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

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Considering *Jessica Jones* as a Moment in Time

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As a Netflix original series, *Jessica Jones* combines the popularity of superhero stories (and those of the Marvel Cinematic Universe in particular) with the grit of a film noir–esque detective series in a single product that appeals to a mass audience. Rather than draw viewers into a strict version of appointment viewing by releasing one episode per week, Netflix chose to release the series as one complete season to be binge-watched by those viewers with the time and then rewatched immediately and at their leisure by fans. Common to most Netflix original series, this decision influences the type of content Netflix chooses to produce as well as the ways in which audiences understand serial narrative. This popular impact also offered the show's creators an opportunity for immediate and helpful feedback that directly influenced the show's storyline, similar to how Netflix's use of data gleaned from its users helps it to determine what content to create. The result was a show that is representative of its time in terms of both content and production.

Through analysis of the viewing habits of its audience and minute classification of its content, Netflix is better able to recognize the products that will appeal most to its audience than traditional television studios. Combining this direct knowledge with daring business practices, Netflix is displaying a confidence in the content that comes from a new and more accurate kind of market research. Netflix usually releases its original content in complete seasons. This has been extremely successful for the company as people make plans to stay home and binge-watch the entire season of their preferred show—creating a new form of event television. In fact, Netflix uses this strategy because it has determined how to retain viewers for a new series. That is, it knows which

episode tends to make a skeptical viewer decide to stay up for three days to binge-watch an entire season of a particular show (O'Reilly 2016). This hook episode is never, according to the company's research, the pilot of any show, which is why Netflix regularly buys a show based on its concept rather than ordering a pilot and then deciding to green-light the rest of the series—the practice used by traditional networks to keep viewers committed and loyal, to render them returning customers (Baldwin 2012; O'Reilly 2016). Knowing that this is how viewers engage with these series gives creators a new way to provide narrative content. Rather than structuring their stories in a way that ensures viewers recall content and maintain a continued interest in the show over an extended period, series created specifically for Netflix distribution can play with the structure since many viewers treat the season of a Netflix show almost as an extended film—that is, they may watch thirteen episodes in one weekend. Media critic Djoymi Baker suggests that these series be considered "epics" and our binge or marathon viewing of seasons a type of "epic-viewing" (2017, 40–1). In fact, as Baker writes, "Netflix encourages customers to think of its products as best experienced in the overall *epic* duration" (40).

We see some of this in the first season of *Jessica Jones* when the storytelling slows down at the moment Jessica and Kilgrave come together in one house (1.08, "AKA WWJD?"). Instead of continuously rushing forward toward the goal of capturing Kilgrave to secure Hope's release, the show allows the audience to consider the possibility of Kilgrave's rehabilitation and Jessica's role and feelings of responsibility in that rehabilitation. This ability to slow down a little rather than moving from action to action is extremely important in a show that comments so obviously on rape, PTSD, trauma, and their after-effects. Ultimately, Jessica decides that it is not her job to save her abuser, and that saving Hope is more important, but the time it takes to consider this possibility helps to flesh out Jessica's motivations while also giving the audience a closer look at Kilgrave's character. Obviously, this is not something that Netflix invented, and the company owes a lot to HBO, AMC, and other producers that position themselves as "more than TV" for popularizing the "narratively complex" long arc in storytelling (Mittell 2006).

In addition to the element of narrative structure, Netflix offers showrunners some flexibility in terms of the maturity of their shows. *Jessica Jones*, for example, was in development at ABC as early as 2010 before finally being passed over by the network in 2012 (Acuna 2015). Kirsten Acuna of *Business Insider* suggests that *Jessica Jones* is "basically an R-rated Marvel adaptation

made for the small screen" (2015), and it is unlikely that ABC would ever have been the right place for this woman who drinks, is promiscuous, and only begrudgingly helps her neighbours when they're in need. We can see that Netflix produces something different from traditional television—something that can be enjoyable while opening up the opportunity for greater conversations—and *Jessica Jones* is one such site of discursive pleasure.

