"Just Jessica Jones": Challenging Trauma Representation and New Trauma Metaphors in Melissa Rosenberg's *Jessica Jones*

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This essay examines the representation of trauma in Melissa Rosenberg's *Jessica Jones* (2015-2019). Rosenberg's series has received critical acclaim, with critics commending *Jessica Jones*' engagement with difficult topics including rape, domestic violence, and the resulting traumatic effects of these experiences; at the same time, extensive criticism has been written on the series and its representation of trauma. The most significant of these is Tim Rayborn and Abigail Keyes' edited collection, *Jessica Jones, Scarred Superhero: Essays on Gender, Trauma and Addiction in the Netflix Series*. The collection contains a number of essays on trauma representation in *Jessica Jones*, exploring issues that include: how the series uses superpowers as an analogy for rape and sexual assault, traumatic memory and powerlessness, alcoholism, the visual strategies employed to depict trauma, and patriarchal oppression.

My essay uncovers several new ways the series depicts the traumatic experiences of marginalized groups, adding to these studies, and explores the ways in which *Jessica Jones* challenges conventional trauma representation, a topic which has yet to be examined in existing criticism. I will explore how *Jessica Jones* challenges trauma representation in two ways. First, the series undermines the dominant concept of trauma as a sudden, overwhelming event outside the range of ordinary human experience. Second, the series subverts the cultural tradition of representing ostensibly controversial types of trauma such as sexual abuse in supernatural terms; while traumatic experiences such as sexual abuse are common, they are often relegated to the realm of the supernatural in culture as a means of

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Popular Culture Studies Journal
Volume 9, Issue 2, ©2021

repression. Rather, I argue that *Jessica Jones* represents trauma according to feminist trauma theories, which define trauma as an ongoing experience rather than a singular extraordinary event, and that the series employs the supernatural, in the form of superhero tropes, to further explore rather than repress the psychological experience of abusive relationships on victims.

I analyze how *Jessica Jones* formulates unique supernatural metaphors to depict the following experiences: post-abuse symptoms, psychological abuse, perpetrator trauma, and structural violence such as sexism and rape culture. In doing so, this essay is significant to wider trauma studies, revealing new themes and techniques of trauma representation. Studies on trauma in popular culture frequently apply established trauma theories to popular texts. For example, Frances Pheasant-Kelly analyzes post-9/11 fantasy films such as Guillermo del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006) and Andrew Adamson's *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (2005) in terms of Michael Rothberg's concept of multidirectional memory in Fantasy Film Post 9/11. Popular culture's challenging and undermining of dominant trauma theory, and the new ways of representing trauma found in popular culture, remain under-explored topics. Dominant trauma theory needs to be challenged and undermined because it is phallocentric (see below) and prescribes both limited definitions and aesthetic models of trauma's representation. Dominant trauma theory also often valorizes high-cultural works to the point where popular culture treatments of trauma are often dismissed (Gibbs 29), and therefore does not always effectively analyze the particular themes, techniques, and media of trauma representations in popular culture. Further, this essay is relevant to studies on American popular culture, examining how *Jessica Jones*' trauma representation also reworks conventions of the superhero genre it writes within and how American culture has changed in its approach to sexual violence.

Trauma Studies, Phallocentrism, and Popular Culture

From the 1980s onwards, PTSD and trauma have reached "far into culture" (Gibbs 1), effecting "the rise of what is becoming almost a new theoretical orthodoxy" (Radstone 10). The dominant trauma theorist Cathy Caruth has been very influential in particular. While rehearsing a full genealogy of trauma and PTSD is beyond the scope of this article, in summary, Caruth's trauma theory draws upon "the roots of PTSD as a concept in the experience of Vietnam veterans," Holocaust Studies, post-structuralism and Sigmund Freud (Gibbs 3). Caruth defines trauma as

comprising the experience of a sudden, overwhelming event that is "outside the range of usual human experience" (Caruth, *Trauma* 3). Caruth claims that trauma is belated, meaning that a traumatic event is so overwhelming it cannot be assimilated into memory at the time of the event and is instead repressed and returns in the form of flashbacks and nightmares:

> there is a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviours stemming from the event [...] the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it. (*Trauma* 4)

Caruth also defines trauma as unspeakable or unrepresentable, which means that trauma should be represented in experimental and indirect forms, that trauma "must, indeed, also be spoken in a language that is always somehow literary: a language that defies, even as it claims, our understanding" (*Unclaimed* 5). Resultantly, canonical trauma fiction tends to more strictly adhere to these aesthetic models and themes outlined in dominant cultural trauma theory. Alan Gibbs writes that "a number of reviewers and critics in the field have constructed what amounts to a critical practice based on a search for elements in literary texts which endorse accepted tenets of trauma theory," what Gibbs calls a "checklist criticism" (38).

