



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

Edited by: Mary Grace Lao, Pree Rehal, and Jessica Bay

ISBN 978-1-77385-575-2

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Gender and Trauma AKA**

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Diverging the Popular, Gender and Trauma



UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY
Press

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University of Calgary Press
2500 University Drive NW
Calgary, Alberta
Canada T2N 1N4
press.ucalgary.ca

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LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA CATALOGUING IN PUBLICATION

Title: Diverging the popular, gender and trauma : AKA the Jessica Jones anthology / edited by Mary Grace Lao, Pree Rehal, and Jessica Bay.

Other titles: AKA the Jessica Jones anthology

Names: Lao, Mary Grace, editor. | Rehal, Pree, editor. | Bay, Jessica, editor.

Description: Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: Canadiana (print) 20240372212 | Canadiana (ebook) 20240372239 | ISBN 9781773855738 (hardcover) | ISBN 9781773855745 (softcover) | ISBN 9781773855769 (PDF) | ISBN 9781773855776 (EPUB) | ISBN 9781773855752 (Open Access PDF)

Subjects: LCSH: Jessica Jones (Television program) | LCSH: Jones, Jessica (Fictitious character) | LCSH: Women superheroes on television. | LCSH: Superhero television programs—United States—History and criticism.

Classification: LCC PN1992.77.J3635 D58 2024 | DDC 791.45/72—dc23

The University of Calgary Press acknowledges the support of the Government of Alberta through the Alberta Media Fund for our publications. We acknowledge the financial support of the Government of Canada. We acknowledge the financial support of the Canada Council for the Arts for our publishing program.



Canada



Canada Council
for the Arts

Conseil des Arts
du Canada

Copyediting by Ryan Perks

Cover image: Colourbox 30578872, 24079048, 18935865, 12197741, 5702168

Cover design, page design, and typesetting by Melina Cusano

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Introduction

Mary Grace Lao, Pree Rehal, and Jessica Bay

The idea of an edited collection began when we realized that there was collective interest within our department in a critical engagement with the highly acclaimed Netflix series *Marvel's Jessica Jones* (henceforth referred to as *Jessica Jones*). What started out as a discussion about co-authoring papers moved to co-organizing a panel for the meeting of the Film and Media Studies Association of Canada (formerly the Film Studies Association of Canada) at the 2016 Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences, held at the University of Calgary. We were pleasantly surprised at how full the room was, despite ours being an early morning panel. We received both productive and positive feedback from the engaged and diverse attendees. It indicated to us that there was a need for this anthology.

But why did this television series speak to us so strongly? After bringing a solo woman-led show to the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) with *Marvel's Agent Carter* (2015–16), the company had to show that it was willing to do something different to fit in with the Netflix aesthetic set by *Marvel's Daredevil* (2015–18). *Jessica Jones* immediately set itself apart from the rest of the MCU and helped to cement the Netflix branch as grittier and more anchored in the real world of New York than the fantasy world of the MCU as seen in *The Avengers Infinity Saga* (2012–19). As Netflix continued to build up the hype in advance of the release of *Jessica Jones* in late 2015, we had questions: How would the company represent her? How would her story be told? How different is this story from the rest of the MCU? How would she be positioned in relation to her character in the comic series? Would she be the gritty noir character, or the wife and mother?

Jessica Jones is unique in that she is a comics character without a long history in comic-book form, and she completely rejected her superpowers to

first live a life as a private investigator in the *Alias* (2001) run, and then as a wife and mother in various other series. Jones's lack of extensive history as a comics character affords the show's creators the opportunity to expand her story beyond the brief glimpses we have been given in the comics to explore her identity as a survivor of trauma and to focus on her time as a private investigator. These are both smart business and content decisions—they allow for more seasons while, as our contributors point out later in the book, exploring the experiences of women in abusive relationships. But choosing Jessica Jones as the second Defender in the Netflix expansion of the MCU also says something about how these shows hope to be different from the films and even the broadcast series, such as *Marvel's Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* (2013–20). The Netflix shows have set themselves apart by focusing on lesser-known anti-heroes working mostly independently in the gritty streets of New York.