In the preceding chapters, we were introduced to the character of Jessica as presented in this first season. The season as a whole focuses on what it means to be a hero, the different ways to be a supportive friend, the aftermath of trauma, the normalization of gaslighting, and the effects of toxic masculinity. In these episodes we are given some insight into the lives of survivors who have left their abusers but without ever fully escaping their past torments, including in the characters of Robin, Kilgrave's parents, Jessica, Trish and her mother, Simpson and his colleagues in the military, the entire survivor's group, Malcolm, etc. But it is also a story about people working through their demons—as in the cases of Malcolm and drugs, Jessica and misandry/alcoholism/guilt/feelings of inadequacy, Trish feeling weak, Luke and his experience of loss and feelings of weakness. Moreover, it is a story of strength, too, as we saw in part 2 of this collection, where we encountered many different types of masculinity: Simpson and his need to exert control despite the fact the he is never quite the strongest or smartest and is never in charge; Luke Cage and his emotional softness despite his "unbreakable" physicality; Malcolm and his overwhelming need to help those around him even when he can't help himself. We also witness a multitude of femininities: Jessica's typical "strong" female stereotype; Hogarth as the woman who has had to imitate men to get where she is; Trish, who has been weak and refuses to be seen as such, and so fights back with her words while she learns to push back physically, even as she barricades herself in her home; Pam, who seems to be subservient and weak, but who defends Jeri physically and stands up for what she believes in, both in her relationship and ultimately in her life; Wendy, whose whole world is falling apart around her, but who still has an ace up her sleeve; and finally Claire, who sees more "powered" people and a larger situation opening before her and who trusts them to solve her problems while offering whatever aid she can, both in terms of her medical knowledge and her experience with superpowers. Moreover, the show still manages to give us glimpses of wonderful relationships amid the many forms of turmoil charted

here (e.g., between Jessica and Malcolm, and especially between Jessica and Trish).

Are there problems with this series? Absolutely. The focus on strong women who all seem to be fighting against each other is a glaring concern in a show so strongly focused on the aftermath of abuse. Season 2 of the series, while not discussed in the preceding chapters, was made available on Netflix on March 8, 2018, and fans and critics alike were excited to see what the show would tackle next. This season followed the introduction of all four Defenders characters (Daredevil, Jessica Jones, Luke Cage, and Iron Fist) in their own individual series, as well as the combined *The Defenders* series, so quite a bit had happened in New York within the story world of *Jessica Jones*, and Jessica herself would presumably have some new demons to overcome.

After the second season was released, reviewers continued to find the show enjoyable, but they voiced a greater degree of criticism compared to the first season. Many viewers, and particularly racialized fans and critics, were disappointed with the show's continued focus on white women saviours and its lack of people of colour (Caroll 2018; Collins 2018; Flint 2018; Glover 2018; Jasper 2018; Sperling 2018). While the show continues to focus on women's stories, it does so at the expense of people of colour, and women of colour in particular. There is a discernable shift in season 2, with Jessica in recovery and her appearing to move on in terms of her romantic relationships and her interactions with others in general. This season spends more time focusing on substance abuse and the devastation that it can cause to relationships, as well as illness and the accompanying loss of hope; it also lingers on Jessica's struggle with her sense of self and her family relations. For a show that has been so groundbreaking in terms of its realistic portrayals of women survivors of abuse, *Jessica Jones* let its audience down by continuing to focus on—and seemingly forgive—the white survivors despite their increasingly monstrous actions. At the same time, as critics have shown, the show didn't just ignore women of colour, it used those characters recklessly to further the stories of the main characters (Flint 2018; Glover 2018; Jasper 2018).

