



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

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When Is a Superhero Not a Superhero?

Catherine Jenkins

Long before the Netflix series, Jessica Jones came to life in 2001 in the *Alias* comic book series written by Brian Michael Bendis, with art by Michael Gaydos, for Marvel's Max imprint. *Jessica Jones* is a gritty comic book for grown-ups, full of hardship and social isolation. The title character is aggressive, sexually active, and foul-mouthed (the comic's opening word is "fuck," which is repeated several times in the opening pages). Her comics carry "Explicit Content" warnings. She has a strong, if sometimes confused, moral compass. She has superpowers: with super strength, she can throw a two-ton car; her body has beyond-human durability; and she can fly (sort of). She also has problems with alcohol, and post-traumatic stress disorder. So is Jessica Jones, the woman behind Alias Investigations, a superhero, some kind of twisted anti-superhero, a post-human enterprise, a troubled young woman, or something else?

Marvel comics legend Stan Lee suggests that "a superhero is *a person who does heroic deeds and has the ability to do them in a way that a normal person couldn't*" (2013, 115; italics in original). Comic scholar Peter Coogan suggests that the defining conventions of the superhero genre are "*mission, powers, and identity*" (Rosenberg and Coogan 2013, 3; italics in original). In this context, "identity" might refer to both the superhero's identifiable costuming, and their "secret identity" or civilian persona, which they use when not in their superhero role. In his essay "The Myth of Superman," semiotician Umberto Eco observes that "Often the hero's virtue is humanized, and his powers, rather than being supernatural, are the extreme realization of natural endowments" (1979, 107). He also suggests that in a post-industrial society, in which humanity's personal power has been usurped by machines, the hero

becomes representative of “the power demands that the average citizen nurtures but cannot satisfy” (107).

Jessica Jones certainly accomplishes things in ways that regular people cannot, having powers beyond regular human capacities, although it is questionable whether these are consistently used for heroic deeds. She takes on missions and has a sometimes-confused identity that is more often affiliated with her civilian role rather than that of a costumed superhero, and for eight months she was possessed by the Purple Man (a.k.a. Zebediah Killgrave¹), who manipulated her to act against her will (Bendis and Gaydos 2003b, n.p.). In the cynical Bronze and Modern Ages of comics (ca. 1973–present), in which superheroes are humanized and forced to cope with common problems like money, substance abuse, and death, Jessica Jones still represents capacities beyond those of regular people; however, her powers seem only slightly beyond us, and having discarded her superhero garb, she even looks like one of us. Earlier generations of superheroes were virtually indestructible and infallible, aligned with a naive American ethos. Jessica Jones does represent the superhero mythos, but in an unconventional way. By exploring Golden Age comic book superheroes against the background of Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of habitus, as well as contemporary conceptions of post-humanism, this chapter explores Jessica Jones as a superhero who diverts from the classic model, thereby evolving the superhero habitus.

Although a narrow view of Pierre Bourdieu’s construction of habitus focuses on cultural capital and socio-economics—“class habitus, the internalized form of class condition and of the conditionings it entails” (1984, 101)—the concept has a much broader cultural reach. Bourdieu refers to three types of social capital that tend to locate who we are in terms of class: embodied cultural capital, such as linguistic dialect; objectified cultural capital, such as a house; and institutionalized cultural capital, such as professional credentials (437–8). Although these may be shared by certain social classes, creating part of that group’s identity and a foundation for social inequality, they can also be acquired by other classes (471).

Bourdieu, however, also discusses cultural capital in terms of lifestyles, as “systematic products of habitus, which, perceived in their mutual relations through the schemes of the habitus . . . transform the distribution of capital . . . into a system of perceived differences” (172). For Bourdieu, lifestyle includes aesthetic tastes, skills, fashion, mannerisms, etc. Habitus is the unconscious and acquired embodiment of all forms of cultural capital: “The schemes of

the habitus, the primary forms of classification, owe their specific efficacy to the fact that they function below the level of consciousness and language, beyond the reach of introspective scrutiny or control by the will” (466). These are the habits, aesthetic sensibilities, characteristics, and skills that are our second nature, and that seem obvious or intuitive (“Profile: Pierre Bourdieu” n.d.); in this way habitus “becomes internalised in the form of dispositions to act, think, and feel in certain ways” (Fleming n.d.). Habitus can be defined as “the way society becomes deposited in persons in the form of lasting dispositions, or trained capacities and structured propensities to think, feel and act in determinant ways” (Wacquant 2005, 316). Our habitus enables us to move readily within certain environments and social contexts. Habitus is, however, culturally and socially developed, rather than naturally ingrained (“Profile: Pierre Bourdieu” n.d.); we are enculturated to our habitus through family, peers, gender, and other forms of identity (Fleming n.d.). Because habitus is learned, it is also flexible, and therefore adaptable to different situations or over time (Navarro 2006, 16). One’s habitus can change by way of the flexibility between its intrinsic and relational properties; in other words, through the interplay between its socially entrenched structures and free will (Bourdieu 1984, 170).