Netflix started as a mail-in DVD subscription service in 1999, added streaming in 2007, and has become a powerhouse in terms of global film and television streaming providers (Keating 2012). Part of this success is due to its use of effective and sophisticated algorithms, good business decisions and lucrative deals with rights holders, and the quality of its “original” content. The deal that allowed Netflix to produce *Jessica Jones*, a Marvel product, began in 2012 when the company gained exclusive rights to new-release Disney products starting in 2016 (Graser 2012). From there, Marvel worked with Netflix to develop a television deal that included, in addition to *Jessica Jones*, *Daredevil* (2015–18), *Luke Cage* (2016–18), *Iron Fist* (2017–18), and the ensemble piece *The Defenders* (2017) (Lewis 2013). Netflix's model of releasing original series as complete seasons, rather than releasing one episode a week, not only encourages binge-watching among its viewers, but also allows for more seamless storytelling and fan investment. With *Jessica Jones*, this translates to a more complex superhero who can truly engage in the real world of New York's underground and with the trauma she is experiencing.

Jessica Jones actively leans in to its role as “different,” even oppositional, through its main character's blatant refusal to smile; her eschewal of acceptable standards of femininity, or even acceptable standards of social interaction; the show's focus on trauma and refusal to shy away from calling Kilgrave's invasion anything but rape; its marketing—including a Twitter account attributed to Jessica herself, who regularly claps back at haters; and by actively recruiting women behind the camera and in the writer's room (Prudom 2016). By approaching a character and topics that are normally

ignored, *Jessica Jones* introduces tough topics to the MCU and chooses to grapple with them rather than superficially “solving” them. The general, and presumably superhero-loving audience is introduced to the concept of gaslighting and, through Jessica, is allowed to follow a woman as she works through the lasting trauma of domestic abuse and rape while also finding her place within the world—both the world of New York, as shown in the show, and the larger world of the MCU itself.

Jessica is a compelling character and a unique choice for the MCU. The show started a conversation that has gone beyond comic book or superhero fans, offering many people a way to discuss their own trauma with others, and it serves as a political statement on the ways that narratives focused on gender-based violence, militarization, and toxic masculinity continue to persist in North American popular culture, as well as the role of the hero. Through this anthology we want to explore this character, who is, in many ways, exactly the kind of hero that feminist detective fiction author Mary Wings said she wanted; Jessica unapologetically “fucked and drank and detected [her] way through exciting stories” (quoted in Tasker 2006, 236) in the show’s first season, and that allows her to push back against the norms that too often govern superhero stories.

We chose *Jessica Jones* as our focus for this collection for the popularity it won for engaging headlong with concepts of heroism, gender, female relationships, and trauma. At the time of season 1’s release, it was revolutionary in its depiction of a woman (super)hero who did not care to be liked. Jessica Jones was being compared to the likes of Agent Carter or the members of S.H.I.E.L.D., and the audience found her to be very different from these depictions of femininity and heroism. *Jessica Jones* spoke to the wider sociological and political commentary of its time. The overwhelming audience response to the innovative content in the first season set it apart from the middling response to the more traditional superhero narratives of subsequent seasons, with season 2 focusing more on Jessica’s past and origin story as she came to terms with the consequences of killing Kilgrave, and season 3 showing Trish Walker’s descent into evil and Jessica’s own reckoning with being a more permanent superhero in New York. In addition, the other series in the Netflix branch of the MCU (e.g., *Luke Cage*, *Iron Fist*) suffered a decrease in ratings (Clark 2018), likely due to the introduction of Disney+, which owns the MCU. It has been suggested that Netflix accounted for this drop, and, rather than

investing in substantial plot development for season 3, as it had for the first season, it was more concerned with bringing the series to an end (Clark 2019).

This collection places considerable focus on season 1, originally released in November 2015, as its themes continue to be relevant to contemporary discussions of gender and race, not just in popular culture but also in the news. For example, season 1 came to resonate with audiences again in October 2017 with the advent of the viral #MeToo social media campaign¹ (Green 2019; MacDonald 2019) and subsequent discussions surrounding male entitlement and toxic white masculinity.

