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Author

Green, Stephanie

Published

2019

Journal Title

CONTINUUM-JOURNAL OF MEDIA & CULTURAL STUDIES

DOI

[10.1080/10304312.2019.1569383](https://doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2019.1569383)

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Fantasy, Gender and Power in *Jessica Jones*

Dr Stephanie Green, Griffith University

ABSTRACT

The ABC/Marvel Television fantasy series *Jessica Jones* (Season One, 2015) is the first television series in the Marvel Cinematic Universe both to be made specifically for an adult audience and to feature a female superhero as a lead character. It is also notable for having a female showrunner, Melissa Rosenberg, women writers or co-writers, and, in its second season, all women directors. Wielding an innovative generic blend of noir crime thriller and superhero fantasy, the series adapts its graphic fiction sources to foreground Jones as the central character. Its tightly interwoven plot lines, witty dialogue and richly crafted visual narrative address themes of trauma, power and responsibility. Krysten Ritter features as the cynical superhuman who struggles to reconcile her strength and agility with vulnerability to psycho-sexual abuse after being abducted by the purple-clad mind control monster, Kilgrave (David Tennant). Referring to theories of coercive control (Anderson 2009) and gender stereotyping in contemporary screen narrative (Benshoff and Griffin 2009), this article will discuss the ways in which Season One of *Jessica Jones* engages feminist approaches to television narrative by challenging conventional representations of the female superhero in the lead-up to the #MeToo era, and opening up possibilities for women in the realm of the fantastic as actors, writers and producers.

Keywords: Fantasy, Gender, Marvel, *Jessica Jones*

The character of Jessica Jones first appeared as the alter ego of female superhero Jewel in the original graphic novel *Alias* (Bendis and Gaydos 2001-2004) and its companion volumes, *The Pulse* (2004-2006) and *New Avengers* Volume 2 (2010-2013). The character has now gained a presence across an array of Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) platforms, appearing in different, often overlapping, narrative strands through graphic fiction, television and video games, which, as Manning points out, is partly as an outcome of industry-wide changes to media property ownership (*CBR.com*, 30 October 2015). The most popular iteration of Jessica Jones, to date, has been as the leading character in the ABC/Marvel Television fantasy series *Jessica Jones* (2015; 2018), played by Krysten Ritter. As Patten notes, this is the first series in the MCU both to feature a female superhero as the lead character and to be made specifically for an adult audience (*Deadline Hollywood*, 19 November 2015).

The television series is the character's first outing beyond the graphic novel platform, as part of a new wave of MCU superhero characters who emerged as central figures after corporate entertainment deals made in the 1990s. As their stories have been adapted from graphic fiction to screen narrative they have been characterised by a grittier socio-political edge and more explicit 'adult' content – as with the companion series *Luke Cage* – operating at the edge of mainstream society where they help others through covert heroic action (Bainbridge 2017, 375).

Reinhard and Olson point out that the series reflects 'Disney/Marvel's attempt to develop a grand transmedia narrative' (2017, 85-86) designed to take advantage of Netflix direct-to-streaming production capabilities, thus creating a 'Marvel Netflix Universe' which allows for darker and more explicit overtones than the broader, more family friendly, MCU (94). *Jessica Jones* offers a grungily stylish incarnation of the retcon¹ character with tightly

interwoven plot lines, taut dialogue and a complex visual narrative, produced within a branch of the entertainment industry where, until recently, few women operated (Erigha 2015, 78).

This series is cross-genre take on the classic noir persona of the hard-drinking, unsentimental detective, the sarcasm, jazz notes and shadowy hallways: social marginalisation inflected with a more contemporary identity politics. Whereas, mid-twentieth century noir cinema used its anti-heroes to reflect war-damaged and other marginalised masculinities. As this paper will argue, Season One of *Jessica Jones* reflects themes of embodied exploitation and trauma survival, offering a critical engagement with gender and power. Its prescience and contemporary topicality seem striking as gendered practices of discrimination, exploitation and violence are publicly called into question through protests such as the #MeToo social media campaign and giving rise to new televisual critiques of domestic abuse such as *Big Little Lies* (Warner Bros/HBO 2017) and *The Handmaid's Tale* (Atwood/Miller Hulu 2017) and to new narratives of empowered girlhood, such as *The Bold Type* (see S1: E10 2017) or the reboot of *Charmed* (S1: E1 2018). *Jessica Jones* Season One will be considered here as a vehicle through which to reimagine the persona of the female action hero and navigate the spaces of possibility for women through transmedia fantasy narrative.