Based on this very brief overview of Bourdieu’s notion of habitus, one can construct a habitus of the superhero class by observing the lifestyles and practices of its members. Drawing on the previous definitions, the superhero habitus indicates one who (a) accomplishes heroic deeds or missions, (b) embodies powers beyond those of regular humans, and (c) has both an identifiable superhero identity and a secret civilian identity. Comic book superheroes, including popular, long-running series such as *Superman* (1938), *Batman* (1939), and *Wonder Woman* (1941), began publishing during the Golden Age of comics (1938–50). During the Second World War, such superheroes took on Hitler and single-handedly defeated hordes of spies and other Nazis; during the Silver Age, (ca. 1956–73), they defeated a variety of super villains who often had their own superpowers. These superheroes accomplished their heroic missions by exercising extraordinary powers. As a native of Krypton, Superman has super strength, speed and durability, the ability to fly, X-ray vision, super breath, and high intelligence. Batman is a different type of superhero: the vigilante. Although he is intelligent, he embodies no special physical abilities, other than being well trained and in peak physical condition. He is aided by high-tech devices, afforded largely by inherited wealth. As a demigod,

Wonder Woman is yet another type of superhero. Similar to Superman, she has superhuman strength, speed and durability, as well as longevity, training in hand-to-hand combat, and access to magical devices, such as the Lasso of Truth, her indestructible bracelets, sword, and shield. As a female superhero, she is also a rarity. All three have distinctive costumed superhero identities, as well as secret civilian identities: Superman is also reporter Clark Kent; Batman is also billionaire Bruce Wayne; and Wonder Woman is also Diana Prince, first an army nurse, and later part of military intelligence, a civilian employee, and a United Nations staffer. Typical of Golden Age superheroes, all three have a strong moral grounding; as an audience, we know that they represent the power of good over evil.

Does Jessica Jones fit this classic superhero habitus? In the original comic book, Jessica begins life as Jessica Campbell, attending Midtown High School, where she has a crush on Peter Parker (a.k.a. Spider-Man). She is an ordinary teenager whose superpowers only manifest after her family car collides with a military convoy carrying radioactive “Hazardous Experimental Material.” The accident kills her parents and younger brother and leaves her in a coma for six months. She awakens after the hospital is plunged into darkness as a result of the Fantastic Four’s battle with Galactus, which releases additional radiation. From the Moore House for Wayward Children, she is adopted by the kindly and supportive Mr. and Mrs. Jones (quite different from the Netflix conception), becoming Jessica Jones (Bendis and Gaydos 2003a, n.p.). Her return to Midtown High is difficult, with school bullies teasing her about being a freak for waking from a coma. Peter Parker, having also experienced family loss, tries to talk to Jessica, but misinterpreting his advances as pity, she runs away. For two pages, Jessica is seen running and experiencing traumatic flashbacks, when she suddenly discovers that she has left the ground and is floating, beyond her control, above the Hudson River. Suddenly conscious of her flying, she falls into the river, and is rescued by Thor. Her second attempt at flight is equally uncontrolled, ending when she lands on the villainous Scorpion trying to rob a laundromat. Jessica discovers her increased strength by pushing over a very solid-looking tree. During the awakening of her powers, she and her adoptive father discuss the varied public perceptions of superheroes. When asked whether she is a superhero by stunned witnesses at the laundromat, she answers with a hesitant yes (Bendis and Gaydos 2003a, n.p.).

