

Neurological Zones of Indistinction: The Cultural Politics of Childhood Torture Cures in Jessica Jones “Sin Bin” and the Judge Rotenberg Center Behavior Treatment Facility

With the current explosion in original online entertainment and the insatiable ‘binge-watching’ appetite of the modern day consumer, providers like Netflix are striving to produce original quality programs that match the increasing particularities of the modern-day viewing palate. Consumers today have little patience for the rote or predictable and Netflix is responding with a new and arguably darker take on familiar franchises like Marvel’s superhero universe. Netflix’s extremely well received interpretation of Marvel characters *Daredevil*, *Jessica Jones*, *Luke Cage* and *Punisher* blend themes Catherine Zimmer defines as “torture porn”—extreme violence, torture, psychological warfare and tools of surveillance—with the tormented personal histories and private traumas of its superheroes to bring depth and humanity to Marvel storylines. The narrative of *Jessica Jones* is particularly complicated and at times, its ambiguous storyline makes it nearly impossible to determine if the former superhero turned private detective is working towards the humanitarian good or feverishly laboring to extinguish her own demons. In Episode 9 *AKA Sin Bin*, Jones constructs a hermetically sealed torture chamber for her archenemy Killgrave, which she has armed with



surveillance cameras, a video playback device as an instrument of psychological torture, microphones and a foot of water flowing across an electrically charged floor for administering powerful and random shocks to Killgrave. *AKA Sin Bin* reflects Zimmer’s narrative strategies in

torture porn through its relentless video playback loop of Killgrave’s childhood medical abuse as an instrument of his psychological torture, graphic depictions of violent and unpredictable electric shock and the “zone of indistinction” Jones constructs to reduce the formerly invincible Killgrave to a “figure of bare life” (pp. 40-41). Zimmer is emphatic that graphically violent and surveillance strategies in the torture porn genre are “indicative of larger political formations— that either began or have become racialized (or *ableist* my insertion) in quite specific ways” (p.60). The following analysis argues *AKA Sin Bin*’s narrative situates Killgrave as a neurologically disabled subject of medical child abuse as an *ableist political strategy* to justify

Jones torturous acts, and that this tactical formation parallels the highly controversial real life use of electric shock and surveillance deployed as behavioral interventions at The Judge Rotenberg Treatment Center in Massachusetts.

In the episodes preceding *AKA Sin Bin*, we know Killgrave as ultimate evil, the unadulterated embodiment of a supervillain with the power to control and exploit human minds, bodies and behaviors—a superpower he exercises exclusively with murderous, materialistic, lustful and violent intent. A previous Killgrave victim having once killed for him, Jones now relies on her unnatural strength and superhuman abilities to fortify her obsessive desire to end his evil reign at any ethical cost. *AKA Sin Bin* marks a significant shift in the Jones/Killgrave narrative. Throughout earlier episodes, Killgrave expressed his undying love for Jones, stalked, manipulated and surveilled her every move, kidnaped and raped those close to her and forced her friends to commit murder and suicide. *AKA Sin Bin* finally gives Jones the upper hand as she traps Killgrave in a sealed room designed to neutralize his power. Jones is determined to elicit, through electric shock and surveillance methods, a videotaped confession that will serve as irrefutable proof of innocence for those imprisoned for committing crimes on his behalf. While the narrative motive is ‘pure,’ Jones’ political strategy mirrors “the systematic violences that occurred at Abu Ghraib and the degree to which they were not only documented by, but performed *through* the act of photography,” a tactic that ultimately writes Killgrave as a body and mind “produced as visible for, by, and through the act of torture” (p.44). Jones now reduces Killgrave’s previous standing as the ultimate sovereign citizen (albeit through extremely reprehensible means) free of restriction and in absolute control over his political autonomy to a life “without legal or political rights” (p. 41). As the scene of confinement unfolds, we watch Killgrave through a bulletproof glass wall, pacing the water-submerged floor and shielding his ears in extreme agony as he attempts to block relentless audio screams emitting from the video reflecting on the glass in front of him. The viewing audience, Killgrave and Jones watch unfolding horrors on the scratchy black and white video replay; a child named Kevin we soon come to know as young Killgrave screams in pain as unimaginable neurological tortures are inflicted upon him.

The video serves a dual narrative purpose, it is foremost an implement of auditory and visual torture forced upon adult Killgrave; however, the viewing audience interprets the scene as a representation of the original extreme violences *imposed on young Kevin* in the name of treatment, alongside the emotional

torment the playback inflicts on the adult neurologically deranged Killgrave. This duality serves to illicit viewer sympathy for the clearly neurologically divergent young Kevin, and by extension, an ethical confusion regarding Jones violent treatment of the murderous adult Killgrave. This duality demonstrates “direct and indirect relations between surveillance and torture” (p. 38) that Zimmer argues is illustrative of how the videotaped event and Jones attempt to capture Killgrave ‘performing’ his powers on video “comes to serve two interrelated purposes... as surveillance used to monitor the scenes of torture, and as representation incorporated into the torture scenarios” (p. 39). Jones later meets Killgrave’s estranged parents, who reveal the source of his power and torment is, “a degenerative neural disease he was born with” and frame the videotaped torture as treatment in “an experimental study using a virus to repair his damaged DNA”. Killgrave’s mother pleads with Jones for understanding and tells her “we love our son, we wanted a cure and we found one,” a sentimentality that echoes familiar and politically controversial ‘cure’ ideologies embedded in modern day medical and psychological discourses.

The Judge Rotenberg Center (JRC) in Massachusetts houses over 200 adults and children with developmental and neurological disabilities and has a fifty-year history of ongoing legal challenges, media scrutiny and activist efforts to close its doors. The Mental Disability Rights International (MDRI) report *Torture not Treatment: Electric Shock and Long-Term Restraint on Children and Adults with Disabilities and the Judge Rotenberg Center* (Hinman & Brown, 2010) describes the centers methods of behavior control as torture, which they claim are imposed on residents for ‘undesirable’ behaviors such as self-injury, arguing, speaking out or uttering noises. Once approved through the state court hearing process, developmentally disabled patients are committed JRC custody and immediately “subject to electric shocks on the legs, arms, soles of their feet, finger tips and torsos ... administered by a remote-controlled pack attached to a child’s back ... so strong as to cause red spots or blisters to the skin” (p. 1). A ‘central digital video recording/monitoring system’ surveils and records all JRC spaces and student behaviors for later review for determining if delayed behavior modifications (shocks, restraint, food rationing) are necessary. The implementation of video surveillance, playback and review to justify torture and *delayed* electric shock on neurologically divergent JRC residents emulates *AKA Sin Bin’s* narrative “zone of indistinction.” Students and adults retained at JRC have no legal or political rights outside of parent or guardian representation and

the impassioned parent testimonials “I have a treatment that works for my son” and “I love my child as much as anybody can” that appear on the JRC website echo the sentiments expressed by Killgrave’s mother.

The cinematic politics in *AKA Sin Bin* and literal strategies of control at JRC rely on their subjects status as intellectually or neurologically *different* to justify the construction of a “literal and philosophical space for torture as another functioning zone of indistinction” (p. 42). These highly political spaces “manifest [their] victims *as bare life*” (p.40) as a marginalizing tactic to justify their neurological abuse through their divergent social status. While this cinematic narrative provides a rush of adrenalin for viewers seeking justice for the victims of the murderously evil Killgrave, its efficacy as a therapeutic technique or cure for the real life residents at JRC remains a matter of heated debate within contemporary legal and social justice discourses regarding the rights of those diagnosed with developmental disabilities.