Setting the Scene

Jessica Jones begins as aftermath. Having survived the trauma of abduction and violence, Jessica Jones now operates as a big city private detective who brings something extra to the job. Krysten Ritter plays Jones as a loner who, having faced the darker complexities of superhuman ontology, refuses to politely follow the rules, displaying none of the glamorous female superhero clichés. She wears a baggy leather jacket, old jeans and a moth-eaten woollen scarf. She is reluctant to help anyone and prefers whisky to company.

Ritter's ability to deliver rapid-fire cynicism and defiance mixed with a shrouded tenderness for others is well suited to the role. Although masked by hard-nosed independence, Jones still carries the shameful burden of her capture and abjection. As Season One unfolds, we learn that she has been trapped in thrall to Kilgrave for several months, escaping his hold only after the murder of Reva Connors (S1: E3; 41.05) which wrenches her from his control.

Jones's power to help others has been viscerally compromised when super-psycho mind-control villain Kevin Thompson, alias Kilgrave (David Tennant), witnesses her in action during a street fight and immediately sees the mischievous potential in being able to manipulate her incredible strength (S1: E5; 37.30). Using his pheromonic powers of persuasion, he abducts Jones, mentally forces her to adore him, have sex with him, and to wear the kinds of feminine clothes that please him. He also commands her to steal, mutilate and destroy on his command. The gestures of Kilgrave's predation – jealousy, stalking, and violent manipulation – are cloaked the conventions of romantic seduction: elegant meals, gifts and flowers. But these flourishes are decoration for his real motivation, which is possession and control.

Kilgrave first appears in Marvel Comics' *Daredevil* (1964) as a Yugoslavian spy who is poisoned by nerve gas, which turns his skin purple and endows his extraordinary powers of pheromonic persuasion. This origin plot is adapted for *Jessica Jones*, where he is born as Kevin Thompson, an acutely disabled baby with a neurodegenerative disease, subjected to a radical medical experiment by his scientist parents, with the aim of creating a being with extra-human powers of persuasion. Kilgrave's mauve tailored suits allude to the altered skin colour of the original Marvel Comics character. In both the televisual and the origin narrative iterations, Kevin/Kilgrave is a victim of over-zealous institutional and parental power who turns to crime for gain and personal pleasure and, in both versions, toys briefly with the possibility of redemption. In the television iteration he is a beguiling and complex figure

desperate for the control he was denied as a child whose crinkly boyish smile invokes a thrill of fear and whose mere shadow is a reminder of horror.

Jones discovers, in the first episode of Season One, that Kilgrave has been closely watching and recording her movements by manipulating a tenant in her building, Malcolm Ducasse (Eka Darville). Gradually, Kilgrave forces Jones to see herself, literally, through his lens by placing clues that lead her to discover his location. She suffers nightmares and flashbacks: 'I'm not safe anywhere. Every corner I turn. I don't know who's on the other side' (S1: E2; 14.35). The trauma of her vulnerability is still with her, as is her guilt about the crimes she committed at Kilgrave's behest. Most of all she feels that she is a danger to her friends: 'I'm life threatening Trish, steer clear of me ... please, I can't risk you' (S1: E2; 14.40). Kilgrave manipulates her actions, even after his superhuman persuasion loses its hold over Jones (S1: E5; 46.57), by controlling others in frighteningly cruel ways, for example, forcing his household staff to injure themselves when he occupies her former family home (S1: E8). For Jones, Kilgrave's superpowers are a vice in which her own will has been disabled. But for we viewers, his powers are a metaphor for a social ill that is so commonplace in our supposedly open, gender aware society that it frequently passes unnoticed.

