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**“DID ANYONE EVER EXPLAIN TO YOU WHAT ‘SECRET IDENTITY’  
MEANS?”: RACE AND DISPLACEMENT IN *BUFFY* AND *DARK ANGEL***

Whiteness is everywhere in U.S. culture, but it is very hard to see.

GEORGE LIPSITZ, *THE POSSESSIVE INVESTMENT IN WHITENESS*

Representation is the means by which race establishes social power—hence the metaphor of a dividing “line” between black and white identities; yet it is through representation that we are able to envision challenges to the color line’s authority.

GAYLE WALD, *CROSSING THE COLOR LINE*

I would say that, absolutely, race was an integral part of our casting process. We were looking for an actress who was perhaps of mixed race so we could say, “Look, this character is supposed to represent the best in all of us; the best of the human race.” We didn’t want to fall into the chauvinistic mistake, that I think science fiction films have made in the past, where the superior race happens to have a certain Nordic quality as opposed to the alternative, which I don’t think has ever really been explored.

JAMES CAMERON, EXECUTIVE PRODUCER OF *DARK ANGEL*

“**W**e are alone.” When Buffy Summers meets the First Slayer, she hears a few things she would rather not, including the preceding assessment of a slayer’s existential lot in life. This scene comes at the end of “Restless,” the fourth season finale of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Whereas the nightmares of other members of the Scooby gang have been somewhat mundane—Willow is unprepared for a school

play and Xander is left out of some gang activity—Buffy’s takes place in a spectacularly antediluvian desert, an apt setting to demonstrate her most acute fear, which is, no surprise, being alone. She demands the return of her friends. “No friends!” growls the First Slayer, “Just the kill.” This is too much for Buffy; she fights back.

As the two slayers kick and chop and roll around in the sand dunes, it becomes clear that the First Slayer, while the original source of Buffy’s powers and sense of purpose, is also wholly unlike her. The First Slayer is somehow “African”—she wears animal skins, tribal paint, and wild hair, while Buffy has imagined herself, in her dream, wearing a stylish pink ensemble (see fig. 1). Though the First Slayer’s primal instincts and ferocity represent a threat to Buffy in the desert, when the two cross time and space, out of the nightmare and into Buffy’s middle-class suburban reality (specifically, her mother’s bedroom), the First Slayer’s menace essentially evaporates. Straddling the prone Buffy, the First Slayer stabs at her frantically with her stake and misses repeatedly. Buffy is thus inspired to her customary sarcasm: “You’re *not* the source of me,” she snipes. “Also, in terms of hair care, you really wanna say, ‘What kind of impression am I making in the workplace?’” And with that, the First Slayer is vanquished.

The comedy of this summary ejection is complicated some minutes later, when Buffy hears the First Slayer’s voice, warning, “You think you know what’s to come, what you are. You haven’t even begun.” This is the series’ standard approach to Buffy’s dilemmas, to reveal the always imminent hazard with which she lives (“You haven’t even begun”) while privileging her resilient and capable youthfulness. Still, Buffy’s triumph here privileges her contemporary sensibility over the First Slayer’s rudimentary rawness. This sensibility is famously emotional, ironic, fantastic, and clever, as well as violent and traumatic, serving as a metaphor for the “universal” trials and traumas of youth, “universal” in a white, straight, middle-class, suburban sort of way. In this context, it is worth underlining that the First Slayer is black.

This rendering of race, like almost every other category of experience and identification in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, is at least partly metaphorical. When Buffy rejects the First Slayer as her source, denying her aloneness, as well as her dour brutality and inelegant rage (Buffy’s own rage at this point in the series is, well, cuter), she is also rejecting her own “otherness.” The image of the



**Fig. 1.** The First Slayer confronts Buffy, “Restless,” 23 May 2000.

First Slayer is troubling in various ways: at the same time that she represents the African roots of Buffy’s Euro-American present, she also can be read as an ignorant (not to say racist) image of a primitive black character being bested by a white girl’s “modern” know-how and training.