This Collection

Our vision for this anthology was to gather as academics, artists, and fans to critically engage with the political and gendered themes surrounding the representations of trauma for which the series was known. What we ended up with was far beyond our initial vision: there were a number of similarities as well as differences in the issues and themes on which our contributors chose to focus—the way the show deals with trauma, abuse, gaslighting, and masculinity, among other topics, and the way it fits into larger conversations surrounding its place in both the MCU and the world at large. As academics familiar with the barriers of institutional access and accessibility issues themselves, we intended for this collection to have a space in television and media studies as well as fan studies, while being accessible to both the general public and the academic community. Joli Jenson (1992), Henry Jenkins (1992), and, more recently, Paul Booth (2010) have problematized the divide between scholar and fan, with Booth in particular suggesting that fans can be seen as media scholars due to their critical engagement and consumption of the content they enjoy. As an example of an academic journal that successfully incorporates the academic and general voice, the Organization for Transformative Works and Cultures publishes *Transformative Works and Cultures*, which regularly features critical works written by both academics and non-academics. This blending of engagement with popular content allows for a diversity of critical voices and an expansion of our understanding of the material. Likewise, we wish for this collection to be read beyond the “ivory tower,” as it were, so that we can engage in a more interesting and expansive dialogue on popular culture in the spaces where it is consumed.

The authors gathered here use different theoretical frameworks and methodologies in order to provide nuanced analyses of *Jessica Jones*, ranging

from film, media, surveillance, urban, psychoanalysis, and affect studies. While acknowledging that much of our work is located within these theories, we also recognize that theories are subject to critique and interrogation. For example, some chapters (Ross; Moll) have used Michel Foucault's foundational theories (panopticon and sexuality). In light of recently published allegations of Foucault's sexual exploitation of young boys during his time in Tunisia (Sorman 2021), we must be cognizant of how his personal indiscretions have an overall impact on our scholarship, especially since many of the themes from *Jessica Jones* are rooted in sexual violence and trauma. We are not calling for Foucault to be "cancelled"; instead, we wish to reflect on his actions and how they serve as an example of the ways that the academy has historically viewed (and in many cases still does) marginalized groups as mere objects to be studied. This perspective reinforces the colonial structures that our institutions are built upon. Our intention is to challenge these colonial structures by engaging rather than theorizing these lived experiences.

Keeping with the tradition of fandom scholarship and previous feminist collections like *This Is What a Feminist Slut Looks Like: Perspectives on the SlutWalk Movement* (Friedman et al. 2015), which considers the historical, contemporary, and future directions of the SlutWalk movement, our approach to this collection reflects Donna Haraway's (1998) notion of situated knowledges, according to which feminists neither want nor need a "doctrine of objectivity" or some other single transcending theory. Instead, feminists want modern critical theories to understand "how meanings and bodies get made, not in order to deny meanings and bodies, but in order to build meanings and bodies that have a chance for life" (580). This feminist analytical perspective considers the "class, race, culture, and gender assumptions, beliefs, and behaviors of the researcher," arguing that the researcher "must be placed within the frame of the picture that [they] attempt to paint" (Harding 2004, 461).

Acknowledging this feminist analytical perspective, the authors in this collection have made use of a number of methodologies, including auto-ethnography, close reading, content analysis, Laban movement analysis, discourse analysis, and semiotic analysis. This interdisciplinary analytical approach provides nuanced insight into the impact of the series and its main characters' portrayal and trauma narratives, which in turn allows us to reflect on the issues of stigmatization, trauma, mental illness and addiction, as well

as rape culture and race in an era of #MeToo, and racialization and police brutality in an era of Black Lives Matter.

This book begins with an episode guide and is divided into three parts, each focusing on a different aspect of the series and accompanied by brief editorial introductions. The episode guide provides a synopsis of the first season episodes. We encourage you to flip through it, and to refer to it with each proceeding chapter. That way, you do not have to rewatch the entire series—though we are not trying to stop you from doing so!

The first part of the book focuses on Jessica Jones, the hero and protagonist. What is interesting to note here are the various themes that overlap in our contributors' chapters having to do with the gendered ways in which women are portrayed. Jessica is a flawed woman. She may not have a heart of gold, but she is doing what she can to survive. Despite her rough demeanour, she cares deeply for her best friend, Trish Walker. The character of Jessica allows us to consider what it means to be a woman through her positions as super, troubled, and hero.