Coercive Control

Studies in gender and human psychology elaborate concepts of entrapment and coercive control to explain the covert potency of forcible persuasion. Stark uses the term 'coercive control' to identify the gradual ways in which victims (predominantly women) lose personal autonomy and safety by means of 'the micro-regulation of everyday behaviours associated with stereotypic roles' (2007, 5). This may seem harmless, early in a relationship, but systematically achieves dominance by: undermining womens' social support systems,

‘subverting their rights to privacy, self-respect and autonomy’ (2007, 12). This behaviour is difficult to address, because it is often masked as caring and is complicated by ‘behaviours that are normative gender performances in contemporary culture’ (Anderson 2009, 1448; Benschhoff 2009, 16). Gendered power differentials have a well-established social and cultural history in western-identified cultures. Gillis and Hollows point out, for example, that passivity, physical weakness and domestication have been conventionally associated with ideas of femininity since the construction of gendered domesticity began to emerge with industrialization (2009, 3-5). In a context, therefore, which assumes that male authority and female passivity are normal, it becomes much harder to recognise the patterns of allure and punishment that coercive control entails. To question these behaviours as abusive and violent threatens to question the very basis on which men and women relate. Further, the notion that behaviours, such as persistent male attention, authoritative decision-making and jealousy, may be predatory and abusive can seem unthinkable to outsiders, partly because these are part of the formalised rituals of masculine courtship that are still culturally privileged as desirable. Indeed, Benschhoff remarks, ‘ideology is most effective when it goes unnoticed’ (2009, 16).

As Susan Brownmiller’s foundational work demonstrates, ‘rape has a history’ as an expression of dominance and power (Open Road Media, [1975]2013). However, if the male body is a weapon of historical significance in the determination of gender relations, as Brownmiller suggests, in the MCU fantasy world of super-powered inhuman beings, women can wield their bodies as well as their minds against violence. In a recent interview, Brownmiller responded to the #Me Too campaign by saying, ‘it is important that the details of the assaults now being described almost every day don’t distract from the real issues at hand, however memorably ghastly’, and pointing out the importance for the wider

community to hear from ordinary working women, not only those in prominent cultural positions (Cooke, *Observer*, 18/2/18).

The routinised abuses of sexual power that so often go unreported are re-imagined and re-addressed in Season One of *Jessica Jones*, through the character of Kilgrave's latest victim Hope Schlottman (Erin Moriarty) and that of Jessica herself, where Kilgrave's cruelty is depicted as unlimited in its scope and application. During Kilgrave's earlier abduction of Jones, however, the conventionality and unthinkability of gendered coercive control facilitates his persuasive force. Jones has been invisible to others as the victim of traumatic abuse partly because his gestures of romance – avowals of affection, gifts, celebratory meals, regulated dominance – follow a desirable pattern of courtship and avowal, made more forcible by his broad-spectrum ability to control minds. Social workers have observed that the physical manifestation of domestic violence often begins as a 'love bombing', and turn to methods for recognising patterns of power and control abuse, such as the Duluth Model (DeKeseredy 2007; Browne 2017). Kilgrave's behaviour towards Jones rehearses key tropes identified in the Duluth 'wheel' of violence: coercion, isolation, threats toward family members, blame and discounting or minimization (DIAP). Even after she has escaped and is free from his persuasive powers, Kilgrave presses Jones to doubt her own feelings. If she would only appreciate him properly, share in his idea of fun and fulfil his needs for a pretty, non-judgemental partner in crime - without resistance - she too would be happy: 'after a while, however long it takes, I know, I *know*, you will feel as I feel. Let's start with a smile' (S1: E13; 41.38).

