



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

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“AKA WWJD?” Interrogating Gendered Ideologies and Urban Revanchism

Arun Jacob and Elizabeth DiEmanuele

As the saying goes, we do not know what happens behind closed doors. There are always stories, histories, and experiences that we simply cannot know, especially when it comes to our relationships with one another and ourselves. The broken door to Jessica’s apartment—which, after breaking early in the first episode, has cardboard in place of the window that reads, “Fragile. Handle with care.”—is a recurring motif in *Jessica Jones*, positioning viewers as witnesses to Jessica Jones’s life as a survivor of sexual trauma and a reluctant hero who is determined to save people from the dangers of Kilgrave and the city with her exceptional abilities (ep. 1.01, “AKA Ladies’ Night”).

A broken door represents more than a rupture of silence; its gendered histories reveal much about our protagonist and the city in which she lives. Doors offer privacy and they are essential in keeping unwanted people out. They also hold a history of gendered politics; in this context, doors operate as the divide between the public and private spheres, ensuring that women stay in their place away from all the dangers of the outer world. In *Jessica Jones*, the broken door—complemented by the “Fragile. Handle with care.” sign—tugs at the vulnerabilities we might associate with a woman living alone in a dangerous part of the city. Jessica’s client Mr. Shlottman aptly echoes these concerns for safety early on in the season. After his wife tells him to forget about it, he responds, “Leave a woman living alone in this city? With no lock, no door? It’s not safe,” vocalizing the belief that women are fragile (and perhaps require protection from a masculine system) (ep. 1.01, “AKA Ladies’ Night”).

In addition to demonstrating the ways in which fear, privacy, safety, and gender inform one another throughout the series, Mr. Shlottman’s questions

open up a broader conversation about how urban politics interpolate with men's fears and threats to middle-class, white masculinity. Urban geographer Hille Koskela (1999) emphasizes the centrality of space to women's fear, noting that "space and social characteristics are mutually modifying, interacting dimensions that deeply affect the nature and shape of women's fear. Fear of crime is constantly modifying women's spatial realities. . . . [However] space is not just a medium for interaction but is also produced by this interaction" (112). Sexual objectification of women in public space through harassment and sexist imagery not only produces fear but is also part of the social production of patriarchal urban space. While Jessica may not always show her fear openly, the broken door and its sign remind us of why: Jessica's past with Kilgrave and all of his abuses is far more terrifying than anything that may barge through that door. She has already lived the nightmare.

We believe it is productive to explore these relationships in *Jessica Jones* through the economies of revanchism. The neoliberal society of the United States and Canada suffer from a vicious "revanchism" that Neil Smith (1998) describes as a "blend of revenge with reaction," a mean-spirited movement that denies the social responsibilities of government while exacting distress upon the most vulnerable in society (2). Revanchism circulates the belief that society is dangerous and threatening, that, in the words of Leslie Kern (2010), "fear of the other justifies displacement and redevelopment, and the need for redevelopment (highest and best use) legitimizes the violence of displacement and marginalization" (210). What makes Leslie Kern's work especially fascinating is her gendered approach. If revanchist urbanism reinforces masculine power relations, wherein the privileged and the ruling class respond to the threat of losing power and status through gentrification, its survival also depends upon the idea that the safety of women (their offspring, the city's futurity, and so on) are under threat if action is not taken. Notably, gentrification operates as an important tool of revanchism in the series, often used as a means to "protect" the ideal citizens and keep undesirable citizens out; in many cases, gentrification operates as a means to confine women to private spheres, so as to keep them safe from "undesirable" living conditions and people. For the purposes of this discussion, *gentrification* will refer to the process of renovating and upgrading dwellings and cityscape so that they conform to middle- and upper-class standards of living.

Phil Hubbard (2004) opines that "it is possible to re-read spaces of neoliberal gentrification as landscapes that revalue (and *capitalise*) Masculinity

through distinctive commodity forms and aesthetics” (679); keeping women “in check” through fear and social narratives is one way in which neoliberalism upholds this masculinity. In the revanchist cityscape, these narratives are often bolstered by presenting social problems (such as crime) as the preserve of individuals. As a case in point, consider the notion of slut shaming, which is the action of stigmatizing a woman for engaging in behaviour judged to be promiscuous or sexually provocative; people (the hegemon is/are usually men, but sometimes white women) often criticize women for appearing too sexual (according to their standards of acceptable sexuality) in order to control them. They also often blame women for being victims/survivors of rape by using similar appearance-based criticisms. The non-compliance (or un-adaptability) of the subject to a neoliberal consumer society is viewed as not only immoral but, inevitably, as unlawful. This use of shame to dominate and control women is an example of how these narratives can operate in the revanchist city under the guise of the individual’s problem, and it is certainly mirrored in the narratives that unfold in *Jessica Jones*. For instance, Hope’s arrest for murdering her parents under Kilgrave’s command turns her into a criminal and public object of scrutiny (ep. 1.01, “AKA Ladies’ Night”). We witness her arrest and questioning, as well as public reporting of her guilt throughout the series. The social terror that arises out of the experience is so bleak that even Jessica Jones, with all of her physically exceptional strength, refuses to come forward with her own story (ep. 1.03, “AKA It’s Called Whiskey”).

