. As psychoanalytic clinician and feminist Janice Haaken notes, however, trauma can disrupt memory formation by way of “both intrusive remembering—often described as ‘flashbacks’—and amnesia for overwhelming events, accompanied by emotional numbing” (1996, 1070). This disruption of memory formation is evident in Jessica’s life. Indeed, the audience has witnessed Jessica’s flashbacks throughout the series: apparitions of Kilgrave appear in Jessica’s apartment, on the subway, following her wherever she goes. Trauma, and sexual violence in particular, can disrupt our experiences of past, present, and future; trauma “halts the flow of time, fractures the self, and punctures memory and language” (Schwab 2010, 42). The effects of trauma on memory formation often make narrating events in a

chronological, linear manner difficult; for those who experience sexual violence, piecing together the details of the traumatic event can be challenging, to say the least (Brison 2002; Schwab 2010). In this scene, the audience already knows that Jessica is suffering from PTSD and flashbacks, suggesting some potential disruptions in her memory formation. By calling Jessica's memory into question, Kilgrave casts doubt on Jessica's version of events—did it really happen the way she claims, the audience is persuaded to question, or is Jessica simply so insecure she is unable to accurately read the situation, thus inflicting trauma on herself over nothing?

Not only does Kilgrave's repositioning of events cast doubt on Jessica's account, but the workings of trauma place Jessica's rape in a grey area—one that typically is not depicted on television and that is, paradoxically, a far more accurate depiction of many women's lived experiences of gendered violence. After all, Kilgrave is not a stranger hiding in a bush, and he does not use physical force to rape Jessica—both common tropes of rape portrayed on television; rather, he uses mind control to keep her in a relationship and to force himself on her. Furthermore, their interactions after Jessica breaks away from Kilgrave's control could complicate external understandings of what occurred between them. Indeed, as Emily Nussbaum, television critic for the *New Yorker*, states,

Kilgrave raped Jessica, but since he did so using mind control, rather than physical force, the scenario emerges as a plastic, unsettling metaphor, a violation that produces a sense of collusion. Jessica hates Kilgrave, so why, when he requests a selfie of her smiling, does she send him one? She has strategic reasons. But to the world it looks as if she were flirting—and that's what he keeps telling her, too. (2015)

Jessica's decision to appease Kilgrave and send photos of herself, while done to save Malcolm, may cause the audience to question whether her claims about Kilgrave are legitimate. After all, why would Jessica send photos of herself to the man she claims raped her and forced her into a relationship? In the midst of these circumstances, the audience is left to ask: Did Kilgrave rape Jessica? Do their interactions count as rape, even if Kilgrave believes he truly loves Jessica?¹

Returning to the police station scene, immediately following Kilgrave's claim about Jessica's insecurities, Jessica's depiction of Kilgrave and his actions are reaffirmed: a phone rings at a police officer's desk, sending Kilgrave into a rage and causing him to threaten that the next person whose phone rings will have to eat it. Having such a minor inconvenience set Kilgrave into a violent rage shows his inability to regulate his emotions and appropriately engage in social interactions, and it confirms for the audience that Kilgrave's perception of reality is not quite right. This positions Jessica's perception of Kilgrave and their interactions in a more believable light, leaving the audience wondering how Kilgrave sees his "relationship" with Jessica. Jessica then attempts to save the police officers, who are still pointing their guns at each other. Jessica agrees to go with Kilgrave, an offer he rejects, stating, "Oh please, I am new to love but I do know what it looks like! I do watch television!" (ep. 1.07, "AKA Top Shelf Perverts"). Here, it becomes evident that Kilgrave's understanding of love is grossly underdeveloped. If the audience can take Kilgrave's word as truth—that he has developed his perception of love based on what he has seen on television—then his actions in the series, although inappropriate, illegal, and twisted, begin to make sense. As children, we rely in part on television and other forms of media to create schemas and rules about the social and physical world around us (Strasburger and Wilson 2002). In the series, then, Kilgrave is simply mimicking the narratives of love that are displayed on television—and, unsurprisingly, they look eerily similar to women's accounts of rape and harassment. Indeed, as Nussbaum asks, "Is it really such a reach for Kilgrave to insist that Jessica will succumb to him in the end? Tweak Kilgrave's banter, and he'd be a wealthy vampire who desires Jessica above any other woman, a man who is literally irresistible, as in 'Twilight.' Wrench it again, and they'd be role-playing 'Fifty Shades of Grey'" (2015).