Redefining the Super-hero Persona

By the time we meet her, however, Jones is free both from any sense of obligation to her nemesis and from the pressure of dressing to please anyone other than herself. In the

original graphic novel *Alias*, by Bendis and Gaydos, Jones's super-human alter ego was, 'Jewel', depicted in a clinging silver and blue costume of conventional, hyper-sexualised femininity, sported by a curvaceous figure and wild, lush flowing hair (1989, 19-20). In the transmedia adaptation of the Jessica Jones story, from graphic novel to television screen, the tropic fantasy objectification of 'Jewel' has been consciously revised under Rosenberg's direction and given a contemporary female perspective.

In this early characterisation Jewel is the desirable emblem of exaggerated femininity, arguably more like the hyper-polished object of fantasy fetish, as Smelik describes it (2007), than the dangerous masquerade of the femme fatale (Doane 1982, 82) in which the female gaze threatens to de-naturalize gender (Robinson 1991, 121). Indeed, how the series reframes the visual account of the female super hero is arguably one of the most interesting things about it. Jones eschews the fashionable elegance of her best friend, Trish, carelessly throwing on jeans, tank tops, sweaters and a sturdy leather jacket – clothes that will stand up to the rough wear of a superhero lifestyle. Moreover, there is no split between her everyday self and her 'super' persona. Under Melissa Rosenberg's direction, this minor transmedia character becomes a coherent and substantive figure of contemporary social comment. Here, Jewel's blue and silver costume has become an absurd cliché that Ritter as Jones easily disregards. When Trish playfully brings home a blue sleeveless store-bought costume for Jones to try on (S1: E5; 23.30) Jones merely scoffs at its absurdity. Instead she asserts her right to be herself and wear her own clothes (Hairston, *Fusion* 30 November, 2015).

While Ritter's portrayal of Jones is not without sexualisation – red lips, pale skin, semi-clad sex scenes, etc – the narrative is not dependent on Jones as a figure of either embodied feminine objectification or ravenous desire for submissive male adoration. Indeed, this is something the character overtly resists. When Kilgrave compels her to stay with him in her

former family home and presents her with a pretty, strapless frock to wear to dinner, Jones again insists on wearing her own grungy clothes (S1: E8).

Jessica Jones is one of a handful of shows that have operated to overcome industry structures of gendered power. In having both a female Director (Melissa Rosenberg), Executive Producers (Liz Friedman, Raelle Tucker) and women writers Season One enabled women to break in to the 'sf showrunner boys' club' by prioritising 'inclusive hiring practices from the writers' room to the cast that disrupt the dominant pattern of white men hiring other white men' (Sharp, 2018). Season Two also deliberately sought strong leadership from women directors and writers. Rosenberg's announcement to this effect at a 2016 University of Southern California conference was reported by Ryan in *Variety*, 22 October, 2016. The conference, 'Transforming Hollywood 7: Diversifying Entertainment', was held by the Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism, aimed to engage publicly with questions of gender and power in the media entertainment industries.

At the time of writing, the series remains distinctive in the current screen media context, where conventional tropes of sexualised objectification continue to be rehearsed, for example, in the costumes worn by the Black Widow/Natasha Romanov (Scarlett Johansson) in *Iron Man 2* (Favreau, Marvel Studios, 2010) and by Amazonian warrior Diana (Gal Gadot) as *Wonder Woman* (Jenkins, RatPac-Dune/DC Films, 2017). Powerful female action figures whose heroic roles attract narrative tension, these personae nevertheless invite 'moments of erotic contemplation', as Mulvey expresses it, in ways that resist the possibility of nuanced subjectivity or depth (1989, 19-20).

In *Jessica Jones*, the lead character's refusal to wear the costume of femininity is one of at least three ways in which resistance to patriarchal representation is played out in the story. It is, secondly, expressed in her determination to be a 'reader', rather than merely a 'spectator' of truth, as she uncovers Kilgrave's existence, and, thirdly, in her direct

interrogation of the personal politics of her abduction by Kilgrave, as this paper will go on to discuss. The series thus offers a layered critical dimension, allusive of established feminist theoretical concerns in screen studies which seek to address the passivity and objectification of the feminine: to transform ‘the problem of the subject – its forms of identity or difference, and the limits and possibilities of knowledge of itself and in its relation to power’ (Rodowick 2014, 259-260).