Furthermore, canonical trauma representations tend to be phallocentric, in part due to Caruth's writings (Brown 104). Caruth's definition of trauma as a sudden, overwhelming event "outside the range of usual human experience" (called the event-based or belatedness model) has come under criticism by feminist trauma scholars because it is applicable mainly to white, middle-class men and does not account for the types of trauma frequently experienced by minorities, which tend to be the more insidious, "everyday" traumas resulting from ongoing situations of distress, such as domestic violence, child abuse, poverty, and "repeated forms of traumatising violence such as sexism, racism and colonialism" (Rothberg 89). As Laura S. Brown notes:

> the range of human experience becomes the range of what is normal and usual in lives of men of the dominant class; white, young, able-bodied, educated, middle-class, Christian men. Trauma is that which disrupts these particular lives, but no other [...] (104)

In turn, canonical trauma representations tend to feature white male protagonists and present traumatic experiences from their perspectives. For instance, Gibbs has identified J. D. Salinger, Joseph Heller, Kurt Vonnegut, and Tim O'Brien as

canonical trauma writers. Likewise, Renny Christopher has criticized American Vietnam writers for ethnocentricity, critiquing celebrated Euro-American writers such as Robin Moore, William Lederer, Eugene Burdick, Philip Caputo, and Tim O'Brien for stressing their own and their comrades' suffering and ignoring that of the Vietnamese. Examples of such include Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* and Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*. In such narratives, the primary focus lies on the trauma experienced by the veterans and invading US forces instead of the trauma suffered by the civilians resulting from military action. The traumatic symptoms of the soldiers, such as guilt stemming from atrocities they have committed and their nightmares and flashbacks of these events, are foregrounded. By contrast, the far greater suffering of the civilians, such as the daily threat of rape and murder, are either briefly referred to in asides or reduced almost to the level of statistics, described along the lines of "x number of burned or decomposing bodies." In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, for instance, Vonnegut writes highly detailed descriptions of the nightmares and hallucinations suffered by the novel's traumatized soldier-protagonist Billy Pilgrim, while only brief referring to the digging up of rotting bodies from "hundreds of corpse mines" (204).

While numerous popular works also center on white male characters (and contain problematic tropes such as "fridging," whereby in superhero stories a woman's trauma is used to motivate the male superhero), popular culture since the early 2000s nevertheless involved an increased number of texts concerned with the traumatic experiences of marginalized groups, including women, ethnic minorities, and the LGBTQ+ community (Noveck). This is due to several factors, including: the increasing demand for diverse representation in contemporary popular culture and its production, the more immediate feedback on popular texts enabled by social media, and the increased creative freedom enabled by media-service providers in comparison to more traditional networks (Hastings). As Reed Hastings says of platforms such as Netflix, the company can "push the envelope with content and [allow] for innovation."

Also significant is popular culture's wider array of genres, particularly genres that incorporate the fantastic, including fantasy, science fiction, and horror. These genres can enable texts to generate more suitable representations for the traumatic experiences of minorities. For example, superpowers in superhero narratives can be employed as metaphors for symptoms specific to the types of trauma largely experienced by women, such as mind-control as a metaphor for domestic abuse in *Jessica Jones*, as we shall see. Additionally, I argue that popular works like *Jessica*

Jones more frequently diverge from canonical trauma representations and dominant criticism, making them more suitable to represent the experiences of the marginalized (Travers).

However, it is important to also note the long-standing and problematic tradition in American culture to repress ostensibly “taboo” topics by representing them in supernatural terms. According to Judith Herman, sexual abuse in literature has been “entirely enmeshed [...] in myth and folklore” (*Father* 3). Herman observes that “[t]he language of the supernatural [...] still intrudes into the most sober attempts to describe” traumatic experiences such as “chronic childhood trauma,” for instance (*Trauma* 98). Of course, while not all rapes and domestic abuse portrayals in popular culture are depicted using the supernatural, the types of trauma experienced by minorities, particularly women, and experiences such as domestic violence and rape, are often depicted in popular culture that is more inclined to incorporate the supernatural (such as in the popular genres of horror and fantasy). An example of such is David Lynch and Mark Frost’s *Twin Peaks* (1990-91), in which the abusive father Leland Palmer (Ray Wise) is shown to be possessed by a demon from another dimension when he rapes and murders his daughter Laura Palmer (Sheryl Lee). This can be regarded as evading family violence. Family violence in American culture is usually presented as “an external evil”, and the perpetrator either takes the form of a “marginal figure” (Luckhurst 104) or is “safely relegated to the supernatural” (117). Roger Luckhurst notes that “[t]his device means that intra-familial violence is half-acknowledged but at once covered over by exteriorising it in an abjected, monstrous figure defined as the very opposite of the family” and that “[t]his also matches the model of trauma as something done to individuals, an event that breaches the subject from outside, turning them from agents to victims” (104). The device also matches how dominant trauma theory envisions trauma as an extraordinary event to give “the illusion that it is not part of normal [American] life” (Gibbs 22).

Jessica Jones

To briefly summarize the series’ plot: *Jessica Jones* centers on a super-powered woman (Krysten Ritter) and private investigator who had a brief superhero career until she encountered Kilgrave (David Tennant), a similarly empowered man with mind control abilities that enable him to compel others into doing whatever he commands, which includes forcing victims into sexual relationships with him.

Jessica spent a torturous tenure as Kilgrave’s sex slave before eventually breaking free of his control, but the experience left Jessica suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The first season of the series centers on Kilgrave’s return and Jessica’s attempt to defeat him.