Significantly, the First Slayer is unable to speak; Buffy hears her “thoughts” during the dream sequence, spoken by Tara, who is conveniently inserted into the background of the action for this purpose. But this particular “lack” is exceedingly complicated, as it not only initiates a layered communication and community among Buffy, the First Slayer, and Tara, but also establishes a subtle continuity of purpose, experience, and desire, a continuity contingent on their shared youth. Charles Acland has argued that the ostensible and over-determined “deviance” of youth allows it to function as an identity category in distinct contrast to adulthood, which is constructed as the norm. This troubled opposition between youth and adult enables an ongoing process of struggle for dominance through which social and political systems sustain themselves.<sup>1</sup> Because Buffy is a spectacularly representative youth, her encounter with the First Slayer exemplifies and exacerbates such crisis. Buffy’s perpetual sense of displacement, her sense that she belongs to another “race,” apart from her world (which is populated by humans, demons, and vampires, communities into which she never quite fits), is made concrete for her in the First Slayer.

The First Slayer is distinctly other; she does not easily fit the category of white youth with which Buffy and her friends identify and she thus reminds Buffy of her own uneasy place.

This chapter considers such displacement as it characterizes youth and race in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Dark Angel*, a science-fiction-action-teen-melodrama series that aired on Fox from 2000 to 2002. Both series present youth and race as metaphorically related identities, especially as race refers to human and nonhuman and youth refers to a deviant other. Both programs denote the complications and intersections of these categories through the protagonists' "secret identities."

Whereas Buffy is a slayer posing as a high-school student, a college student, and, in the later seasons on UPN, a "normal" suburban head-of-the-household, nineteen-year-old Max Guevara (Jessica Alba) is a genetically enhanced warrior (a "transgenic") posing as a bike messenger for Jam Pony X-Press, a gig that allows her an access pass to most of the city's militarized sectors. More obviously (literally) than Buffy, Max is a member of an "other" race; she is one of twelve fabricated, bar-coded, and brainwashed soldiers, the X-5s, also called "my kids" by the man who designed them, Donald Lydecker. Max and her siblings escaped from Manticore (a facility in Gillette, Wyoming, where genetically enhanced soldiers are made in *Dark Angel*'s near-future, science-fiction world) some ten years before the series' present, 2019. Max helpfully and repeatedly recalls this past in nightmarish flashbacks featuring a nine-year-old, crew-cut Max (Geneva Locke), who performs training drills, schemes with her fellow baby soldiers, and, following their escape, repeatedly struggles to elude dogs, ATVs (armed transport vehicles), and uniformed, heavily armed men, across an icy-blue-lit, decidedly creepy American West. In her current life, Max must avoid detection by Manticore, whose agents continue to pursue her, an expensive project gone rogue.

"Death is your gift."

THE FIRST SLAYER TO BUFFY, "THE GIFT"

As the *New York Times* observed of Buffy in 1997, she is a post-*Patty Duke Show*, post-*Beverly Hills, 90210* phenomenon. According to Thomas Hine, Buffy is

an attempt to represent the experience of teen-agers' lives today. She is part of an unprotected generation, one that must live with its elders' insecurities as well as its own. She rubs shoulders with monsters, and like many of her age-mates, she is sometimes suspected of being a monster herself. She's powerful, responsible, scary to know—and personally at risk.<sup>2</sup>

Her own “monstrosity” is, of course, Buffy's most excellent gift and dreadful secret, her youth made at once reassuringly recognizable and dramatically disturbing. She might moonlight as a Maybelline model, as a beauty-queen slasher victim in *I Know What You Did Last Summer* (1997), or as an incestuous vamp in *Cruel Intentions* (1999), but Buffy is, primarily and importantly, the kick-assingest girl on television. Her appearance in a weekly series made being a teenager metaphorically understandable, as a set of ongoing daily rituals, trials, desires, and aspirations. Buffy's “secret identity” as the slayer exacerbates such ordeals and dreams. When she first appears in Sunnydale, for example, in the first season's “Welcome to the Hellmouth,” Buffy discovers that several residents—including Giles, who is her watcher, and a few vampires—have anticipated her coming. Having been expelled from a number of high schools already (for being aggressive and incendiary), she is looking to “start over,” to live a “normal” life. But no, she discovers that she has been chosen to beat off demons; moreover, that “having a secret identity in this town is a job of work.”