Reframing the Visual Narrative

The representation of the female survivor superhero as subject is supported in *Jessica Jones* through the crafted mobility of the visual narrative. As Jones confronts Kilgrave’s return, the viewer’s attention is directed towards narrative context and away from the performative female body in space. While we take pleasure in her feats of strength and agility, these are not presented as a display of objectified feminine physique, but as necessary acts of rescue or survival for the story. She is not cloaked in a sheen of scanty glamour, but most often shown in terms of personhood: we see her facial expressions, her eyes, lips, dark untidy hair and pale skin; not her chest, hips or legs. In Episode 8, for example, Jones leaps high, out of the camera frame, to save Kilgrave’s life from a drug-ravaged Will Simpson (Will Traval) so she can prove Hope’s innocence. We see only her feet leaving the ground as Will’s squad mates stare in amazement (S1: E8; 47.18). Although she cannot completely shake off the residue of personal and sexual shame invoked by her earlier powerlessness against Kilgrave’s coercive control, Jones gradually rediscovers her ability to help and protect those around her and overcomes her feelings of helplessness. In this way, the series reframes Jones’s identity beyond objectification and victimhood, as media commentator Loofbourow expresses it, offering a ‘complex treatment of agency in the wake of victimhood’

(‘Jessica Jones: Shattering Exploration of Rape, Addiction and Control’ *Guardian* 28 November 2015).

The spatial visuality of the city is key to the unfolding narrative of pursuit and escape. The camera leads us through shifting frames, across windows and doors, dingy hallways, dimly lit streets, and the fire-escape ladders of old apartment buildings from which Jones conducts her surveillance. The dark cityscape, with its expressionistic interiors, alludes to the urban iconography of the mid-twentieth century monochrome thriller, as the camera dwells on intersecting lines, reflections and shadows, portraying a city full of darkness and uncertainty. The vertical scope of the action plays out across ladders, stairwells and walls, sustaining visual mobility, interrupted by successive realisations of new horror. The camera focus constantly shifts, so that the viewer’s gaze is unsettled, just as Jones’s investigation is disrupted by the elaborate moves of Kilgrave’s surveillance. Low lighting robs colour from interior scenes: a symptom of the emotional drain Jones suffers from the shame of her traumatic imprisonment. At other moments, the sharply lit contemporaneity of high-sheen glass and steel city towers provides a brittle backdrop to the taut game of capture and evasion.

The character of Kilgrave is introduced into the action through a sequence of staged revelations. We have only a fleeting glimpse of him in Episode One through the side window of a car. He next appears briefly near the end of Episode Two when we hear his distinctive British accent and observe him tangentially, obscured by frames, angles and shadows. Television fantasy audiences are already familiar with Tennant via his popularity in the role of BBC TV sci fi television hero ‘Doctor Who’ (2005-2010, 2013) and as DI Alec Hardy in *Broadchurch* (Cibnall and Featherstone: ITV 2013-2017). His articulate British charm perhaps serves as something of a baffle for the dark origin character of the Purple Man, rendering him seemingly likeable in the face of his terrible actions. Our introduction to him

is, thus, carefully paced, sustaining mystery and ambiguity, well into Episode Three. Kilgrave becomes a tangible figure only at the very end of this third episode, when Jones confronts him through a balcony window as she rescues the policeman, Will Simpson (Will Travel), from his suicide directive (S1:E3; 40.55). A moment later she discovers that Kilgrave has been stalking her for weeks, when she enters a room filled with photographs of her face and activities (S1:E3; 47.10). These incremental revelations, and those that follow, delay the impact of Jones's realisation that the scope of his surveillance and control is almost limitless. The way in which this positions Jones is interesting, partly, for its intensification of shock suspense, but more importantly, in this discussion, for its genre revisionism, overturning the gendered ontology of noir thriller paranoia and feminine victimhood.ⁱⁱ Jones embodies resistance to gendered power because she is at once superhuman and noir anti-hero. Ultimately, however, the only way for her to overcome Kilgrave is to play his game then turn the odds at the last moment, finally liberating herself from false romantic compulsion.