This essay focuses solely on the first season of *Jessica Jones*, as the main arc of this season is the abusive relationship between the series’ protagonist Jessica and antagonist Kilgrave. Except for the second season episode “AKA Three Lives and Counting,” Kilgrave does not feature in subsequent episodes of *Jessica Jones,* and Jessica’s relationship with this character is no longer explored, with the second and third seasons focusing on new plotlines including Jessica’s traumatic origin story and relationship with her family. The following will first examine how *Jessica Jones* challenges conventional trauma representation. I argue that the series challenges the event-based model of trauma and the cultural tradition of representing controversial topics in supernatural terms as a means of repression. Instead, *Jessica Jones* appears to formulate unique supernatural metaphors to further explore the various psychological aspects of abusive relationships in detail. I will then examine a number of these supernatural metaphors for experiences, including post-abuse symptoms, psychological abuse, perpetrator trauma, and structural violence such as sexism and rape culture.

Challenging Trauma Representation

Trauma is a significant theme in superhero narratives, with a traumatic event often used as a trigger for a turn to superheroics. According to Alyssa Rosenberg:

> A theme of the [superhero] film is that these characters are in many respects [...] people who have suffered some great trauma and as a result have developed an animal alter ego who either rises above the trauma to fight for good or becomes a vengeful, embittered, and possibly insane villain, this being a classic comic-book convention. (30)

Certainly, the way comic book heroes tend to be instigated by a sudden traumatic event to use their abilities to fight crime aligns with Caruth’s belatedness or event-based model. This narrative structure is evident in *Batman*, for example. The young Bruce Wayne is affected by a singular traumatic event, the murder of his parents by a street thug in an alleyway when he was a child, and his decision to assume the Batman identity and fight crime is fundamentally a response generated by this childhood trauma. Several further dominant trauma concepts are evoked in such

depictions. These include an effort to re-grasp the traumatic event (such as how Batman fights criminals like those that murdered his parents, essentially re-enacting the traumatic event), in addition to traumatic dissociation in the form of the superheroic alter-ego. Dissociation refers to how a trauma sufferer may split off a part of their consciousness from a traumatic experience and remember it as occurring to someone else, thereby creating an "alter personality" (Herman, *Trauma* 103).

While critics such as Peter Counter, Katie Gordon, and Brandon T. Saxton note that *Jessica Jones* incorporates aspects of trauma, with Gordon and Saxton asserting that Jessica meets the full diagnostic criteria for PTSD per the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th Edition* (DSM-5), such as flashbacks, nightmares, and alcohol disorder, how the series challenges these trauma theories and definitions of trauma has not been acknowledged. *Jessica Jones* subverts the event-based model to suit its particular depiction of trauma. As noted, the event-based model is the definition of trauma as a sudden, overwhelming event that becomes repressed and returns in the form of flashbacks and nightmares. For superheroes such as Batman, trauma is framed as a tragic side effect of their tradition, with Batman owing his entire identity and persona to witnessing his parents' deaths and his motivating force being "to strike fear into the hearts of those who would traumatize innocents, internalizing his mental illness to the point of weaponization" (Counter).

By contrast, Jessica does not owe much to her illness beyond its symptoms, with Jessica established as obtaining her powers before her traumatization by Kilgrave. While Jessica's powers manifested earlier after a different trauma, specifically the death of her family in a car crash of which she is the only survivor and subsequently being experimented upon while in the hospital and then adopted by a family whose mother is abusive towards her, *Jessica Jones*' representation of its protagonist's trauma nevertheless diverges from more conventional superhero depictions of trauma such as *Batman*. Jessica's abuse by Kilgrave is the central traumatic event and focus of the narrative despite it not instigating her powers, while the series' depiction of Jessica experiencing several traumatic events throughout her life is more realistically in line with the feminist model of trauma as insidious and ongoing rather than more conventionally stemming from a singular extraordinary event.

Further challenging the event-based model, Jessica is shown to experience multiple flashbacks of her traumatic experience with Kilgrave at sporadic moments

in the narrative, but these flashbacks of Kilgrave’s abuse are presented clearly; that is, they are not represented through indirect and experimental aesthetic forms. These flashbacks are represented either by having Kilgrave visually appear in a scene, incorporating a Kilgrave voice-over, or employing purple-toned lighting (purple is Kilgrave’s trademark color; in the comic the character’s skin was purple and he is also referred to as The Purple Man). In the first episode, Jessica wakes from a nightmare in which we see Kilgrave pulling back her hair and licking the side of her face. In the opening scene, Kilgrave whispers to Jessica: “You want to do it. You know you do” (“AKA Ladies Night” 00:09:39-00:09:40). At the same time, however, these flashbacks are brief, showing moments of Jessica’s life while she was under Kilgrave’s influence that imply she was sexually abused by him.

This aspect of Jessica’s flashbacks is also significant in terms of the series challenging conventional trauma representation. While fiction generally represents trauma obliquely, rape scenes tend to be represented graphically and glorify the visuals of sexual violence. In *Twin Peaks*, for example, Leland is depicted supernaturally as a demon when committing violent acts, but the scenes in which he rapes his daughter are graphic. Indeed, Rosenberg asserts that the one of the goals of *Jessica Jones* was to focus on the psychological effects of rape on survivors without resorting to graphic rape scenes: “with rape, we all know what that looks like [...] we’ve seen plenty of it on television, used as titillation [...] I wanted to experience the [psychological] damage that it does” (Hill). Jessica’s flashback scenes therefore challenge both dominant trauma theory and cultural depictions of sexual abuse.