Part of this work is defining who she is in relation to that secret identity, as “other” and as “regular” human. The saga enacted on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* has everything to do with her desire to fit in, at high school, at home, at college, in the world. That the series is set in a place where “fitting in” is so crucial (the suburbs, or more specifically, the Hellmouth) allows the story line to run a sweetly ironic course. Throughout the series, Buffy is driven by her sense of singularity and isolation, conveyed by her status as the chosen one, the slayer. The fact that there is, theoretically, only one slayer at a time amplifies this sense. (The series occasionally fudged this point, aligning Buffy temporarily with fellow slayers Kendra and then Faith, who were brought in because of a confusion in the universal order when Buffy was dead—though, as she points out, she “was only gone a minute.”)

While Buffy initially resists her calling, Max's conflict comes from the opposite direction: her superior skills. Her strength, speed, agility, telescopic

and night vision, hypersensitive hearing, mental abilities, and catlike reflexes are engineered, and she uses them to take vengeance against the engineers who wanted to use her as a weapon. As Fox's official website had it, "She's a revved-up girl trying to make a run-down world a better place." Max and Buffy inhabit narratives that don't worry about "explanations." They are tough chicks, driven by equal parts aggression and frustration, empathy and moral rectitude. In "What's My Line? Part 2," Buffy's break with slayer tradition (according to which she is not allowed to tell *anyone* who she is) provokes by-the-book Kendra to voice her frustration, asking Buffy, "Did anyone ever explain to you what 'secret identity' means?" Buffy's response is typically sardonic—"Nope, must be in the handbook, right after the chapter on personality removal"—emphasizing her refusal to accept those rules she sees as restrictive. Kendra, speaking in her exaggerated patois (to underline her extremely noticeable difference from everyone in Sunnydale), insists, "But de Slayer must work in secret, for security." Buffy, of course, does not quite see it this way, believing that her friends provide as much security as they pose risks.

"Pete's not like other guys, is he, Debbie?"

BUFFY TO CLASSMATE WITH A DEMON BOYFRIEND, "BEAUTY AND THE BEASTS"

The series repeatedly shows that Buffy's dedication to the gang is a function of her whiteness (her suburbanness, straightness, and so forth). Significantly in this context, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* depicts the whiteness of Buffy and her friends with a forthrightness that is rare on series TV, or in the broader culture. Ruth Frankenberg writes that "whiteness makes itself invisible precisely by asserting its normalcy, its transparency, in contrast to the marketing of others on which its transparency depends."<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Buffy's whiteness is anything but transparent. The series consistently investigates whiteness as a cultural construction and presumption, by parody, by metaphor, and, occasionally, as with the First Slayer, by contrast. In the fifth season episode "Fool for Love," for instance, Spike, a formerly vicious vampire now suffering from a chip in his head that prevents him from killing humans, and suffering as well as from a dire attraction to Buffy, explains his complicated feelings in a series of flashbacks in which he kills two earlier slayers, a Chinese slayer during the Boxer

Rebellion in 1900, and Nikki the Afro-ed slayer, whose neck he breaks during a fierce battle on a New York City subway, circa 1977 (see figs. 2a and b). These glimpses of past slayers of color reinforce the idea that Buffy's (and Faith's) whiteness, normalized in the 'burbs and in the hackneyed iconography of youth culture, is actually unusual in the long history of the slayer biz.

While Buffy is surely "white" in almost every sense of the term, the very overstatement of that whiteness also highlights and draws attention to it (her name *is* Buffy and she does live in a place called Sunnydale, after all). Indeed, part of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer's* genius lies in its ironic undermining of the very status quo it appears to epitomize. In defying the conventional parameters of whiteness, Buffy also resists an idealized and traditional adulthood by way of her violence, immaturity (in her mother's eyes, her sneaking out at night is just childish), and seeming deviance (even if it is in the service of saving the planet from the Hellmouth's perpetual spewing forth of demonspawn). The series' ongoing joke hinges on the ways that adolescence, as a collective cross-cultural "stage," simultaneously demands and prohibits such fitting in. Kids know all too well that conformity is more of an agonizing and perpetually shape-shifting process than an achievable end. Even during the sixth season, when Buffy, newly resurrected from the dead, confronts traditionally "adult" tasks, such as managing money and monitoring her little sister Dawn's education and social life, she remains—stubbornly and perhaps hopelessly—lost, partly affected by her unsettling time as a corpse, but also by her ongoing resistance to "growing up," or becoming like everyone else.