Resisting Romance

A longstanding and complex discussion exists in screen studies around the representation of the feminine within visual platforms. Mulvey's work provides a foundational critique of the privileges and constraints of the gendered gaze (1989), while Kuhn, for example, analyses the visual pleasure produced by the affirmation of the passive feminine in classic Hollywood screen culture in which a mildly transgressive women character can be restored to her proper place, after a rupture or lapse from convention, by 'falling in love, by 'getting her man', by getting married, or otherwise accepting a 'normative' female role. If not she may be punished' (1994, 34). Kuhn's well-rehearsed account argues that the prizes of heterosexual courtship offer a highly regulated representation of gender difference, reinforcing the account of the passive feminine. Part of

the appeal of the noir femme fatale figure, and the way it is upended to create a counter-narrative of the gendered superhero in *Jessica Jones*, is that normative female passivity is resisted while the complex ideological and personal imperatives of power and desire are also acknowledged.

Several recent discussions seek to complicate the notion of female visual desire, pointing to increasingly active roles for women as screen action heroes (Calvert 2017), or leading women who have acted as ‘unruly figures’ (Rowe 2011, 410), serving their own needs and desires and creating spectacle for their pleasure and ends rather than merely to please (Butler 1993, 14). It is useful, nevertheless, to recall Kuhn’s remarks as we watch Kilgrave manipulating Jones in these precisely conventional terms to become the helpmeet of male desire, during Season One of *Jessica Jones*. Here, the discourse of feminine passivity and romance is sharply reflected in how Kilgrave demands her feminized dependency by costuming Jones, commanding her to obey his orchestration of the routines of romance and, furthermore, implying that their relationship offers a sublime liberation from the dull constraints of human existence (S1. E3).

The rupture between agency and victimhood is most fully articulated at the key moment of confrontation between Jones and Kilgrave, when she reminds him that he is a rapist, not a lover.

Kilgrave: ‘We used to do a lot more than just touch hands.’

Jessica: ‘Yeah. It’s called rape.’

Kilgrave: ‘What? Which part of staying in five-star hotels, eating at all the best places, doing whatever the hell you wanted, is rape?’

Jessica: ‘The part where *I* didn’t want to do any of it! Not only did you physically rape me, but you violated every cell in my body and every thought in my goddamn head.’

Kilgrave: ‘That is not what I was trying to do.’

Jessica: ‘It doesn’t matter what you were trying to do. You raped me again and again and again—’

Kilgrave: ‘*How am I supposed to know?* I never know if someone is doing what they want, or what I tell them to.’

Jessica: ‘Poor you.’ (S1. E8; 28.50)

This exchange momentarily flirts with the idea that the role of male perpetrator is an imperative for Kilgrave, a burden that he too carries. He argues, in addition, that his belief in their love is based on 18 seconds of genuine mutual affection he believes they have shared during an elegant brunch on a sunlit rooftop balcony, when she is, very briefly, free from his mind-control. Jones responds bluntly that, ‘you saw what you wanted to see ... getting you out of my head was like prying fungus from a window.’ (S1: E10; 29.33) Kilgrave assumes that his female victims must in some sense ‘want’ to be controlled, partly because of the freedom and wealth his powers bestow. But this assumption fails to allow room for the autonomy of female desire or the importance of equal choice or self-determination. Kilgrave acts ‘as if he believes he has the right to inflict his will on others’ reflecting the tenets of a ‘rape culture’ in which ‘domestic abuse can cement a woman’s affection’ (Reinhard and Olson 2018, 88). This point reinforces Anderson’s remark, cited earlier in this discussion, that gradual and banal controlling practices often lead victims of violent domestic situations to give up autonomy and safety, allowing the aggressive partner to gain control through fear (2009). As Stark also reminds us, this may occur even when no physical violence is used, because coercive control is underpinned by societal structures of gender inequality (2007, 10). Kilgrave’s mind control ‘gift’ is an exact metaphor for this practice of coercive control. Kilgrave need never exercise physical violence himself. That his command is enough to

produce total obedience, even the victim's self-destruction, is a clear metaphor for the personal and ideologically-sanctioned violence that Jones contends.