Moreover, in the opening scene, Jessica has been hired to survey and photograph a cheating spouse and is triggered by watching a man take the woman home from a bar to which Jessica responds by reciting her childhood neighborhood street names as a coping mechanism. While this recalls the Caruthian idea that trauma can be characterized by an “increased arousal to [...] stimuli recalling the event” (Caruth, *Trauma* 4), this scene further undermines Caruth’s event-based model in that Jessica’s flashback and, indeed, the subsequent flashbacks she experiences in the series, are not belated. Jessica is never represented as having repressed her memories of Kilgrave’s abuse. Instead of forgetting these memories, Jessica is shown to use alcohol to cope with them. For instance, Kilgrave remarks when they meet later in the series that Jessica drinks too much, to which she responds that drinking is “the only way I get through my goddamn days after what

you did to me" ("AKA WWJD?" 00:12:37-00:12:38), and the series depicts Jessica excessively drinking alcohol throughout the day.

Supernatural Metaphors

In addition to challenging dominant trauma theory, *Jessica Jones* also challenges trauma fiction's conventional employment of the supernatural. As with texts such as *Batman*, *Jessica Jones* also employs the supernatural in the form of superhero tropes in the portrayal of Jessica's trauma but reworks them to suit the series' particular representation of post-abuse trauma. Because Jessica's trauma stems from sexual abuse, which is unusual in the superhero genre, we can argue that this also forms part of the series' challenge to cultural representations of this type of trauma, as American culture traditionally employs the supernatural to conceal such controversial content. Kalí Tal, who compares American attitudes towards sexual abuse and the Vietnam War, notes that two ways America copes with trauma are via mythologization and denial (6). Likewise, Mark A. Heberle notes that similar to the national violence of American history (American political myth-making), American domestic violence has continually been subject to "mythic and ideological interpretations" (18). Instead, *Jessica Jones* employs the supernatural via superhero tropes to further explore rather than repress the different aspects of sexual abuse and the psychological effects it has on an individual, formulating unique supernatural metaphors to represent these experiences in detail and put them into strong visual context for the viewer. This idea, the series' engagement with the superhero genre to further foreground the experience of sexual abuse and thereby challenge cultural representations of such topics, has yet to be considered. The following will explore several themes that I argue are supernatural, superheroic metaphors for experiences, including post-abuse symptoms, psychological abuse, perpetrator trauma, and structural violence such as sexism and rape culture.

Post-Abuse Symptoms. Daniel Binns notes that Jessica possesses "two disparate personalities," the series positing its protagonist "alternately as hard-boiled antihero [...] and struggling victim" (14). However, the trope of the alter-ego is also strikingly evoked in the juxtaposition between Jessica's possession and post-possession by Kilgrave, between Jessica while she was in a "relationship" with Kilgrave and Jessica post-breakup. Narrative flashbacks show mind-controlled Jessica as docile and feminine-dressing because Kilgrave ordered her to wear dresses that are brightly-colored not unlike the hues of traditional superhero

costumes. In both a reference to street harassment and bizarre inversion of *Batman*’s Joker, mind-controlled Jessica is also depicted as a smiling, Stepford Wife-like automaton. This contrasts with present day Jessica, who is depicted as serious and anti-social and dresses casually in a leather jacket and acid-washed jeans. The series also portrays Jessica this way after having experienced the trauma of losing her family and having powers (albeit to a lesser extent). In further contrast to traditional superheroes, Jessica’s encounter with Kilgrave leads her to retire from being a superhero and open a private investigation firm, instead of trauma instigating her superheroics.

Jessica’s occupation is significant regarding the series’ employment of the supernatural to further explore the psychological effects of rape rather than repress it, as among the symptoms of rape victims are feelings of defectiveness (Smith and Segal). Jessica’s mediocre abilities also appear significant in this regard. Jessica possesses “considerable strength” rather than super-strength (“AKA It’s Called Whiskey” 00:03:43). She can stop “a slow-moving car” and describes her powers of flight as “more like jumping and then falling” (“AKA It’s Called Whiskey” 00:04:03). Additionally, Jessica refuses to wear a costume and get a “superhero name,” introducing herself as “just Jessica Jones” when Kilgrave commands Jessica to tell him her alter-ego name (“AKA The Sandwich Saved Me” 00:38:11). The use of the word “just” here is important, as it recalls the culturally inherited habit of undermining women’s self-confidence through the employment of words that soften their communication, resulting in women sounding defensive and apologetic rather than competent, which is especially relevant to sexual assault victims, who are subject to this type of treatment in particular.