Aside from Buffy herself, the series manifests whiteness in her peers' ironically perky affects and in the everyday assumptions that guide life in suburban Sunnydale—that Buffy must patrol graveyards and back alleys at night, that demonic invasions are inevitable, that parents are not even close to being sources of support or comfort (rather, they tend to be clueless or odious). Whereas malevolent adult authority figures such as Principal Snyder suffer just desserts, parents other than Buffy's late mom, Joyce, rarely make appearances, and when they do, like Tara's, they are unpleasant and essentially run off the show. Buffy and her friends face frequent questions concerning their "race," metaphorized as their humanness. Whereas the problems for vampires such as Spike and Angel who hang out with humans are obvious (the avoiding daylight thing, the need for blood), other problems arise for characters



**Figs. 2a and b.** A Chinese slayer and an African American slayer, "Fool for Love,"  
14 November 2000.





**Fig. 3.** Xander is split into two “races”—Scruffy and Suave—as Buffy tries to understand the difference, “The Replacement,” 10 October 2000.

who cross race or species borders, including the werewolf Oz, the former vengeance demon Anya, and the witches Willow and Tara. Xander, ostensibly the straightest, whitest boy on the show, may have the most bewildering race-identity history of all: he has been split into two characters, “Scruffy-Xander” and “Suave-Xander” (“The Replacement”; see fig. 3); transformed into Dracula’s bug-eating lackey (“Buffy vs. Dracula”), and mutated into a hyena-boy (“The Pack”). As Anya’s fiancé, Xander dealt with her lengthy nonhuman history (and accumulated habits) on a daily basis.

The series also wrestles with the problem of race—human, youth, and race-race—in the menace accommodated by the gang’s excessively suburban surroundings. Each comfy domestic space, classroom, or youth hangout (for example, the Bronze) is potentially what Carol Clover has termed the slasher film’s “Terrible Place.”<sup>4</sup> Moreover, as in many of these slasher films, from *A Nightmare on Elm Street* to *Scream*, the nighttime brings greater visibility to the terrors of adolescence—sexual activity, emotional yearning, acts of violence, and, perhaps worst of all, betrayal by well-meaning as well as self-serving adults. These terrors take particularly embodied forms: vampires lurk in the cemeteries and alleys, demons pop up just about anywhere, and the once quiet

Willow becomes, in the sixth season, a full-fledged witch, increasingly and unhappily addicted to a dark side.

“How do you get to be renowned? I mean, like, do you have to be ‘nowned’ first?”

BUFFY, “THE FRESHMAN”

Buffy regularly walks on the dark side, of course, which is demonstrated most emphatically in her long-term relationship with Angel and, beginning in the sixth season, in her just-can’t-help-herself liaison with Spike. Their impulsive, often violent sexual trysts have literally caused floors and ceilings to collapse (“When did the building fall down?” she asks Spike the morning after their night of wild sex and fighting, in “Wrecked”). For all the excitement she feels, Buffy resists her inclination toward this dark side, angry that, post-resurrection, her attraction is manifested in such a crude and youthful recklessness. Spike pushes her, not a little irritated at himself for his cross-species craving, saying, “I knew the only thing better than killing a slayer would be f—. . .” With this, Buffy has to recognize her own desire, but she accuses him first: “Is that what this is about? Doing a slayer?” Spike’s insight is devastating: “Well, I wouldn’t throw stones, pet. You seem to be quite the groupie yourself . . . vampires get you hot.”

Here Spike makes fun of Buffy’s otherness as a slayer by comparing it to her will to humanness, her desire to be normal, “straight,” or prototypically “white”—nevertheless, she lusts across race, or more specifically, across species. Spike’s own difference, of course, is also raced, in that he is a vampire who has developed a romantic desire for human (or nearly human) flesh. Buffy’s difference is parallel to his and also more complicated. Her near humanness makes her unlike her school chums and also unlike her adversaries, as even the demons and vampires in the series tend to be white, or effectively white looking, with some exceptions, including the second season’s “Inca Mummy Girl,” Ampata, and the fourth season’s Chumash vengeance spirit, Hus, who terrorized the gang on Thanksgiving in “Pangs.” More often than it introduces characters of color, however, the series tends to displace raced identity and anxieties about race onto species-related anxieties, which are typically performed as various romances. These include Willow’s first romance, with Oz

(which was rather cuddly, despite his monthly conversions), and the somewhat nervier one between the human Xander and the demon Anya. While these relationships involve characters that look very white, they also explore the compromises needed in order to cross cultural borders. Not incidentally, the gendered shapes of these compromises also represent attitudes of youth culture: Oz left Willow in order to be with “one of his own” (but really so that the series could set up Willow’s new queer relationship with Tara), while Xander tried to teach Anya how to be properly, passably human.