When considering Jessica as “woman,” our text looks to feminist theories. Beginning particularly with Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler, we understand that there is nothing naturally feminine about being a woman. While de Beauvoir (1974) suggests that we “become” women, Butler ([1990] 2006) says that we “perform” our femininity. The work of these two scholars influenced future feminist scholars in their ability to break the essentialist conception of “girl” and “girlhood.” While de Beauvoir has fallen out of favour with some, the ideas presented by Butler continue to be reimaged by scholars in North America and remain relevant to our understandings of gender and its representation. Jenny Bavidge (2004) suggests that “the notion of the Girl—her identity, her body and sexuality, as well as her moral, physical and intellectual education—has been recognised as a site around which many of culture’s concerns and anxieties cohere” (44). *Jessica Jones* offers a space to examine those anxieties through an extraordinary “girl.” Meanwhile, feminist theory offers an opportunity to approach Jessica’s gendered position through class and gender structures, power and its imbalances, while also offering space to consider how this show can act as a call to arms for political action and social justice.

We show how Jessica Jones challenges our preconceived notions of what a superhero is, through her gender, her adherence to a moral compass, and her behaviour (Chestopalova; Jenkins; Stang). Shana MacDonald (2019)

describes Jessica as a feminist killjoy and a foil to the neoliberal, post-feminist sensibilities of girl power. Unlike other female superheroes, Jessica's other job is less than meritorious, as she makes a living as a private investigator spying on cheating spouses. Her career and personal choices, along with her trauma, are justified rather than vilified (MacDonald 2019). The series focuses on the violation of personal space, not just at the hands of Kilgrave, but also Jessica's own actions as a private investigator (Ross). As a character in the larger MCU, Jessica offers a connection between the sleek fantasy world of the movies and the gritty noir world of the other MCU series on Netflix while challenging the superhero genre itself (Fitzgerald).

The second part of the book focuses on the male characters in the series. While *Jessica Jones* has been critically acclaimed for its representation of female characters, it is equally important to look at the many ways masculinities are portrayed in the show, as these reflect the highly gendered society within which it situates itself. Part 2 looks at constructions of masculinities through bodily performance, and it does so to illustrate gendered relations among the characters in the series. The focus here on masculinities, as opposed to masculinity, recognizes the concept's fluidity. As R. W. Connell (2005) argues, masculinity is not described by a concrete set of definitions, but instead changes such that a dominant masculinity emerges and re-emerges, so long as it maintains the patriarchal system. It is this relationality that, according to Connell, naturalizes or marginalizes men who do not fit this dominant form of masculinity. More recently, critiques of masculinities studies have highlighted this relationality, as it is said to create a dichotomy between masculine and feminine (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005), as well as between Western (white) and non-Western (non-white) masculinities (Beasley 2008).

In part 2, we begin with Jessica Seymour's chapter. Seymour argues that the presentation of these different masculinities across a gender spectrum is a way to portray feminine gender performance positively while also recognizing that there is a need to portray Black masculinities positively in popular culture. Next, we explore Western notions of hegemonic masculinity through the idea of toxic masculinity. Brett Parady, for example, connects toxic masculinity to the militarization of law enforcement, focusing on Will Simpson's character development. Anastasia Salter and Bridget Blodgett's chapter on Kilgrave's representation of toxic masculinity draws on the increasing presence of geek masculinity, a masculinity that at one point was considered something like the opposite of mainstream masculinity. These nuanced portrayals

of the villain give way to a different kind of relationship with the audience, one that is deeply rooted in gender, power, and violence (both physical and emotional) in order to uphold a Eurocentric (white) patriarchy (Lao).

Indeed, the gendered performances analyzed in parts 1 and 2 feed into a greater scholarly debate surrounding popular representations of sex and gender. Both Jessica's and Kilgrave's representations as the epitomes of the feminist killjoy and toxic masculinity, respectively, flourish under neoliberalism (MacDonald 2019). However, it remains that these performances are cis-normative and rooted in Western (and white) definitions of gender. While the show has been criticized for these depictions, as we discuss in our conclusion (Bay), our contributors have made use of these normative representations of gender to problematize and further our understandings of intersectional gender representations in media more generally.