Further, we can interpret *Jessica Jones*’ eschewal of superheroics in terms of self-blame, another common symptom of post-abuse PTSD whereby the victim feels responsible for their abuse (Smith and Segal). For instance, superhero characters are frequently depicted as solitary. John DeVore points out that “superheroes are loved from a distance [...] they crouch on rooftops or float in clouds,” as evident in characters including Batman, Superman, and Spider-Man. However, such characters are shown to isolate themselves as a means of protecting loved ones from enemies. Peter Parker (Toby McGuire) says in Sam Raimi’s *Spider-Man* (2002), “No matter what I do, no matter how hard I try [...] the ones I love will always be the ones who pay” (01:51:34-01:51:36) and is reluctant to begin a relationship with Mary-Jane Watson (Kirsten Dunst) for this reason. By contrast, Jessica avoids others as a means of protecting them from herself due to self-blame

for what she did under Kilgrave's control (not only did Kilgrave compel Jessica into having sex with him, but he also ordered her to commit violent acts against others, the series further dramatizing the concept of self-blame and employing the supernatural to explore rather than repress the experience of sexual abuse). Jessica tells her adopted sister Trish Walker (Rachael Taylor): "I'm life-threatening, Trish. Stay clear of me" ("AKA Crush Syndrome" 00:14:32-00:14:33). Jessica also asserts that "[t]hey say everyone's born a hero. But if you let it, life will push you over the line until you're the villain" ("AKA Smile" 00:47:24-00:47:25), and that "the world thinks I'm a hero [...] maybe I can fool myself" ("AKA Smile" 00:50:08-00:50:10), believing herself to be a super-villain rather than a hero.

Psychological Abuse. Kilgrave's abuse of Jessica is also rendered in supernatural, superpowered terms. The most obvious interpretation of Kilgrave mind-controlling Jessica into a sexual relationship with him is a supernatural metaphor for an abusive relationship. As Patricia Grisafi remarks: "ask anyone who has been in an abusive relationship, and they will tell you a similar story: they have done things they didn't want to do." However, this representation is also in stark contrast to and inverts traditional depictions of domestic violence, whereby the supernatural is employed as a means of displacing the blame from the perpetrator, as critics such as Luckhurst has highlighted (104). In *Jessica Jones*, it is the victim of abuse instead of the perpetrator that is possessed by a diabolical force over which they have no control. Kilgrave puts his victims into a trance-like state, but he does not remove their emotions, memory, or consciousness when under his influence. His orders also usually include a command to feel as well as to act. In the second episode, for example, Kilgrave is shown entering a family's house, declaring: "I'm going to be your guest here indefinitely […] you'll be delighted" ("AKA Crush Syndrome" 00:47:16-00:47:18) and the family, suddenly cheerful, invite him inside. Kilgrave's abuse victims, then, are forced to experience his commands, including rape, as something they participated in and are left doubting their perception, questioning their accountability in the assault and struggling to determine their own desires from Kilgrave's commands.

Kilgrave's powers therefore evoke rape culture and the way perpetrators may justify assault by claiming the victims secretly wanted it, as well as how rapes can be discounted because the victim's physical response to the assault is taken as consent (Weiss). This can occur when a victim freezes and disengages during the attack, or experiences physical arousal either as a defence mechanism when the painful feelings resulting from the assault are too much to bear or simply as a bodily

response to stimulation, a common but rarely discussed aspect of sexual assault. According to Suzannah Weiss, "many survivors feel as if their bodies have betrayed them for responding to unwelcome stimulation [...] imagine [feeling as though] inside something [has] betrayed you." Jessica experiences analogous feelings, evident in the scene where she describes herself as feeling unclean and shameful to a client's wife despite being subject to a force beyond her control: "you know what shame feels like? [...] when you've done something. You hurt. [...] The black oozing shit inside you, you sweat it through your skin [...] until you would do anything not to feel it" ("AKA Top Shelf Perverts" 00:05:37-00:05:40). She then briefly considers jumping under an incoming train, super-jumping onto the subway tracks and back again onto the platform. Appropriately, Kilgrave's powers are later revealed to be a literal virus. Thus, the series unusually employs the supernatural to debunk traditional perceptions of rape by representing the perpetrator as literally tainted rather than the victim.

Kilgrave's powers are used in the series to explore further types of psychological abuse that can occur in abusive relationships, with Kilgrave's powers of literal mind-control being an apt metaphor for common abuser tactics, including coercive control, victim-blaming, and gaslighting (the attempt of one person to overwrite another person's reality, a tactic employed by abusers to manipulate the victim into doubting their own perceptions and believing they are at fault for the abuser's behavior). The superpowered representation of Kilgrave also demonstrates the traumatic experience of abusive relationships to be an ongoing and insidious experience rather than a singular extraordinary event (such as through a graphic rape scene). For instance, we are told Kilgrave held Jessica captive for several months, and flashback scenes reveal Kilgrave to have controlled all aspects of Jessica's life. Kilgrave told Jessica what to eat ("you like Chinese" ["AKA The Sanwich Saved Me" 00:38:22]), and what to wear – further foregrounding this is his line when they first meet: "Jesus, you're a vision [...] appalling sense of fashion but that can be remedied" ("AKA The Sandwich Saved Me" 00:37:30-00:37:32). Kilgrave undermined her self-esteem, such as in reference to her super-strength, he muses, "all the power, just like me, but not quite as good, of course" ("AKA The Sandwich Saved Me" 00:37:37-00:37:40); isolated her from her family and friends, such as when Kilgrave commanded Jessica to inform her sister Trish that everything was fine whenever she called; as well as ordered Jessica to harm herself as punishment whenever her obedience flagged. One flashback shows Jessica discovering that Kilgrave's powers last twelve hours or until the victim is given a

new order. Jessica is free of Kilgrave's influence for eighteen seconds and considers jumping off his balcony to escape, but before she can, Kilgrave orders her to step down, in an attempt to put her under his control again. Here, Kilgrave orders Jessica to cut off her ear because she briefly hesitated when he told her to step down from the balcony, but stops her when she begins to obey: "Why didn't you listen to me? [...] You never appreciate anything I do for you. If you can't listen to me, you don't need ears. Cut them off [...] Stop. It's alright" ("AKA 1,000 Cuts" 00:29:35-00:29:40).