And yet, despite these obstacles, the series presents women as powerful survivors in a city that demands their silence. The revanchist city expresses “terror felt by middle- and ruling-class whites who are suddenly stuck in place by a ravaged property market, the threat and reality of unemployment, . . . and the emergence of minority and immigrant groups, *as well as women, as powerful urban actors*” (Smith 1996, 207; emphasis added)—an idea rooted in the fear of losing power and control. Who is more threatening to such an ideal than Jessica Jones, a woman who can lift cars, hold her own in a bar fight against a group of rugby players, and sleep in an apartment with a broken door, despite living in a densely populated, threatening city? Who is more threatening than a woman who can survive on freelance work and who forgoes stringent ties to any organization or person? While the Marvel franchise certainly presents us with other characters who threaten the revanchist city narrative, we are fascinated by the way Jessica’s very real narrative of survival

(of violence, assault, trauma, and so on) also acts as a motif for survival in a gentrified society, whose very existence and sense of safety depends upon women's silence and complacency. Jessica's decision to confront Kilgrave's violence in conjunction with the trauma she experienced and continues to endure is not just a personal triumph, but also a decision to reject the revanchist city's goal to silence and contain the uncontrollable. In Jessica's own words, "[The people in this city] want to feel safe. They'd rather call you crazy than admit I can lift this car or that I can melt your insides with my laser eyes" (ep. 1.01, "AKA Ladies' Night"). Even knowing that society desires her to maintain a certain degree of predictability and "safety," Jessica knowingly pushes forward, vocalizing her message for survivors of Kilgrave's violence and using her abilities to do the right thing, even when it makes others uncomfortable.

Facing the Hell of Hell's Kitchen

The first line of *Jessica Jones*, "New York may be the city that never sleeps, but it sure does sleep around," immediately presents the city through the lens of a scorned lover (ep. 1.01, "AKA Ladies' Night"). Combined with the visual of Jessica working with her camera as a private investigator who takes photos of people—often men—cheating on their spouses, we learn right away through Jessica's eyes that other people are morally damaged and cannot be trusted. "A big part of the job is looking for the worst in people," she says. "Turns out, I excel at that. Clients hire me to find dirt, and I find it. Which shouldn't surprise them—but it does."

We cannot simply dismiss the role "dirt" plays in the gritty landscape that is Hell's Kitchen, nor can we ignore the gendered history it holds in the labour that Jessica performs. Morag Shiach's (2004) work in women's labour helpfully unpacks the role technology once played in distancing women from "intimate forms of dirt" (73). The professions Shiach examines were once hidden from the public sphere due to their "shameful" status and closeness to spaces that would otherwise be reserved for women, such as caretaker and housekeeper roles. Technology, like the washer, operated as a way of helping women maintain their social dignity in professions that were already precarious due to their proximity to men. Jessica's camera represents an evolution of these technologies, as it becomes her professional tool to collect and distribute "dirt" for payment from a distance. When she says, "cheaters are good for business," she echoes fear-driven narratives related to women's labour the "dirt" with which it was associated; however, she does so with a twist: she is

not ashamed or fearful, and in fact, she operates her camera by choice. Right away, she challenges the revanchist desire for her to be vulnerable to the city and its people, as she exposes the “dirt” of those who “deserve it.”

Dirt seeps into many aspects of Jessica’s life and comes to signify how neoliberalism births new forms of urban inequality, cleaving society and space along visible fault lines. Take Jessica’s dwelling. She lives in a run-down apartment building; her clothes are strewn across the floor and cockroaches crawl from her sink. The occupants of the building are poor, visible minorities, homeless teenagers, drug-addled vagrants, and other socially undesirable types, people whose very presence in the central city is deemed untenable. The series makes a bold statement about gentrification in the city by placing its protagonist-hero and the majority of its minorities in this undesirable space: by placing our protagonist-hero in a setting that is (from a gentrified lens) undesirable and unsafe, the series in some ways suggests that these circumstances are unjust, perhaps even unwarranted. We know right away with the open door that Jessica feels more at home in Hell’s Kitchen than she ever did living with Kilgrave or even elsewhere. At the same time, the cockroaches, broken doors, and dirt of Jessica’s apartment complex operate as determinants of social worth and imply early on that those living with her in Hell’s Kitchen are difficult, problematic, or unworthy within the revanchist city.