Jessica's subsequent experience as a costumed superhero is, however, short-lived. The story is told in flashbacks to her on-again, off-again partner, Luke Cage. Almost unrecognizable in a form-fitting silver costume with aqua trim, Jessica flits overhead as Jewel, wondering about getting a job and a decent boyfriend. Swooping down to break up a fight, she encounters the Purple Man (a.k.a. Zebediah Kilgrave). Exposure to experimental nerve gas left Kilgrave the colour purple, but also gave him mind control over others through psychoactive pheromones, paving the way for his criminal career. Kilgrave overcomes Jessica's will and orders her to delay the police so he can finish his steak. Jessica remains under Kilgrave's control for eight months. In the original comic book, when Cage asks whether Kilgrave raped Jessica during this incarceration, she responds, "He didn't. What he did was—He fucking made me stand there and watch him fuck other girls. Telling me to **wish** it was me. . . . But when there **weren't** any girls around, on a rainy night with nothing to do . . . he would make me **beg** him for it" (Bendis and Gaydos 2003b, n.p.; bold in original).

While Jessica's second trauma in the Netflix series is her repeated rape and her stronger connection with Kilgrave's other rape victims, in the original comic book, the second trauma is Kilgrave's mind control. When Kilgrave orders Jewel (a.k.a. Jessica Jones) to destroy Daredevil, she finally escapes the vicinity of his pheromone-based mind control. Unfortunately, she attacks the Scarlet Witch, having mistaken her for Daredevil, before fully returning to her senses. The unprovoked attack on one of their own causes the amassed Avengers to beat Jessica into another coma. While recovering, she is offered a position as a S.H.I.E.L.D. liaison for the Avengers, which she declines (Bendis and Gaydos 2003b, 2003c). Although the X-Men's Jean Grey builds Jessica a mental block to prevent Kilgrave from ever gaining control of her mind again, subsequent mentions of Kilgrave cause Jessica extreme anxiety. After the Kilgrave incident, Jessica retires her Jewel identity. Comic scholar Terrence Wandtke suggests that differences between the original comic book and the Netflix series denote "two different understandings of the character" (personal communication, April 13, 2017). Although Jessica's eight-month encounter with Kilgrave is a pivotal part of the comic book, it forms only a brief chapter in her story. The Netflix series gives Kilgrave a much more prominent role.

Jessica's second attempt as a costumed superhero is as Knightress, another story told in flashbacks to her newborn, Danielle. Upon reflection, Jessica considers the Knightress chapter a brief, but dark and cynical, period of her

life. As the Knightress, Jessica is a vigilante, attempting to defeat a kingpin called the Owl. The Owl and his henchmen are defeated by a joint effort of the Knightress, Luke Cage (Danielle's eventual father), and Iron Fist (a.k.a. Danny Rand). When asked her superhero identity, Jessica declines to answer. As the police arrive, Jessica discovers that one of the thugs has brought his children, and that they are in the back seat of the villain's car. When an officer indicates that the children will be taken to the police station before going to child services in the morning, Jessica responds, "You can't have kids in a police station in the middle of the night." Seeing the children's distress, Jessica removes her mask—thus retiring her Knightress identity—and gives her full name and a S.H.I.E.L.D. reference so she can gain custody of the children overnight (Bendis and Gaydos 2006, n.p.). Subsequent to this second failure as a costumed superhero, Jessica establishes Alias Investigations and begins working as a private investigator, often looking into mutant- or superhero-related crimes.

Returning to the Golden Age notion of the superhero habitus, through her attempts as a costumed superhero, Jessica Jones can be seen to accomplish heroic deeds, but on a small scale. She brings down low-level thugs, using powers of flight and strength beyond those of regular people; however, both of her attempts at creating a costumed superhero identity are short-lived, ending in failure. As Bourdieu suggests, habitus can change over time owing to a flexibility between its socially entrenched structures and free will (1984, 170). Certainly the superhero habitus has changed since the Golden Age. One of the starkest changes was the 1954 introduction, and subsequent abandonment by Marvel in 2001, of the Comics Code Authority, briefly discussed by Sarah Stang in this volume. *Jessica Jones: Alias* began publication in 2001, so how does Jessica Jones fit the superhero habitus of either the Bronze Age (1973–ca. 1985) or Modern Age (ca. 1985–present) of comics?