Kilgrave asserts that the balcony incident is evidence that Jessica wanted to stay with him. Kilgrave says that "It had been twelve hours, I timed it, I hadn't told you to do anything. And then for eighteen seconds, I wasn't controlling you and you stayed with me [...] because you wanted to" ("AKA 1,000 Cuts" 00:26:56-00:27:00) and that Jessica "didn't jump" ("AKA 1,000 Cuts" 00:29:14), despite Jessica showing him her ear scars and insisting that she "wasn't fast enough [to jump]. Getting you out of my head was like prying fungus from a window. I couldn't think" ("AKA 1,000 Cuts" 00:29:18-00:29:20). There are a number of further scenes in which Kilgrave similarly attempts to manipulate Jessica, in these instances making Jessica feel responsible for his violent acts. For instance, Kilgrave kidnaps another young woman, Hope Shlottman (Erin Moriarty), which he claims he did to send a message to Jessica. Kilgrave keeps Hope hostage for weeks, raping her numerous times, and then orders Hope's parents to hire Jessica to find their daughter (after which he compels Hope to murder her parents). Jessica finds Hope in a hotel room having been told by Kilgrave not to move for "five hours and twenty one minutes" ("AKA Ladies Night" 00:44:13). Hope is literally paralyzed on a bed screaming "I can't leave!" (00:45:08) in this scene as Jessica forces her out of the room; this is also a powerful supernatural metaphor for an abusive relationship and associated feelings of entrapment. Later, Kilgrave compels a police officer to murder Trish and orders Jessica's neighbor Ruben (Kieran Mulcare), who is infatuated with Jessica and frequently brings banana bread to her apartment (much to Jessica's annoyance), to slit his own throat. When Jessica confronts Kilgrave about these acts, saying "you've been torturing me" ("AKA Top Shelf Perverts" 00:41:52) by killing innocent people, Kilgrave tells her that he did so because he loves her, "I knew you were insecure but that's just sad! [...] I'm not torturing you, why would I? I love you" (00:41:56-00:41:58). Kilgrave claims he murdered Ruben as a favor to Jessica because she found him irritating: "Come on! You cannot pretend he didn't irritate you" ("AKA Top Shelf Perverts" 00:43:01-00:43:03).

Perpetrator Trauma. In its depiction of Jessica and Kilgrave's abusive relationship, *Jessica Jones* also formulates new supernatural metaphors to explore perpetrator trauma. Despite criticism focusing on Kilgrave as an abuser, the perpetrator model has been surprisingly excluded from critical discussion on this character. This model of trauma focuses on the traumatic experience of the perpetrator and is both characterized by "an inversion of perpetrator/victim status" (Gibbs 19) and "linked to the notion of agency, in particular denial of agency, as a means to slough off responsibility" (Gibbs 247). Again, this kind of representation is often found in American war literature, such as *In the Lake of the Woods* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*, in which texts situate narrator-protagonists, often members of US forces and perpetrators of extreme violence, as simultaneously individuals in a position of limited agency and therefore trauma victims. According to Tal, "[t]he soldier in combat is both the victim and victimizer," while Gibbs notes that "whatever deplorable actions in which [these individuals] are directly or indirectly involved, they are nevertheless also simultaneously victims of traumatizing circumstances over which they have no control" (167). This practice of conflating the perpetrator and victim is foregrounded and undermined in several ways in *Jessica Jones*.

As noted, Kilgrave also orders victims to commit crimes, including murder. In other words, Kilgrave not only makes his victims believe they are responsible for his actions and feel like villains but also literally turns them into villains who carry out his atrocities. During Jessica's time under Kilgrave's control, Kilgrave became aware that a woman named Reva Connors (Parisa Fitz-Henley) was previously in possession of a hard drive containing information on the experiments performed during his childhood that generated his powers. Having compelled Connors to give him the hard-drive, Kilgrave orders Jessica to kill Connors ("take care of her" ["AKA You're a Winner!" 00:29:36]), which Jessica obeys by punching Connors in the chest and stopping her heart; significantly, killing Reva enabled Jessica to break away from Kilgrave's control and escape him, evoking how victims often leave their abusive partners when they begin to hurt others, such as the victim's children. Kilgrave frequently reminds Jessica of this event and his attempt to displace the responsibility for his actions. An example of such is when Kilgrave insists that Jessica killed Reva of her own free will, asserting, "I did not tell you to kill Reva. If you remember I said take care of her, not kill her, you chose to punch her" ("AKA WWJD?" 00:22:55-00:22:57), attempting to position Jessica as the perpetrator of this act.