Luke Cage acts as the one exception, and once again, concepts of cleanliness and worth come into play. The first time Jessica enters Luke’s bar, she says, “I’ve never seen a dive bar this clean. Because you care about it.” To Jessica—and by extension, to us viewers—everything about Luke is moral and good. As his strength, however, the cleanliness of Luke’s bar is not typical. We cannot dismiss the fact that visible minorities do not hold a significant place in the city. As viewers, what are we to make of the fact that the other residents in Jessica’s building possess similarly undesirable living arrangements? What are we to make of Luke’s clean bar by contrast? Just as the series creates distinct lines between cleanliness and dirt within the heart of Hell’s Kitchen, these social cues also operate to satisfy the impressions and expectations of a potential middle- and upper-class viewership and/or anyone with access to Netflix culture. Those who binge-watch Netflix have access to media technologies and social infrastructures, which could range from high-speed Internet to 4K televisions and securitized condominiums. The Netflix subscriber cleaves to the more clichéd regimens of daily life: the hermetic capsule of the daily commute, the constant effort to avoid contact

with strangers, and the welcome redoubt of the home. More simply, in many cases, the Netflix subscriber has the privilege of separating themselves from the circumstances of the characters on the screen.

Jones's friend Trish Walker, a media personality, resides in a fortified luxury condominium tower, one that satisfies the ideals of the gentrification process with its cleanliness, upgraded technology, and location in the downtown core. We believe the contrasting living arrangements of Jessica and Trish are emblematic of how urban pro-growth agendas intensify social and territorial inequalities within cities. Where Trish resides in the scenic, aestheticized, and revitalized downtown enclave, Jessica schleps around Hell's Kitchen, a name synonymous with onscreen urban blight, fear, and violence. These onscreen depictions further our understanding of how the characters are meant to be primarily understood as participants in the neoliberal consumer society. It should come as no surprise that Trish's apartment is described as "the fortress," a place protected from unwanted bodies and people. Not one person has a spare key (ep. 1.01, "AKA Ladies' Night"). While Mr. Shlottman may not have provided a definition of the perfect space for "a woman living alone in the city," we imagine that Trish's fortress would be the ideal: clean, private, silent, surveilled, and unbreakable.

If Jessica's broken door reveals her invulnerability to the city's dangers, Trish's surveilled fortress is everything else: it exemplifies the fear, vulnerability, and helplessness the city seeks to ignite in women. Trish's containment places her in the city's hold, stripping away her power and agency as a working woman and public figure in the process (ep. 1.04, "AKA 99 Friends"). While she later fights alongside Jessica, the belief that Trish should stay protected in her fortress remains a running concern throughout the series. Such a relationship reminds us of Koskela's (2000) work on video surveillance, where the principle of surveillance is considered to be "much the same as the principle of the 'ideal prison': to be seen but never to know when or by whom" (243). The threats revanchism places on self-sufficient women like Trish fits within this line of thinking. The more contained the city's citizens and agents can be, the better, especially if those citizens are considered to be unpredictable, uncontainable, or threatening to the status quo. Following this analogy of the prison, consider the living arrangements of Hope and Trish. While polar opposites in terms of luxury, Hope's prison cell and Trish's fortress are both informed by urban threat. The unpredictability of Hope's perceived crime creates enough public fear that she must remain in prison without bail.

On the other end of the spectrum, Trish's privileged lifestyle enables her to mobilize a high-quality surveillance system to remain safe from Kilgrave. In both instances, gentrification operates as the system that ensures their containment as well as their invisibility to the public.

It's Not Your Fault: Surviving the Revanchist City

Abusive relationships are, at their core, about control. Abusers will assert control over their partners any way they can, often employing sophisticated tactics: manipulating their victims with mental and verbal abuse, scaring them into submission, isolating them from their communities, and ultimately convincing them that their pain and suffering is completely their own fault (Healicon 2016, 65). Kilgrave does all of this but through the metaphor of a superpower. His power mirrors the ways in which abusers break down and control their victims, subduing their will, regardless of their personal strength or integrity. Kilgrave's psychological abuse of his victims, his absolute and total control, his manipulation, and his dominance over their agency are all part of what makes him utterly terrifying: his powers are subtle exaggerations of very real human abilities.