While it offers social critique, however, *Jessica Jones* deflects its topics of gender, trauma and violence through a compelling fantasy action story of despair and triumph. Its originality lies in its hyperbolised vision of real-world issues through generic transmedia adaptation, to show new ways of representing women in fantasy screen narrative through issues that speak to the lived experience of gendered difference.

Jessica Jones first aired in November 2015 and was immediately recognised as distinctive for its critique of domestic rape as an expression of power and control (Zutter 'What Rape Apologists Need to Learn', *TOR.COM*, 1 December, 2015). Carpenter points out that the series ranked well against other shows from the same ratings period – around 4.8 million viewers averaging September through December 2015 ('Are these Netflix Viewership Numbers for *Jessica Jones*...?' *IGN*, 13 January 2016). Eleven months later, on 24 October 2017, the #MeToo hashtag began trending on Twitter, prompted when Alyssa Milano adopted Tarana Burke's 2006 Twitter hash tag in response to allegations of sexual assault by Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein. According to Mendes et al., the #Me Too campaign, 'follows a growing trend of the public's willingness to engage with *resistance* and *challenges to sexism, patriarchy and other forms of oppression via feminist uptake of digital communication.*' (2018) The 'hashtag feminist' movement has attracted widespread attention from mainstream media, including in the 2017 Time Magazine 'Person of the Year' feature (Zacharek et al.), however, as Mendes et al. observe, little is understood about how effective the movement can be in producing social change. The shift in public focus towards a critique of gendered violence in mainstream popular culture is striking, nevertheless, at a time when women are speaking out and telling their stories of abuse on a global scale through the hashtag mechanism (Mendes et al. 2018). While the second season of *Jessica Jones* is not the

subject of discussion here, the themes of emotional manipulation and gendered violence remain relevant as the television narrative moves forward.

Challenging Rape Culture

Benshoff reminds us that the concept of gender difference ‘permeates our understanding of being human’ so that ‘when patriarchal ideology is functioning smoothly, most people do not notice how gender is being rehearsed’ (2009, 260). Only when called into question, or when ideological constructs begin to change, does representation become apparent. *Jessica Jones* offers a social critique of male violence in a fantasy action context. The clichés of seductive pursuit, romantic desire and domesticity are repeatedly challenged as Jones resists Kilgrave’s campaign to repossess her, insisting that his actions are about power and control rather than love and recognition. Free from his ability to control her mind, she refuses his avowals of devotion and gestures of romantic capture – including his meticulous reconstruction of her childhood home (S1: E8). Kilgrave acknowledges the tension between dominance and choice when he promises Jones, facetiously, ‘I won’t touch you until I get your genuine consent’ (S1: E8; 4.12). Yet, he continues to hold Jones against her will, forcing her to stay with him by threatening to use his powers on others: a forced contract that violates any possibility of autonomous, mutual desire.

Kilgrave succeeds as a perpetrator for the same reason that many women never escape violent homes: a man’s extreme need for control, to an extent that seems inconceivable. In Kilgrave’s case, his psychic superpowers are reinforced by a different but equally weapon – underlying public belief in male superiority and disbelief in the possibility of an evil super-monster with such a brutally inventive capacity for control. Even Jones’s adopted sister, Trish, the only person who has known about Jones’s earlier abduction, cannot fathom the depth of Kilgrave’s ‘ability’. Only after he forces Trish to try to maim herself – before being

rescued – does she fully grasp its implications (S1: E10; 03.22). Jones thus fails in her first attempt to contain him because his abilities are inconceivable to anyone who has not witnessed or experienced them. ‘I was a fool. I didn’t believe you about him. Not enough’, Luke Cage says to Jones after Kilgrave forces him to destroy his own beloved bar in a fire (S1: E5; 5.25). That every one of the monster’s actions is part of a meticulous campaign to win back possession of his favourite female superhuman, however, speaks for the series as a close interrogation of regulated romance and power.