This mirroring of normative relationship narratives in popular culture is significant. First, it points to the importance of accurate depictions of healthy and unhealthy relationships in popular culture to the formation of societal narratives concerning love, consent, and sexual assault. Second, it identifies Kilgrave's perceptions of love, consent, and sexual assault as severely distorted by the television industry—an industry that, time and time again, packages stalking, harassment, and sexual assault as the epitome of romance (Brown 2009; Kahlor and Eastin 2011; Reenen 2014). In this moment, the audience comes to understand the vast differences between Kilgrave's and Jessica's accounts of their interactions. Just as many individuals in society do not

identify their actions (or the actions of loved ones, beloved celebrities, etc.) as rape, Kilgrave is unable to categorize his actions as anything but declarations of true love. Kilgrave's continued erratic behaviour and obvious lack of mental or emotional development—particularly, his inability to display love and affection in a healthy manner—leads the audience to rethink Kilgrave's dismissal of Jessica's memory, and to begin to understand the depths to which Kilgrave will go to prove his love for Jessica and to disprove that he raped her.

Who Was Truly Violated—AKA WWJD?

If Jessica is, at first, stunned into silence by Kilgrave's distorted perception of reality in episode 7, she quickly recovers from this and continues to hold Kilgrave accountable for rape throughout the remainder of the season. In the next episode, Jessica, having found the "present" Kilgrave left at her apartment, has joined him at her childhood home (ep. 1.08, "AKA WWJD?"). Now legally owned by Kilgrave and refurbished to look exactly as it did when Jessica lived there with her now deceased family, Jessica's childhood home is the one remaining place that contained happy memories for her. Kilgrave has now violated even Jessica's trauma therapy as he physically infiltrates Birch Street, Higgins Drive, and Cobalt Lane—whose names provide the grounding mechanism Jessica uses to keep her trauma at bay. Left with no coping strategy for her PTSD, Jessica is forced to play her role in Kilgrave's twisted fantasy—recreating her happy memories with him—and yet, she still manages to maintain some semblance of power and control. When Jessica agrees to live with Kilgrave at her childhood home, she does so under one condition: that Kilgrave not touch her. Kilgrave breaks this condition by placing his hand on Jessica's one morning during breakfast, to which Jessica responds by yelling at Kilgrave not to touch her. In the scene that follows, Jessica repeatedly speaks out against Kilgrave's abuse and names it for what it is—rape:

Kilgrave: Come on, Jessie—

Jessica Jones: Don't call me that!

Kilgrave: We used to do a lot more than just touch hands.

Jessica Jones: Yeah, it's called rape. (ep. 1.08, "AKA WWJD?")

This strong and straightforward identification of Kilgrave's actions as rape removes any notion of a consensual grey area from their interactions. When

Jessica finally and actively names Kilgrave's actions as rape, she "invokes [the word "rape"] over and over, explaining to him that by revoking her ability to consent, he violated her in a profound way that he can never make up for, nullifying any 'kind treatment' during that time" (Young 2015). In this scene, Jessica again pushes the normative conversation beyond the concept of physically "fighting back" and holds Kilgrave accountable for removing her ability to fight back. Here, Jessica's words show the audience that the absence of a physical struggle is not the same as obtaining consent.

Although Jessica clearly identifies Kilgrave's actions as rape and directly speaks out about it, this is not enough to create change. In response to Jessica's assertion of rape, Kilgrave attempts to place the blame back on Jessica, to remove his culpability because of his kind treatment of Jessica, and to force her to misremember events to better suit his narrative:

Kilgrave: What part of staying in five-star hotels, eating in all the best places, doing whatever the hell you wanted, is rape?

Jessica: 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.

Kilgrave: That's not what I was trying to do.

Jessica: It doesn't matter what you were trying to do. You raped me, again and again and again.

Kilgrave: How was I supposed to know?! Huh?! I never know if someone is doing what they want or what I tell them to!

Jessica: Oh, poor you.

Kilgrave: You have no idea, do you? I have to painstakingly choose every word I say. I once told a man to go screw himself. Can you even imagine? I didn't have this. A home, loving parents, a family.

Jessica: You blame bad parenting? My parents died! You don't see me raping anyone!

Kilgrave: I hate that word. (ep. 1.08, "AKA WWJD?")