Watchmen (1987) is often cited variously as the end of the Bronze Age or the beginning of the Modern Age, although these periods share many common traits. Superheroes of this latter period are more often troubled anti-heroes. *Watchmen* offered an alternative reality in which superheroes were publicly recognized after the Second World War. In this reconstructed history, superheroes are outlawed by the Keene Act in 1977, and most subsequently retire. A few, like Doctor Manhattan, remain as government-sanctioned agents, giving the United States an edge as a world power. Others, like the story's featured anti-hero, Rorschach (a.k.a. Walter Kovacs), operate as

vigilante outlaws. According to comic book scholar Bradford Wright, unlike previous generations of superheroes, those of *Watchmen* “talked and behaved like real people” (2003, 271). Wright adds, “Rorschach, was perhaps the most disturbing superhero ever created for comic books. His brutal perception of black-and-white morality reflected writer Alan Moore’s critical deconstruction of the whole notion of heroes” (275). Moore’s superheroes are positioned against the backdrop of the Reagan and Thatcher era, when politicians were often seen as harming their country’s populations. Comics scholar Geoff Klock suggests that *Watchmen*’s revisionism “sends waves of disruption back through superhero history . . . devalu[ing] one of the basic superhero conventions by placing his masked crime fighters in a realistic world” (2002, 63).

The dark urban world of *Watchmen* is perhaps best described by Rorschach himself: “The streets are extended gutters and the gutters are full of blood and when the drains finally scab over, all the vermin will drown. The accumulated filth of all their sex and murder will foam up about their waists and all the whores and politicians will look up and shout ‘save us!’ . . . and I’ll look down and whisper ‘no’ ” (Moore and Gibbons 1987, 1). The bullied child of a prostitute and absentee father, Kovacs lashes out in violent self-defence and is subsequently placed in the Lillian Charlton Home for Problem Children. The real-life murder of Kitty Genovese (Gansberg 1964) prompts Kovacs to become a vigilante, and his work in the garment trade provides access to the revolutionary fabric for his chameleon-like black-and-white mask. The mask’s changing ink-blot nature provides the name Rorschach. While siding with a helpless underclass, Rorschach exhibits a rarely seen level of violence toward criminals. Rorschach’s most obvious power is his ability to intimidate; however, he is also a genius investigator and strong-arm interrogator, trained in espionage and hand-to-hand combat. He is often perceived as a sociopath, and after an incident in which a kidnapped child is fed to a dog, he completely loses his original Kovacs identity: “It was Kovacs who closed his eyes. It was Rorschach who opened them again” (Moore and Gibbons 1987, no. 6, p. 21). He confides to his psychologist that this was the point after which the mask became his face and he became “Rorschach, who sometimes pretends to be Kovacs,” rather than “Kovacs pretending to be Rorschach” (Moore and Gibbons 1987, no. 6, p. 14).

As with earlier eras of comics, female superheroes exist in the Bronze Age, but they are still fewer in number. One of the most enigmatic of this period is Elektra, first appearing in *Daredevil* no. 168 (Miller 1981). Elektra’s

mother dies while giving birth to her, so she is raised by her father, as well as various martial arts experts. She is plagued by dark childhood memories, has a psychotherapist, and occasionally self-harms. Her work as a freelance assassin and bounty hunter sometimes puts her on the side of good working for S.H.I.E.L.D., but other times on the side of evil working for mobsters. Lacking a strong moral compass of her own, she is targeted by both sides, finally killed by mobsters, but is then resurrected (Miller and Janson 1983). Mercenary and assassin, Elektra is a master martial artist, with ninja stealth and acrobatic training. She has learned to control her nervous system in order to deaden pain, harness her emotions, and prevent blood loss, and she gains telepathic and telekinetic abilities, heightened vigilance and awareness, a fatal silent Chi scream, and strong weapons skills, especially with her trademark twin Okinawan Sai blades. Her skills are the result of years of disciplined training, rather than being inbred or the result of an accident. Her alter ego, Elektra Natchios, is essentially non-existent, as she always appears in her red costume (Miller and Sienkiewicz 1986a, 1986b).

Based on these examples, superheroes or anti-heroes of the Bronze or Modern Ages of comics still retain the following characteristics: (a) they accomplish heroic deeds or missions, although with an ambivalent sense of good; (b) they embody powers beyond those of regular humans, but often through their own labour, rather than from birth or by accident; and (c) they have both a superhero identity and a “secret identity,” but their superhero identity often dominates their civilian identity, to the degree that their civilian identity may be entirely lost. The pure habitus of the Golden Age has eroded, leaving characters who are less obviously good and who face real-world problems and psychological issues.