The third and final part of the book brings our attention back to the series characters and the ways in which trauma is portrayed. The series makes clear that anyone, regardless of their past circumstances, is affected by Kilgrave, and it leaves them in a state of trying to reconcile the aftermath of the trauma. But at the same time, the series also reflects how women have historically been seen as hysterical and irrational (Moll). Kiera Obbard interrogates the different ways trauma narratives are presented in the series. In this section of the book, some of our authors address trauma as it applies to the character of Jessica Jones through other theoretical concepts and, in some cases, personal reflection on the experience of past traumas. Trauma theory's basis in psychoanalysis certainly has a place in film and media studies, as it helps us understand our affective relationships with media artifacts and events. This is especially the case when we think about the ways in which Jessica represents different types of traumas, such as post-traumatic stress disorder, alcoholism, and gender-based violence (see Rayborn and Keyes 2018). Other scholars, such as Rakes (2019) and their work on feminist crip trauma theory, have successfully started from the position of trauma theory to critically engage with *Jessica Jones* and its narrative of gendered violence and the resulting trauma.

However, as Susannah Radstone (2007) asks, "To what extent . . . are the insights offered by trauma theory generalizable to the whole field of representation?" (12). The dangers of depending too much on trauma theory can result in an unnecessary pathologization of popular culture's representation of trauma. To pathologize could be to do damage to those members of the general population who experience trauma themselves. We are concerned

here with media representations of trauma. Thus, our focus is on how trauma is *represented* (and managed)—not, for the most part, the trauma itself. In this book, we have attempted to approach Jessica’s trauma through other forms of analysis in order to remain true to our goal of presenting an interdisciplinary media perspective on *Jessica Jones*.

Despite this desire to maintain an interdisciplinary media perspective, there are hints of trauma theory laced throughout this book, though these aren’t explicitly stated. For example, in the process of examining Jessica’s physical movements and how they convey her internalized trauma, Michelle Johnson discusses the roots of that trauma and its psychological effect on Jessica. While this work is not grounded in trauma theory per se, it does draw from that important work.

While it is clear that trauma and surviving trauma is a significant theme in the first season, the chapters all contribute unique perspectives that reach beyond the individualization of trauma theory to access a more global understanding of how trauma can be presented on screen, including its effects on bodies in space (Johnson; Jacob and DiEmanuele) and sisterhood (Thomas). On the other hand, we also dive into how the (white) feminist narratives in the series are shaped by trauma and anti-Blackness (Rehal and Fairbarns).

This collection is aimed at academics and fans alike, with the intention of amplifying diverse critical voices in an accessible way. We hope the individuality of the authors’ perspectives and arguments not only expand upon but also challenge what readers know about Jessica Jones. While we recognize that the series is fictional, its impact on the realm of superhero media has been tangible. Whether or not you love the show, or our critiques of it, we invite you to carry this discussion forward.

NOTE

- 1 In this collection, we make a distinction between #MeToo, the viral social media campaign started by Alyssa Milano, and Me Too, the movement started by Tarana Burke in 2006.

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Episode Guide

Season 1

1.01: “AKA LADIES’ NIGHT”

We are introduced to many of the main characters in this first episode. Jessica Jones is a private detective, Jeri Hogarth is a tough lawyer, Trish is a former child star and Jessica’s long-suffering best friend. We also learn that Jessica has PTSD from her time with Kilgrave, and that she is a functional alcoholic who hates the world. Jessica takes a case to find a missing woman named Hope, whom she finds in a hotel after being left by Kilgrave.

1.02: “AKA CRUSH SYNDROME”

The aftermath of Hope’s compelled murder of her parents includes Jessica being questioned, Luke Cage being questioned because Jessica was surveilling him, and Hope in jail. We learn that Luke also has powers.

1.03: “AKA IT’S CALLED WHISKEY”

Luke and Jessica discuss their place in the superhero universe and how they got their powers. Jessica begins to put her plan for capturing and destroying Kilgrave into place by looking for the drug to incapacitate Kilgrave. Jessica saves Malcolm, and Trish confronts Kilgrave over the radio, leading him to send Officer Simpson to kill her.

1.04: “99 FRIENDS”

Jessica is tracking her stalker to find Kilgrave. While looking for other Kilgrave victims, Hogarth and Jessica inadvertently set up a support group for the survivors. Jessica is catfished and attacked for having superpowers. Trish and Simpson connect over their trauma.