The inversion of perpetrator-victim status in trauma fiction can also take the form of depicting the perpetrator-protagonist as having a traumatic past or childhood trauma, evident, for example, in the sympathetic portrayal of John Wade as a child seeking his father's love and attention in *In the Lake of the Woods*. This convention often occurs in the depiction of super-villains as well, such as in the characterization of Lex Luther (Michael Rosenbaum) in Alfred Gough and Miles Millar's *Smallville*, who is shown to be caught in a meteor shower as a child that renders him completely bald and subsequently experiencing a difficult relationship with his father. These ideas are again undermined in *Jessica Jones*, the series asserting instead that a traumatic past is neither an excuse nor motivation to traumatize others. Kilgrave tries to gain Jessica's sympathy and excuse himself from Jessica's accusations of rape: "I never know if somebody is doing what they want or what I tell them to [...] you've no idea. I have to painstakingly choose every word that I say" ("AKA WWJD?" 00:29:22-00:29:25). He then shows Jessica a video of the painful experiments performed upon him as a child by his parents: "tell me which one of us was truly violated [...] while your dad played with you on the front lawn, my dad prepped me for my fourth elective surgery [...] this power was forced upon me" (00:30:33-00:30:27). Kilgrave claims that his parents then abandoned him because of his resulting abilities. Despite this, Jessica refuses to sympathize with Kilgrave, saying, "You blame bad parenting? My parents died [in a car accident] and you don't see me raping anyone [...] your parents had nothing to do with it" ("AKA WWJD?" 00:29:48-00:29:52) (further significant is that Jessica also obtained her powers via forced experimentation after the accident). Furthermore, Kilgrave's tragic backstory is revealed precisely to be a lie to garner sympathy, which appears an overt critique of the sympathetic portrayals of violent perpetrators found in trauma fiction. Jessica finds Kilgrave's parents, who inform her that the experiments were an attempt to save him from a fatal disease, after which Kilgrave's childhood tantrums turned them into slaves. Kilgrave's parents eventually fled because he ordered his mother to hold a hot iron to her face.

Structural Trauma: Sexism and Rape Culture

The series further uses supernatural metaphors to subvert the myths that perpetuate rape culture. The series' representation of abusive relationships and rape culture extends beyond the relationship between Jessica and Kilgrave. As with many rape victims, Jessica gets blamed for Kilgrave's actions by other characters in the series,

and her experiences are subject to endless scrutiny about their legitimacy. According to CarrieLynn D. Reinhard and Christopher J. Olson, whose essay in *Jessica Jones, Scarred Superhero* analyzes *Jessica Jones*' employment of superpowers as an analogy for rape and sexual assault in relation to Netflix's direct-to-streaming model and its audience, the series addresses "a problem that contemporary women face on a daily basis: rape culture" (83). Justin Wigard's addition to this collection similarly explores the insidious and invisible villainy of Kilgrave, arguing that this represents patriarchal oppression that Jessica must fight against. An aspect of *Jessica Jones*' representation of rape culture that has yet to be identified by critics, however, is its representation through Kilgrave's control of other characters. Among what we could call Kilgrave's super-weapons is compelling other people to attack Jessica, such as when she breaks into Kilgrave's apartment to capture and contain him. Here, Kilgrave orders the previous residents to fight off Jessica, who emerge from the varying rooms in the building armed with baseball bats and knives. In the season finale when Jessica is in the hospital, Kilgrave compels "everyone" in the building to kill her, announcing over the intercom that Jessica is "a dangerous virus [that] has [...] spread throughout the building [...] her poison will destroy you all unless you find and kill her first" ("AKA Smile" 00:09:32-00:09:36). Again, we have Kilgrave displacing his crimes to Jessica (as it is he who emits a virus), and as with the previous scene, each of the patients and hospital staff begin searching for Jessica to assault her with medical equipment. These sequences of large groups hunting Jessica and attacking her under the orders of a man dramatizes the wider culture of victim-blaming, the mob mentality of patriarchal society who blame women for being raped and side with the perpetrator despite neither witnessing the attack nor possessing any knowledge of it. For example, acquaintances of the victim or individuals who learn about a rape in the media may accuse the victim of inviting the rape due to her clothing, alcohol intake, or commuting alone, and believe the perpetrator when they claim that they were either drunk, so overcome with sexual desire that they were incapable of controlling their actions, or the act was consensual.

Further driving home the pervasiveness of rape culture mentality, the series includes an analogous "witch-hunt" sequence whereby a similar group of individuals turn on Jessica, blame her for Kilgrave's actions, and rescue Kilgrave from Jessica's containment, except these people are not under Kilgrave's influence. Ruben's sister Robyn (Colby Minifie) blames Jessica for her brother's murder, claiming Jessica has powers of mind control and that she used her brother for sexual

favors (again, Jessica is blamed for a man's fixation with her, as it was Ruben who was infatuated with Jessica). When Robyn disrupts a Kilgrave support group set up by Jessica's neighbor Malcolm Ducasse (Eka Darville) (who Kilgrave compelled to spy on Jessica; all members of the support group have been compelled by Kilgrave in some manner), she asks: "Would this Kilgrave have hurt any of you if Jessica hadn't pissed him off? That's what I'm piecing together from all this goddamn sharing. Each of his atrocities can be traced back to her [...] [Jessica] wants to control you [...] I'm gonna [track] her down" ("AKA 1,000 Cuts" 00:33:02-00:33:06). The group agrees, breaks into Jessica's apartment, beats Jessica to the ground (Robyn shouts, "you killed Ruben, you bitch!" ("AKA 1,000 Cuts" 00:35:41) and knocks her unconscious with a wooden plank), and sets Kilgrave, whom Jessica has tied up in her room, free. Robyn tells the group, "she has a captive!" (00:36:05) and reassures Kilgrave, "you're gonna be okay [...] you're gonna be fine," (00:36:09) evoking how perpetrators, with the support of society, escape punishment for their crimes.