The themes of autonomy and control are explored in a variety of ways, with reference to other characters in the series, not only through the Kilgrave/Jessica Jones rape allegory. Jones’s only trusted friend, her adopted sister, Trish Walker (Rachel Taylor), provides a counterpoint persona for the cynical superhuman detective, as a conventionally feminine blonde beauty with popular appeal as a commercial radio host. She too is scarred, by the ordeal of childhood screen stardom and a needy, manipulative mother. As the series unfolds, Dorothy Walker (Rebecca de Mornay) continues to try to exploit her daughter as a strategy for show biz survival (S1: Eps 7, 11 and 12) – a passing comment on the distortions that patriarchal power wreaks on women in the entertainment industry. Walker represents compassion and comradeship for Jones in her darkest moments and takes private training lessons with a fight instructor (S1: E2; 46.38), secretly longing to acquire a little of Jessica Jones’s superpowers.

Reinhard and Olson comment that the show ‘never fully trades on the fantastic’ but instead uses standard origin story tropes to generate new narrative about a woman learning to control her power and overcome her own fear (2018, 89). Speaking to Libby Hill for the *Los Angeles Times*, showrunner Rosenberg confirms that the story deliberately confronts the issue of rape head on: ‘there was no glossing this over. It was really an exploration of a survivor and her healing, to the degree that she does, in facing those demons quite literally’ (‘Melissa

Rosenberg: Jessica Jones Showrunner Talks Rape, Adaptation and Female Sexuality', November 22, 2015). Undoubtedly, however, the arena of the fantastic offers possibilities for action narrative, here, that realism could not so easily provide: Jones's powers allow her possibilities for overcoming her monsters that surpass those of any ordinary female victim. Her extraordinary strength and ability to leap and jump great heights means that she can navigate the cityscape in spatially complex ways, while the story itself, as one of survival, brings a final resolution to Season One, that belongs in the realm of fantasy revenge, not the real world of human compromise and social regulation.

Jessica Jones provides a closely elaborated demonstration of how the cultural ideology of gendered difference can work to reinforce unequal access to autonomy and power. Its diverse roles for women and the leadership of women in its writing and production indicate that a conscious effort has been made to address limitations for screen industry women at a time when the cultural politics of male power has been so popularly and explicitly challenged by the international '#MeToo' campaign (Riley Silverman, 'In This #MeToo Moment', *ScyfyWire*, 20 December 2017). Without offering pat solutions to trauma recovery or structural inequalities, the series shows possibilities for transcending some of the common limitations for female representation within popular screen narrative. Team Rosenberg's take on the MCU figure of Jessica Jones offers a key example of how the roles and representations of women in transmedia narrative can engage audiences in recognising some of the inconsistencies and tensions of social, cultural and identity politics in compelling and accessible ways. This multi-layered engagement with character, story, issues and ideas is arguably facilitated by the Netflix vehicle, enabling the immediacy of viewer immersion: 'producers can tell a complex serialized drama over multiple episodes, because viewers can watch all of the episodes as closely together as they like' so that the impact of episodic knowledge can be retained Reinhard and Olson (2018, 134). The success of the first season

on Netflix has prompted Marvel to regenerate the character for a new graphic novel series *Jessica Jones* with a fresh creative team in writer Kelly Thomson and graphic artist Mattia di Iulis (2018), while the third season of the television series is planned for release in 2019, demonstrating the adaptability of the transmedia environment to create new story worlds and characters of broad contemporary relevance and appeal.

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ⁱ A short-hand term for the notion of 'retroactive continuity' which is used widely in the field of comic fandom to denote 'the form or content of a previously established narrative is changed', particularly within comic or television series: ("A Short History of Retcon", Merriam-Webster: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/retcon-history-and-meaning/>)

ⁱⁱ I am indebted to Dr Amanda Howell for this insight.