While acknowledging that both Rorschach and Elektra are much darker characters than Jessica Jones, some commonalities are apparent. Rorschach and Jessica both lose their parents during their teens and are consigned to institutions, although the version of Jessica in the comics is adopted by a kind and loving family, while Rorschach is not. Jessica lives briefly at the Moore House for Wayward Children, perhaps an acknowledgement of Alan Moore’s *Watchmen* as Jessica’s antecedent. Elektra never knows her mother, and although she is close to her father, he is killed during an anti-terrorist police action when she is at university. Although Elektra is an assassin for hire, both Rorschach and Jessica strive to aid the helpless against larger and uglier forces. Both Rorschach and Jessica have super strength and are intelligent

investigators. All three—Rorschach, Elektra, and Jessica—have varying degrees of psychological issues.

Jessica Jones can readily be seen as one of these more contemporary superheroes, engaged in the dialectical process of an evolving habitus through conflicting notions of staid Golden Age structure and her own agency. Her independence and volatility are more akin to contemporary superhero models, as are her substance abuse and psychological issues. Unlike her contemporaries, Jessica has twice abandoned a superhero identity and costume, becoming instead a private detective in street clothes. She has more in common with the hard-boiled detectives of the 1930s and '40s, than she does with Superman. *Jessica Jones*, like the work of Moore, Miller, and others, comes even closer to rendering the superhero a regular person. Her powers of strength and flight are all that separate her from the rest of us. In Jessica, the superhero becomes us, and the superhero habitus undergoes a radical revision without the costume or absurdly high moral standards.

In *Jessica Jones*, the superhero is redefined not as a superhero, or even an anti-superhero, but as a form of post-human. Through accident, Jessica takes on superhuman powers, combining her natural biology with science. Theologian Elaine Graham defines post-humanism as “denoting a world in which humans are mixtures of machines and organism, where nature has been modified (enculturated) by technologies, which in turn have become assimilated into ‘nature’ as a functioning component of organic bodies” (2002, 10). This definition resembles Donna Haraway’s earlier conception of the cyborg as “the offspring of implosions of subjects and objects and of the natural and the artificial” (1997, 12). As is apparent from these definitions, post-humanism requires a substantial ontological shift from the biological human being, but the cyborg is not the only theoretical post-human construction.

Rejecting the technologically driven model, cultural theorist Sherryl Vint calls for an “embodied notion of posthumanism” (2007, 16). Similarly, post-modern literary critic Katherine N. Hayles (1999) suggests that the post-human is a new conception of human, an emergent being, rather than the end of humanity. Instead of incorporating the sometimes clumsy prostheses of cyberpunk science fiction, Vint, Hayles, and sociologist Nikolas Rose perceive that advances in the biological sciences, such as the Human Genome Project, actually render us *more* biological, *more* embodied, by manipulating human beings at the organic level. Rose suggests that “we are inhabiting

an ‘emergent form of life,’ ” (2007, 80) one in which genetic augmentation and transformation will allow us to produce better children, improve our physical performance, and acquire ageless bodies. We are, in short, becoming post-human, and in so doing we are striving to meet the superhero habitus. Characters like Jessica Jones allow us to recognize our everyday selves in the post-human superhero who is only slightly augmented.

Regardless of how post-humanism is conceived, whether as a cyborg hybrid or a biological enhancement, Haraway (1997) and others suggest that its conception opens the door for humanity to take on a multiplicity of acceptable human forms, and Jessica’s is just one of these. This concept is liberating, especially in light of genetics research that tends to focus on homogeneity and perfectibility, thwarting natural evolutionary trends. In evolving the superhero habitus, Jessica Jones supersedes the superhero and moves toward the post-human. Bourdieu supports this flexible evolution of habitus:

To reconstruct the social conditions of production of the habitus as fully as possible, one also has to consider the social trajectory of the class or class fraction the agent belongs to, which, through the probable slope of the collective future, engenders progressive or regressive dispositions towards the future; and the evolution, over several generations, of the asset structure of each lineage, which is perpetuated in the habitus. (1984, 123)

Taking her place in the Modern Age of comics, several generations into superhero evolution, Jessica Jones may be perceived as both progressive and regressive. Although her character abandons key elements of Golden Age superheroes, she embodies a post-human superhero habitus, making her more readily identifiable and closer in status to her readers.

NOTE

- 1 The name for the character of the Purple Man is spelled differently in both the Netflix series and the comics on which it was based (i.e., “Kilgrave” and Killgrave,” respectively). Henceforth, I employ the “Kilgrave” spelling to avoid switching between different versions of the name and to maintain consistency with other chapters in the collection.

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