1.05: “AKA THE SANDWICH SAVED ME”

Despite conflict over who should be in charge and how they should proceed, Jessica, Simpson, and Trish capture Kilgrave. Jessica gives Malcolm a choice about his future, and he chooses a drug-free life. Kilgrave has escaped and has found a way to continue controlling Jessica by forcing her to send daily photographs of her smiling.

1.06: “AKA YOU’RE A WINNER!”

Luke needs Jessica to help him find someone so he can get information on his deceased wife. Hope tries to kill herself when she realizes she is pregnant with Kilgrave’s baby. Hogarth and her secretary, Pam, are moving forward in their relationship. Jessica finally reveals her role in Luke’s wife’s death to stop him from killing another person.

1.07: “AKA TOP SHELF PERVERTS”

Kilgrave kills a neighbour in Jessica’s apartment and Malcolm and Trish clean up for her. Jessica’s new plan to capture Kilgrave and save Hope involves getting arrested and placed in a supermax prison so that Kilgrave will have to expose himself to get to her. Kilgrave issues an ultimatum to Jessica, threatening the lives of an entire police precinct if she doesn’t meet him at her childhood home to give him a chance to show her that they are, in his words, “inevitable.”

1.08: “AKA WWJD?”

Kilgrave is attempting to win Jessica over with nostalgia and by promising not to use his powers on her while they live together in her childhood home, but he is still controlling the people around them to keep Jessica in line. Jessica discovers that Kilgrave was never taught how to be good, so she takes him out to show him how to help people with his powers. He feels empowered, but she is conflicted and ultimately decides to follow through with her original plan to drug him rather than try to reform him. Meanwhile, Officer Simpson has tried to help Jessica by blowing Kilgrave up, but he ends up on the receiving end of his own bomb.

1.09: “AKA SIN BIN”

Kilgrave has been captured and is enclosed in the chamber, where he can't control anyone, while Jessica tries to organize a way to prove he controlled Hope for her defence. She enlists Hogarth, Trish, and Detective Clemons as help and/or witnesses to Kilgrave's powers. To better understand Kilgrave and get under his skin, Jessica finds his parents, but their introduction to the situation allows him to escape. Everyone but Jessica is controlled during Kilgrave's escape.

1.10: “AKA 1,000 CUTS”

Hogarth helps Kilgrave escape, and in the process destroys her relationships with both of the women in her life. Kilgrave makes promises to have Hope released in exchange for the return of his father. The survivor's group searches for Jessica for revenge, and Kilgrave uses them against her; Hope gets caught in the middle and makes the ultimate sacrifice for the promise that Jessica will kill Kilgrave.

1.11: “AKA I’VE GOT THE BLUES”

Simpson has gone off the program the military prescribed for him and has turned his anger toward Jessica for not letting him control the situation or kill Kilgrave from the very beginning. He attacks Jessica while on experimental drugs, and Trish takes the same drugs to protect Jessica and fight him off. The military takes him away. Meanwhile, Kilgrave is jealous and blows up Luke's bar with him in it just as Jessica arrives to watch it happen.

1.12: “AKA TAKE A BLOODY NUMBER”

Jessica and Luke get closer during this episode and Jessica seems almost ready to accept his forgiveness as they search for Kilgrave and his father, Albert. Albert has been helping Kilgrave improve the range of his powers. Meanwhile, Trish's mother reaches out with some information about the organization that makes the drug Simpson was taking, as well as their connection to Jessica. She promises more if Trish will agree to rekindle their business relationship. In the end, Jessica must fight Luke when she realizes he has been under Kilgrave's control this whole time.

1.13: “AKA SMILE”

Claire Temple from *Daredevil* makes her first crossover appearance as she recognizes Luke as a man with powers and agrees to help Jessica get him out of the hospital and watch over him as he recovers from a gunshot wound. Kilgrave is no longer trying to convince Jessica they are destined to be together as he now just wants her dead. Jessica and Kilgrave have their final showdown: Jessica finally kills Kilgrave, with multiple witnesses to the murder and the mind control, including police officers. The season ends with Jessica and Malcolm cleaning up and people calling them for help.