Anya is probably the series’ “youngest” character, and the bulk of her role comprises her learning to become a responsible (read: adult) human. Her eagerness and clumsiness are typically played for comedy, and her efforts to “pass” alternately parallel or reframe Buffy’s own. Like the newly resurrected Buffy of the sixth season, Anya must reorient herself, learn to appreciate or at least perform human rituals and expectations, and control her own, less human urges. Because Anya is so adorably blonde and naïve (not to mention sexually voracious and frank, about which Xander is simultaneously embarrassed and thrilled), Buffy’s more disturbing inclinations, as well as the troubles and stakes of her own passing, are thrown into relief. Passing as normal (read: human), Buffy reveals the constraints and constructedness of the categories into which she is trying to pass, as well as those she is trying to elude (“monstrous,” “dead”).<sup>5</sup> Tracking her continual movements in and out of these categories, the series raises multiple questions, asked as well by *Dark Angel*: What does it mean to be human, young, visibly raced? What does it mean for cultural hierarchies when girls become expert killers, slayers, or genetically designed soldiers? What changes, for whom, when girls take care of themselves, not only brilliantly, but with pleasure? And what is at stake, for whom, in representing girls who understand themselves in relation to hostile cultural environments?

“Listening to you two, it’s like reading original text. Talking about yourself in third person. The whole suga-boo dealio. I totally get where it comes from now.”

MAX, TO ORIGINAL CINDY AND HER GIRLFRIEND, DIAMOND, “SHORTIES IN LOVE”

The interrogations of race and youth in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Dark Angel* are premised on their protagonists’ abilities to transgress, to move in

and out of such culturally constructed categories, which in turn open up those categories for viewers. Much like Buffy, Max struggles to maintain a balance between her superheroic responsibilities and her regular girl routine: she has a complicated social life, a stressful day job, and a superheroic sense of responsibility. The primary difference between the two characters is that Max's domain is archetypically urban while Buffy's is archly suburban. Buffy is caught between her conflicting desires, to wear pop-girl halter tops and to destroy all demons, but Max is torn between wanting to live an anonymous, uneventful life, not pursued by Manticore agents, and wanting to find her family and identity. Her search for her fellow soldiers takes up much of her emotional energy and the series' plotlines—she has discovered several of her siblings, as well as members of other transgenic generations.

The flashbacks at Manticore that color Max's current experience create something of an instant and overlapping character development. Her crisis is thus continual. Tormented as a child, she fights back as a very stylish adolescent—dressed in a sleek black leather jacket, tight black jeans, and black motorcycle boots—with a compelling sense of self-righteousness that Buffy sometimes lacks. Then again, Buffy's duties as a slayer are mostly laid out for her: she does not kill humans, and when she kills demons and vampires they usually evaporate into dust. Max, in contrast, often sees herself in and as her opponents. While Buffy came up in a more or less stable single-parent home, Max came from an expansively abusive environment, and so her sense of allegiance, admirable and sympathetic as it is, has more to do with careful crafting of character than conventional motivation.

In fact, Max is designed with a built-in drug addiction (to tryptophan, which stabilizes her brain's jumpy serotonin levels), which means that she comes equipped with a typical youth and street problem (essentially she is a junkie, and she looks like one when she is low on the drug) that carries with it none of the usual moral condemnation. Trying to make sense of her old addiction, her new designer virus, and her deadly super-soldier skills while also maintaining friendships with her human friends, the not-quite-human Max has little patience for legalities or proprieties. Unlike the generally straight Buffy, Max thinks nothing of breaking rules to get what she wants, because she understands such rules as inherently corrupt, designed to maintain power for those who make them.