Kilgrave's powers of mind-control are also frequently refuted by other characters in the series. As Counter notes, "there is a stigma to having been used by Kilgrave [...] victims are silenced by their own guilt and embarrassment, as well as the incredulity of others." Similarly, Wigard observes the significance of the series' reversal of male-female comic book powers regarding its representation of patriarchy, whereby male characters typically possess an active physicality associated with their abilities, such as super-strength, and female characters usually possess some form of mental power, such as telekinesis and mind-control:

> *Jessica Jones* represents something rather unique in the Marvel Cinematic Universe: a feminist superhero whose conflicts expose problematic aspects of gender relations in society. She has the power of super strength, yet the villainy she faces is insidious and nearly invisible, which can be viewed as representations of patriarchy. (10)

However, what has not been recognized in these analyses is the significance of *Jessica Jones*' genre.

Jessica Jones is a superhero narrative, a Marvel adaptation that takes place in the same universe as *The Avengers* and is set after the events of the first film *Avengers: Assemble* (2012), in which a team of superheroes including Iron Man (Robert Downy Jr.), Thor (Chris Hemsworth), Captain America (Chris Evans), Black Widow (Scarlett Johansson), The Hulk (Mark Ruffalo), and Hawkeye (Jeremy Renner) battle aliens that emerged from the sky in central New York.

Despite this, individuals in *Jessica Jones* refuse to believe Jessica about Kilgrave's powers, evoking traditions of mythologization and denial when it comes to taboo topics such as rape and domestic violence, and further emphasizing the absurdity of society's incredulity towards rape victims. For instance, Jessica's boyfriend, Luke Cage (Mike Colter), does not believe in mind-control, despite being superpowered himself (medical experiments gave him unbreakable skin). In reference to Hope killing her parents, Luke says, "Some guy made her do it? [...] Maybe she's nuts" ("AKA It's Called Whiskey" 00:22:58-00:23:01). Here, Jessica attempts to convince Luke that Hope was mind controlled by referring to his "unbreakable skin," (00:23:35) but Luke argues that "you can see my skin, you can touch it but you have no idea what the mind is thinking" (00:23:36-00:23:38). This response is significant, evoking how it is particularly difficult for abuse victims to cultivate credibility and the insidious trauma produced by structural violence such as sexism and rape culture.

The incredulity towards Hope's claims also underscores society's double standards regarding sexual assault and credibility. When Hope's lawyer Jeri Hogarth (Carrie-Anne Moss) dismisses Hope's accusations of mind-control against Kilgrave as "delusions" ("AKA It's Called Whiskey" 00:26:21) and "unprecedented" (00:26:34), Trish argues that "the city [was] attacked by aliens [...] Buildings were destroyed. People were killed. Perhaps what happened to Hope has happened before" (00:26:36-00:26:40). However, as with real-life rape cases, Jeri recommends that one woman's accusation is not enough to be credible, that multiple women need to come forward: "if there were other people who feel they have been controlled by this Kilgrave character they are more than welcome to contract my office but it is more likely that my client has experienced a psychotic break" ("AKA It's Called Whiskey" 00:26:47-00:26:51). This is in striking contrast to Kilgrave, who can singularly convince hordes of people of his innocence and Jessica's culpability with literally just a few words, regardless of whether he uses his supernatural abilities.

Conclusion

This essay examined how *Jessica Jones* challenges dominant trauma theory and formulates new supernatural metaphors, in the form of superhero tropes, to further explore the varying psychological experiences of abusive relationships. While this essay focused on the representation of abusive relationships in *Jessica Jones*, and

therefore solely concentrated on the first season in which this topic is the main theme, the series continues to employ the supernatural to further explore controversial topics, as well as challenge dominant trauma theory, in its subsequent seasons. For instance, Jessica kills Kilgrave in the first season finale, but continues to experience trauma in the second and third seasons from other events, including her traumatic origin story, the death of her mother, and the arrest of her sister Trish, the series again rejecting the dominant event-based model, as well as conventional narrative trajectories regarding the therapeutic working through of trauma. Indeed, in the closing scene of the finale, Jessica experiences a flashback of Kilgrave (as noted, the character no longer features in the series and is only briefly referred to, and in this scene Kilgrave is represented through a voice-over and his signature purple-toned lighting rather than physically appearing).

Ultimately, the aim of this essay is to both expand existing criticism on the series' employment of the supernatural, as well as add to it in terms of introducing the idea that *Jessica Jones* not only represents trauma but more innovatively challenges conventional trauma representation. In doing so, this essay contributes to wider trauma studies, uncovering new themes and techniques of trauma representation, as well as studies on American popular culture, examining how *Jessica Jones*' trauma representation also reworks conventions of the superhero genre it writes within and how American culture has changed in its approach to sexual violence.

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