When we consider the show alongside the other Netflix-Marvel collaborations, we can see how Jessica came to have such a huge responsibility placed on her shoulders. *Luke Cage* is very obviously a show with racial themes, as some of our contributors have briefly shown in their chapters (Fairbarns and Rehal; Stang; Seymour). *Iron Fist* has been openly and repeatedly criticized for appropriating Asian tropes (Bramesco 2017), but it has also been a space

for conversation around the role of women in Asian American action films as well as highlighting the place of the white saviour (if not within the show, then definitely in the discourse surrounding it). And *Daredevil* offers audiences a character who represents a version of disability. If Jessica represents women in this quartet, then her show *should* work to represent all women, rather than just white women. Is it really so much to ask that a superhero show set in one of the most diverse cities in America reflect the community in which it is set? Luckily the discourse surrounding the show has led to some real change. After the first season, *Jessica Jones*'s showrunner, Melissa Rosenberg, ensured that every episode in season 2 was directed by a woman, which further secured the show's feminine voice. After the criticism levelled at season 2 and the show's creators, Rosenberg acknowledged her own blind spot by stating that "it just didn't occur to [her]" (Sperling 2018) that the main characters were white and that she was killing off all of the women of colour. While this response is ultimately quite harsh and tone-deaf, it did lead to some changes.

Season 3 of *Jessica Jones* was released on June 14, 2019, and it took a hard look at the show's own history. The story follows Trish's journey from sidekick to hero to villain as the character of Hellcat, while also introducing a typical, generic, white guy stalker as the season's main villain. Essentially, the villains of the season are, as Patricia Grisafi at the *Mary Sue* suggests (2019), "white entitlement personified." So, while there are also a few new women of colour added to the show, the creators decided to turn Jessica's ever-present camera lens around and point it at themselves with this third and final season to consider the problems caused by white feminism. At the same time, it is undoubtedly true that all three seasons of *Jessica Jones* centre trauma, masculinity and femininity, and the role of the hero in the modern world.

It is clear that Jessica and *Jessica Jones*, both the character and the show, continue to start conversations. While it is unfair to expect her to be the representative for all women superheroes on screen, viewers and critics are right to demand that the show better represent the world its titular character inhabits, particularly given its insistence on placing her in the real world. When *Jessica Jones* was first released in 2015, she was in good company with other women superheroes such as Agent Peggy Carter and Melinda May. By the time the final season was released in 2019, however, Marvel had actually dropped *Agent Carter* (2015–16), *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* (2012–20), though with many more women superheroes, was only a year away from ending its

run, and the promised release of the stand-alone *Black Widow* movie was pushed back (it was finally released in 2021). The future of Marvel's women superheroes at the time seemed to lie with *Captain Marvel* (2019; 2022), the character of the Scarlet Witch (*WandaVision* [2021]), and Kate Bishop in the Disney+ series *Hawkeye* (2021). Despite the progress made by *Jessica Jones* in its final season, it seems Marvel is looking forward to a very white future. It is therefore all the more important that we consider the initial release of *Jessica Jones* and consider the show's continued influence and impact on the industry as Marvel works to integrate its catalogue into the new Disney+ streaming service. Sonia Saraiya at *Variety* points out just how relevant to the cultural moment Jessica has been:

> Jessica Jones is not just Marvel's only female frontwoman, but the franchise's personification of female rage—a force that has become so potent, in the years since her first appearance, that half a million people marched on Washington, Oprah flirted with running for president, and rapists, abusers, and harassers have been dragged out of the highest halls of power and privilege, practically kicking and screaming as they go. Creator Melissa Rosenberg's interpretation of Brian Michael Bendis' comic-book heroine could not have been more prescient. (Saraiya 2018)

This is the character that Marvel and Disney need to consider bringing back to the screen to encourage more adult viewership on the latter's new streaming service: a character and show capable of representing the current moment while also taking criticism and growing because of it. Considering the legacy *Jessica Jones* has created, fans and viewers alike should push Marvel to continuously grow and adapt to the present social and political moment in their other adult Marvel Cinematic Universe content on Disney+ to ensure better women heroes who truly represent their world and allow for public conversations about relevant, if difficult, topics.

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