Max's only visible "parent"—the figure against whom she directs her rage—

is the genetic scientist Lydecker (later known as Deck, since his Spike-like turn at the beginning of the second season to help her work against the increasingly insidious Manticore). When, for example, Max wants her job as a bike messenger back after being absent for months (at the beginning of the second season, in “Bag ’Em”), she flashes her nerdy employer, the ignominiously named Normal. The scene begins as Normal refuses even to hear her explanation: “Your name is mud, missy-miss. I’ve heard some lame excuses for missing work, but faking your own death for a three-month sabbatical is a new low.” Missy-miss protests that she didn’t exactly “fake” being dead, only had a heart transplant. Normal demands proof, and he is suitably aghast when she shows him the big nasty scar on her chest (see figs. 4a and b). Sexy-girl body display this is not.

Max and her coworkers Original Cindy, Herbal Thought, and Sketchy regularly disrespect their employer and their jobs, treating low-paying “kids” jobs (as opposed to career options) as inconveniences rather than seeing them as appropriate stakes. Such conditioned (and for the most part, acceptable) contempt for adults and the structures they signify or trust in sets the kids apart in *Dark Angel*. In contrast to mainstream films’ representations of “youth,” here “the kidz are aiiight,” as one *Dark Angel* episode title has it. Henry Giroux writes that in films featuring youth violence, white kids are “isolated and estranged . . . and can offer no indictment of American society not only because they embrace a disturbing nihilism, but because they appear marginal, shiftless, and far removed from Dan Quayle’s notion of American Family Values.”<sup>6</sup> By the same token, Giroux continues, films pathologize black youths as a group, such that “black powerlessness becomes synonymous with criminality.”<sup>7</sup> Quite the contrary case appears in *Dark Angel*, where violence by youth works to restore a social order decimated by adult abuses and oppressions.

Most adults are trying to kill or recuperate Max back into Manticore, as she is a costly and valuable product, so that hiding from them (usually visualized as hiding her barcode from them) is a standard plot point. Soon after his introduction, Joshua, Max’s transgenic “relative,” leads Max to the scientist he calls “Father,” the generally malicious and aptly named Ames White, who developed Joshua’s dog-boy DNA formula and then abandoned his experiments. This old-school villain has no compunctions about destroying his own creations, seeing only a large picture that has to do with world domination. That *Dark Angel* sets this guy against the radically multi-raced Max and Joshua exacerbates and refines its politics and cultural critique.



**Figs. 4a and b.** Max flashes Normal, showing her scar, “Bag ’Em,” 5 October 2001.

"If you see me going to the dark side, do me a favor: smack me really hard right in the face."

MAX TO ORIGINAL CINDY, "MEOW"

Max's capacity to think beyond these immediate circumstances, to envision a better world, is one of her signature traits. At the end of most episodes, she retreats to the top of the Seattle Space Needle, her favorite spot for contemplation, where her isolation is, of course, profoundly underlined. Max's contemplations set her apart from her friends, but they also give viewers access to the way she is processing her emotions, investments, and beliefs. In her examination of youth culture and femininity, Angela McRobbie asserts that girls stake out an investment in society in their formation of a youth culture and that, in doing so, "there is a greater degree of fluidity about what femininity means and how exactly it is anchored in social reality."<sup>8</sup> Such anchoring in *Dark Angel* is most clearly pictured in Max's sessions at the Space Needle. At the end of the second season's premiere, "Designate This," Max looks out on the city and sighs: "Funny how from up here, it looks like nothing's changed. Only everything's changed . . . The whole time I was at Manticore, all I wanted was my strange little life back. Never figured it could get any stranger." Such self-awareness, framed as a witty appreciation of strangeness as well as crisis, saves *Dark Angel* from an occasional inclination toward melodrama in the style of *Dawson's Creek*. But Max doesn't fret so much as she ponders: "I don't get why people call it a depression," she says of her world's dire economic and political state. "People are broke but they're not all that depressed."

Feeling isolated and "strange," Max works to be (or at least appear) "normal," resisting and resenting aspects of her design that mark her as other. For instance, she has feline DNA in her enhanced makeup, which sets her in heat every few months. In "Meow," her roommate, Original Cindy, describes the condition this way: "So, basically, because of this feline DNA that you got in you, every few months you run around acting like an average male?" Max nods, "Somehow, guys can pull it off. I just turn into this freak show." That masculine behavior makes her a "freak show" speaks to adolescent anxieties about proper behaviors, but Max will never be Buffy, who, for all her virtuoso violence, restrains herself in sex, at least until Spike; her heavy breathing with Angel was always romantic and her sessions with Riley were famously stilted, but her outbreaks of passion with Spike are explicitly brutal.