By actively naming their sexual encounters as rape, despite Kilgrave's insistence that it was not his intention to rape her, Jessica reinforces the important nuances in the concept of consent. It is not enough for Kilgrave simply to not have *intended* to rape Jessica; Kilgrave needed to have Jessica's enthusiastic consent without means of manipulation, coercion, or mind control. Here, Jessica's refusal to let Kilgrave misname his actions and her rejection of his claims to ignorance regarding her consent makes "plain text of the subtext of rape culture" (Young 2015). It is not enough for Kilgrave to believe he did not rape Jessica; it is irrelevant that Kilgrave took Jessica to the best hotels and restaurants; it does not matter that Jessica did not physically fight back. Regardless of every other factor, Kilgrave raped Jessica.

When faced with this fact, Kilgrave attempts one more time to sidestep responsibility for his actions by blaming his parents for his behaviour. Kilgrave shows Jessica a video of his parents performing experimental procedures and cerebral spinal fluid extractions on him as a young child, stating, "Watch this and tell us which one of us was *truly* violated" (ep. 1.08, "AKA WWJD?"; emphasis added). In this dialogue, Kilgrave attempts to position his wrongdoing as a byproduct of his own experiences of trauma. He tells Jessica that, firstly, he never intended to rape her and, secondly, that because he was so traumatized as a child and grew up without parents, he never learned how to interact with others in a healthy manner. Indeed, as Kilgrave previously disclosed, his idea of love comes from television. If Kilgrave has only learned about love through television, which often includes problematic depictions of love, how is he supposed to understand complex concepts such as consent and rape? Thus, Kilgrave attempts to make excuses for his behaviour and to diminish Jessica's trauma—situated within expensive hotels and restaurants—in comparison with his own childhood trauma in a sterile, cold, and harsh-looking laboratory. The video clip showing the young Kilgrave being experimented on is horrifying and difficult to watch, and it certainly helps to humanize Kilgrave. It reminds us that "Kilgrave is a victim, too; his powers were forced on him by his parents . . . and he has no idea how to live life without making people do his bidding" (Opam 2015).

However, as Jessica notes, his childhood trauma does not remove Kilgrave's culpability for the trauma he inflicted on her—and it also does not diminish the severity of Jessica's trauma. Rather, despite Kilgrave's arguments, Jessica continues to hold Kilgrave accountable for his actions: no matter his intentions, the abuse he experienced as a child, or his ignorance on the subject,

he removed Jessica's ability to consent and therefore raped her. By naming Kilgrave's actions as rape, by refusing to shy away from the word "rape" despite the negative connotations associated with it, *Jessica Jones* works to narrate Jessica's personal experience of rape in popular culture. This strategy has long been used by the movement against sexual violence, which "works to expose the reality of rape culture through the narration of women's experiences in the public sphere in speakouts and through the media" (Heberle 1996, 63). In one sense, this "speaking out," or what Alcoff and Gray refer to as the "strategic metaphor of 'breaking the silence,'" broadens the discourse about sexual violence and creates space for a more diversified public narrative of sexual violence (1993, 261). In this case, we as audience members add a narrative of rape due to mind control to our cultural understandings of rape, sexual assault, and consent. After all, with her superhuman strength, Jessica was not vulnerable to physical attacks from humans, and yet she was still raped by Kilgrave. Jessica's body does not conform to normative narratives of the female body; likewise, her traumatic experiences do not conform to normative narratives of rape in popular culture. By making room for different narratives of rape—ones that do not necessarily include a physical "fighting back" narrative, or the intention to commit rape—and by relentlessly identifying this particular experience of mental manipulation as rape, *Jessica Jones* creates space for further discussions of what counts as rape.

However, scholars have long noted the existence of a sort of double effect in which "survivor discourse has paradoxically appeared to have empowering effects even while it has in some cases unwittingly facilitated the recuperation of dominant discourses" (Alcoff and Gray 1993, 263). Despite Jessica's attempts to confront Kilgrave for his actions, to make clear that what he did counts as rape regardless of his intentions, her efforts are to no avail. Although the show doesn't fall into the trap of sensationalizing or exploiting survivor stories by showing graphic rape scenes, Jessica's act of speaking out is ultimately futile (Alcoff and Gray, 1993). As Alyssa Mercante states, "For Kilgrave, he saved Jessica and 'gave her everything she wanted.' For Jessica, Kilgrave mentally and physically raped her, invading her mind and holding it hostage" (2015), and this glaring discrepancy in their accounts is never settled. Thus, it would seem that the act of speaking out or narrating one's experience of sexual violence does not necessarily bring about the end of sexual violence (Alcoff and Gray 1993; Heberle 1996). For Kilgrave, Jessica's version of his actions is incompatible with his own view of himself. However, the larger