Jessica's self-annihilation is a direct response to the horrifying revelation that she remembers everything Kilgrave did to her and how she felt while it was happening. Her memories remind us that Kilgrave's victims are not automatons or zombies; they are instead forced to witness what they have done, and they experience it as something they did themselves. They cannot escape the resulting guilt and they never stop wondering what part of themselves made their obedience to Kilgrave possible. It is not often that popular audiences encounter a rape survivor confronting her rapist and refusing the gaslighting he uses to avoid the word "rape."¹ Jessica's relationship with Kilgrave is the primary focus of this behaviour because he is a master of strategy. Kilgrave distorts the truth of Jessica's experiences in an effort to make her question her own version of reality.

The relationship between Kilgrave's power to distort reality, his manipulation, and his agency within the revanchist city is crystallized in his choice to purchase Jessica's childhood home (ep. 1.08, "WWJD"; ep. 1.09, "AKA Sin Bin"; ep. 1.10, "AKA 1,000 Cuts"). Kilgrave's wealth enables him to reconfigure a space that holds Jessica's innocent memories, as he negotiates terms for her to stay with him. Part of these terms are that he will not use his powers to make her stay. She stays in the home of her own "free will," though

every action is met with some form of blackmail, wherein he threatens to hurt others if she does not follow through on her promise. Flashbacks play a prominent role in these episodes. Each time Jessica remembers some aspect of her family, she is pulled back into the present by something that happens with Kilgrave.

Though these flashbacks are powerful, we are especially fascinated by one that involves her living arrangements with Kilgrave, back when they lived in his condominium (ep. 1.10, "AKA 1,000 Cuts"). In this flashback, Kilgrave wears an expensive-looking suit and Jessica wears a yellow sundress, which is significant, as we learn earlier that Jessica does not like wearing dresses, preferring instead the jeans and tank tops she displays throughout the series. They are on the condominium's patio and have the most picturesque view of the Brooklyn Bridge. From the dress to the view to the way he brushes Jessica's hair aside for a kiss, the "gentrified picture" tells us right away that Kilgrave owns everything about this scene, from the clothes Jessica wears to the condo they live in. We then cut to the present, when Kilgrave says, "I timed it. I didn't ask you to do anything. For eighteen seconds, I wasn't controlling you. And you stayed with me because you wanted to" (ep. 1.10, "AKA 1,000 Cuts"). Not letting Kilgrave get away with his gaslighting, Jessica responds with, "I remember vividly. I had waited so long for that moment; for one single opportunity to get away from you." The flashback plays again, only this time, it is Jessica's memories, and the scene is less clear. She backs out of the kiss and says she will meet him inside. When Kilgrave leaves, she walks to the edge of the building and looks down, fantasizing about her own escape from the situation on a white horse. In this fantasy, she saves herself and escapes the city; however, before she can jump off the rooftop, Kilgrave calls her inside and forces her to return. Jessica and Kilgrave then fight about what happened and whose memory is accurate. The interplay of memory, control, and the cityscape offers viewers a glimpse of what Jessica endured and survived, disrupting Kilgrave's idealized version of their relationship and, in some ways, the gentrified picture. Jessica's vocalization of her suffering reminds viewers that even during what Kilgrave views as the highs of their relationship, Jessica has experienced layers of suffering and trauma.

Just as Jessica's physical strength enables her to resist the city's threats, her vulnerability and resilience as a survivor are what make her an even greater threat—to Kilgrave and to the city that seeks to silence her voice and abilities. Our use of the word "survivor" here is quite purposeful. Jessica

survives the crash that killed her parents. She survives Kilgrave's abuses. She survives Hell's Kitchen. She survives Kilgrave chasing her down. Jessica's experiences and strength as a survivor are integral because they give her something of which Kilgrave is incapable: a capacity to empathize and care about the well-being of others. While Jessica may be passive-aggressive in almost all of her interactions, her understanding of the confusion, pain, and guilt that Kilgrave's survivors experience is what gives her the motivation to keep fighting; it is also what affords us a new glimpse of the "untenables" in her building. As previously mentioned, Jessica's current living arrangements place her alongside minorities, drug addicts, and other "undesirable" types in the gentrified cityscape; yet these are the people who survive in spite of a city that seeks their silence. They are the ones who fight alongside Jessica, not the police or officials who are there to "keep the city safe" (ep. 1.10, "AKA 1,000 Cuts"). They, too, survive and protect one another in the process.

NOTE

- 1 To clarify what we mean by "gaslighting," this term refers to a form of emotional abuse whereby information is twisted, spun, or selectively omitted to favour the abuser. The ultimate goal is to make victims doubt their own memory, perception, and sanity. It is a devastatingly effective tactic, allowing an abuser to more easily manipulate their victim (Abramson 2014).

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