Where Buffy's business with Spike was a terrific new direction, Max had been sexually predatory and aggressive from the start. Her desires are youthfully adventurous, pushing across categories: for Max, whose makers had planned to breed her with a fellow X-5, Alec, looking for love (or even sex) with a non-X-5 is an express act of rebellion. The series' primary romance recalls Buffy's longtime turmoil over Angel: Max is simultaneously distracted and sustained by her love interest and fellow underground activist, the cyber-journalist Logan Cale. In fact, in the premier of *Dark Angel*'s second season, this relationship becomes abruptly like that of Buffy and Angel, when Max learns that she is infected with a genetically targeted retrovirus that is transmitted through bodily contact and was designed to kill Logan. Max thus becomes fatal for her boyfriend, much as Buffy's sexual liaison with Angel turned him back into a bad, soulless vampire. The girls are not only highly trained and lethal fighters, then, but also literal embodiments of the "noxious" threat of young female sexuality and sexual desire.

As disparate as their sex stories are, the most significant difference between Buffy and Max is manifestly racial. Whereas Buffy is a super-white pop-girl, however ironically, Max is straight-up hip-hop, wary, politicized, and tough. Max's dystopia, while hardly unusual (drawing from *Blade Runner* and the *Terminator* movies, among other sources), is definitively unstable. In her Seattle, the apocalypse is defined as post-"Pulse," an electromagnetic shock-wave unleashed by nuclear terrorists in 2009, which zapped the United States into a "third world" nation, poverty-stricken and plagued by disease and violence. She thus inhabits a city that is always on the verge of collapse, where chaos is ordinary and morality is relative. Max's society, in other words, hardly seems worth upholding, except that it is the only one she has.

Her questions and reservations concerning conformity (and family ties) are both more and less vexed than Buffy's, because her world allows for more overt racial multiplicity. In herself, her body, Max represents and functions along a continuum of race; appropriately, her world is categorically hip-hop in style and politics. The look of post-apocalyptic Seattle's streets recalls those depicted in contemporary "'hood" movies. Chuck D co-wrote the series' theme song, the radical underground group is known as the S-1Ws (the name of Public Enemy's affiliated step group), and the kids' speech and dress approximate a tricked out version of today's hip-hop 'tude and gear. Max moves easily in this ostensibly hostile, literally dark environment (brown-outs are





**Fig. 5.** Max and Original Cindy's hip-hop style, "Bag 'Em," 5 October 2001.

standard occurrences, as power is both precious and unpredictable), at home on the street and amid stereotypical urban diversity.

Not only does she use hip-hop slang (as do her peers at Jam Pony, regularly aggravating their boss, Normal), but she also wears low-rider jeans, midriff tops, and leather jackets, only rarely wearing dresses or skirts (in episodes where she is "undercover") (see fig. 5). Though feeling displaced while living among humans, Max also understands her skills, her otherness, and her relation to those who do not know her (and very few do). She hides her mission and her abnormality beneath regular-seeming teen apathy and anger, appearing pissed off at work and drinking beer at a local hangout after hours. This familiar youth activity is about as far as Max will go: she is programmed to be hyper-vigilant.

"Christ. Damn thing talks."

COP, ASTONISHED AT JOSHUA, "TWO"

Max faces dilemmas of definition daily. She lives between species and races, and not only in her own body, which is infected with feline DNA. Motivated

by a sense of her own deviance from the norm, her “monstrosity” and isolation, Max seeks connections, urgently. According to James Cameron, the co-creator of the series, “Max’s real goal is to find a sense of family, of belonging.”<sup>9</sup> This may be so, but the show is also blunt—and not at all idealistic—concerning the dysfunctions of traditional (read: white, middle-class) family structures. Max’s initial strategy toward this end is to track down her transgenic relations—those of her own generation and of previous and subsequent generations, including the second season’s addition, Joshua, whose canine DNA gives him a dog-like face and behaviors; in an episode called “Two,” he woofs and sniffs, and he quickly develops an undying loyalty to Max (this apparently *despite* her own feline DNA). In turn, she looks after him, bringing him food and keeping him hidden away in a secret place, because, as he recites after an unauthorized outing (during which a dog has bitten him!), “I know. People are afraid of what they don’t understand. I know.” Max looks stern: “Never forget it.”