significance of Jessica's speaking out lies within the plot of the show itself. In the end, *Jessica Jones* exactly mirrors Heberle's argument: instead of continuing to use "the reality or truth of women's pain as a *political* strategy to authorize further action," or make Kilgrave admit he raped her, Jessica does "what is intuitively and understandably expected, that is, making men stop raping and beating women" (1996, 68). In other words, she makes Kilgrave stop raping and assaulting women the only way she can: by killing him. In this moment, Jessica transcends the tradition of narrating women's experiences of sexual violence in the hopes of effecting change, reclaims power over her body and control over her mind, and implements positive change in her own world. Kilgrave is ultimately held accountable for his actions, and Jessica ensures he will never again be able to inflict trauma on others.

A Widened Cultural Narrative of Trauma, Consent, and Rape

In a cultural context in which sexual assault trials hinge on the "grey areas" of consent and popular television shows depict graphic, titillating rape scenes as mere plot devices and/or elements of character development, the alternative depiction of trauma, consent, and rape in *Jessica Jones* is immensely significant. The show's audience bears witness to a piece of popular culture and a strong female lead who insist on believing women's memories of sexual violence, on requiring enthusiastic consent before engaging in sexual activity, and on holding men solely accountable for their actions. If, as Angela McRobbie states, the media "has become the key site for defining codes of sexual conduct," and "casts judgement and establishes the rules of play," (McRobbie 2009, 15) then *Jessica Jones* works to disrupt the normative narratives of trauma, consent, and rape that currently exist in popular culture and in society more broadly.

Instead of relying on onscreen portrayals of rape, *Jessica Jones* focuses on the aftermath of rape to engage in critical discussions of why such violations happen. Notably, although the show does not depict the inciting trauma inflicted on those whom Kilgrave assaults, it dedicates a considerable amount of time to showing the characters' efforts to deal with the effects of this trauma. The audience witnesses Jessica's attempts to "cope with being violated on such a profound level, [and to] grapple with [her] own feelings of guilt and culpability" in being assaulted (Young 2015). We bear witness to the gritty, complicated aftermath of Jessica's trauma, we watch as she attempts to regain some power and control over her life, and we stand with her as her strategies

for coping with this trauma are violated, and as she ultimately confronts and overcomes her abuser. Watching *Jessica Jones* is an emotional experience that works to put the audience in Jessica's shoes, without ever depicting her rape. The show explores the concepts of rape, trauma, and consent with immense sensitivity (Young 2015), and is "unafraid to confront the trauma and victimization of the protagonist without falling into a pit of bad stereotypes" (Edwards 2015). The result is a community of viewers who believe Jessica Jones's claim to being sexually assaulted without ever needing to witness it onscreen—and a renewed emphasis on believing women's stories of sexual assault, without requiring the sharing of titillating details. The exploration of Kilgrave's defences against rape—that he did not know Jessica had not granted consent, that he has only garnered knowledge of love through depictions on television—encourages critical analysis of portrayals of love in popular culture and the concept of consent, and delivers a new narrative of consent into Western society: one in which a physically strong woman is (perhaps unintentionally) raped by a man with a twisted conception of love and the power of mind control. In *Jessica Jones*, then, we witness a widening of cultural narratives and understandings of rape, consent, and trauma in North America. In the end, the audience is left with depictions of consent as something that is actively requested and enthusiastically given, trauma as a complex, long-term effect of sexual violence that manifests in innumerable ways, and rape as something that does not always include a physical struggle and that is committed by friends, strangers, and would-be boyfriends alike, against even the strongest of female leads.

NOTE

- 1 Notably, these questions echo ones often asked of individuals who claim they were raped: Why did you have the accused's number saved in your phone? Why did you agree to a date? Why did you contact the accused following the alleged assault? As witnessed during the trial of Jian Ghomeshi, survivors of sexual assault who do not conform to societal conceptions of "good victims" are often subject to intense scrutiny (Pazzano 2016).

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