Otherness, Max knows, can be construed in calamitous ways. And since Joshua, so distinctive in appearance, cannot maintain a “secret identity,” he must stay literally out of sight: he was “developed” years before Max, escaped from Manticore before Max and the X-5s, then hid in tunnels beneath the facility. Even as Max pursues her identity in and as community, she is aware of the risks posed by her, and Joshua’s, difference out in public.

In the episode called “Two” in the second season, Joshua’s younger brother Isaac (whom Max released from the Manticore tunnels) is killing people in the street. Joshua explains to Max that this behavior is a result of abuse at Manticore. When the cops come after Joshua, Max defends him and is unexpectedly jumped by Isaac, whom Joshua then has to kill to save her. When she discusses the events with Logan, she tries to parse her part in them: “I shouldn’t have let them out, Logan. I should’ve known something like this was gonna happen.” When Logan reassures her that she “did the right thing, the only thing,” she won’t buy it. “Tell that to the families of those cops who died.” In this way and others, *Dark Angel* repeatedly complicates the sides it appears to establish, indicting *all* sides for their sins. In a world as relative as this one (and much like our own), survival depends on an ability to shape-shift emotionally, culturally, and politically, to imagine a reality beyond your body and desires, to cross over, again and again. *Dark Angel* comments on the process of such cul-

tural and identificatory movements, their significance and their stakes. Max's apparently tireless pursuit of her peculiar past, while she is trying to build a future with her makeshift family (Logan and Original Cindy), means that she is always trying to define herself as part of something, a race, a community, a politics.

"Who knows. Maybe we can beat this thing. I guess we need to see where the road takes us."

MAX, "BAG 'EM"

Both Max and Buffy have made key, even radical, forays into otherness by dying. Buffy dies at the end of the fifth season; upon her return at the start of the sixth season, she is fraught with emotional distress as she resists fitting back in with the gang (and, as mentioned above, finds self-flagellating solace in sex with Spike). Max dies (differently, of course) at the end of the first season, when she is recaptured by Manticore, then shot and apparently killed by the next generational version of herself (an X-7 played by that same silent and completely riveting girl who plays Max in flashbacks, Geneva Locke). "Designate This" has Max salvaged at the last minute by the Manticore doctors, when her X-5 brother Zack shoots himself—rather spectacularly, in the head—so they can transplant his genetically enhanced heart into her damaged chest. Max's reappearance in the second season, after her stay at Manticore, changes everything: she cannot touch Logan and yet they continue to pursue their projects, tracking down transgenics and fighting the good fight. So all is different, and nothing is different.

It is hard readjusting to life after death. Buffy and Max must recomprehend themselves in their bodies (Buffy's with a perpetual sense of loss, and Max's with Zack's heart) and in relation to the humans and nonhumans around them. In "Wrecked," Buffy describes her liaison with Spike in language that she imagines will put him off: "The only thing that's different is that I'm disgusted with myself. That's the power of your charms. Last night was the most perverse, degrading experience of my life." Alarmed by his knowing smirk, she continues, "That might be how you get off, but it's not my style." No, he observes, "It's your calling." This is precisely the danger and vulnerability of

Buffy's secret, whether she accepts it as her "identity" or not—she is "called" to be other, to transgress, to cross categories. And she can't help herself.

#### NOTES

The third epigraph to this chapter is quoted from Carrillo, "To the Max," 24.

1. Acland, *Youth, Murder, Spectacle*, 41.
2. Thomas Hine, "TV's Teen-agers: An Insecure, World-Weary Lot," *New York Times*, 26 October 1997, sec. 2, p. 1.
3. Frankenberg, "Introduction," 6.
4. Clover argues that the "Terrible Place" is a womb-like space in which the killer's potential female victim is trapped. Clover, *Men, Women and Chainsaws*.
5. As Elaine K. Ginsberg observes, "Both the process and discourse of passing interrogate the ontology of identity categories and their construction." Ginsberg, "Introduction," 4.
6. Giroux, *Fugitive Cultures*, 89.
7. Ibid., 90.
8. McRobbie, *Postmodernism and Popular Culture*, 156–57.
9. Carrillo, "To the Max," 26.