

## **To the Max: Embodying Intersections in *Dark Angel***

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<1> Although *Dark Angel* (2000-2002) is often classed with other television shows featuring female action heroes (such as the longer-running *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Alias*), I argue that it exhibits a more than usual emphasis on the body of its female protagonist and that this is integral to its use of science fiction, Gothic and action to mediate a politicised postfeminist representation of gender. The basic premise of the show is that in a post-apocalyptic United States [1] the protagonist, Max, is a genetically enhanced supersoldier (her batch were designated “X-5s” and she is “X-5-452”), part of a successful escape from a government/ military facility. Max lives in Seattle working by day as a cycle courier, occasionally by night as a cat burglar, and she is always on the look out for other escaped X-5s. In season one Max becomes involved in political resistance through her contact with Logan Cale, a.k.a. hacker broadcaster Eyes Only. As the show continues she also allies herself with other “transgenics” (as the genetically enhanced supersoldiers are called), and with a rebel group known as the SIW (apparently a vigilante organisation attempting to address some of the wrongs of this post-apocalyptic society [2]).

<2> Intersections between science fiction and other genres, between traditional notions of “masculine” and “feminine” gendering, and between the personal and the political are all apparent in *Dark Angel*. The show’s opening sequence includes in season 2 the following words, voiced over various images of its protagonist, Max, including the key image of the barcode on the back of her neck:

They designed her to be the perfect soldier...

a human weapon...then she escaped.

In a future not far from now...in a broken world...

she is haunted by her past.

She cannot run, she must fight...to discover her destiny.

That Max is a genetically engineered “human weapon” adds to her role as a science fiction action hero, as well as situating her as a Gothic “monster” creation. The “broken world” of post-apocalyptic Seattle provides a dystopian backdrop. Thus the show incorporates elements of various genres, as discussed in my first section. Max’s identification as a “soldier” positions her somewhat uneasily in gender terms, as does her role of action hero, though her appearance, and in this sequence, the display of her naked body, serve to feminise and sexualise her. The negotiation of gender will be explored further in the second section. In the third section I argue that *Dark Angel*’s emphasis on the female body of its protagonist and her personal “destiny” shifts to a developing emphasis on the near-future social body, enabling a wider political context to come into view.

### **Intersection 1: Science Fiction, Gothic, Action**

<3> *Dark Angel* is a hybrid of science fiction, Gothic, and action and it incorporates forms and themes from all three [3]. The science fiction genre, it is sometimes argued, arises directly out of Gothic fictions such as *Frankenstein*, and in *Dark Angel* the protagonist is a postmodern Frankenstein’s monster, blurring boundaries between human and monster, subject and object: her apparently human body is the site of (gendered, racialised, and monstrous) Otherness. Max is a transgenic, the product of a secret government project called Manticore. A manticore is a mythological creature

with the head of a man, the body of a lion and the tail of a dragon or scorpion; in other words, it is a chimera or hybrid of different animal parts. The similarity to the transgenics' combination of human and animal DNA is clear. Further, the name "manticore" is derived from Persian "man-eater," and the manticore may also be linked to the sphinx, and to fraudulent or deceptive women (see Wikipedia), associations that relate to the traditional constructions of gender that *Dark Angel* questions or parodies.

<4> The intersection of these genres creates space for a discussion of the body/self, often mediated by use of the fantastic. Both science fiction and the Gothic use estrangement to recontextualise and explore contemporary issues. The Gothic may set its stories in the past, or in strange lands; science fiction may place the story in the future or in another world. In a discussion of dystopian science fiction, Peter Fitting makes the distinction between "*foreground* and *background*," suggesting that in science fiction film setting "is not important in itself, but serves rather to provide a justification for the film's events" (156, original emphasis). He goes on to observe the decaying and devastated landscapes of so many science fiction movies of the past few decades provide the backdrop for the adventure. This device of setting events in a dystopian future feeds on collective anxieties (...), without attempting to elucidate or understand them and without offering collective solutions or political strategies for dealing with them (156).

<5> However, science fiction texts often estrange by constructing what Brian Attebery calls "convincingly faked histories" and are, therefore, "capable of investigating history's shifting alignments of power" (9) while seeming to tell a story about something far removed from contemporary social concerns. Although the setting of *Dark Angel* might at first appear to be just another decaying, post-industrial, cyberpunk landscape (found now even in non-science fiction movies), this setting is developed across the two seasons of the show into more than mere background. *Dark Angel* is arguably critical of contemporary Western capitalist culture and by detailing a larger context in which its action plots and science fiction story of genetically enhanced supersoldiers are situated, it moves its dystopian setting from mere background to an integral motivator for individual, and then collective social and political action.

<6> The post-apocalyptic setting of *Dark Angel* also affords the opportunity to present alternative genderings, that is, those outside our social norms. The Gothic monster theme also facilitates this interrogation of gender – as a non-human the "monster" is not part of society and its structures. Audiences are familiar with the concept of the monster subject/ hero (from Louis in Anne Rice's novel *Interview With the Vampire* to the 2004 film of comic book character *Hellboy*) and Judith Halberstam notes that "Gothic... marks a peculiarly modern preoccupation with boundaries and their collapse," adding, "the monsters of modernity are characterized by their proximity to humans" (23). In this way, the monster becomes the ideal figure through which to explore the often-artificial binaries (of, for example, gender, class, race or ethnicity) that have gone to construct identity.

<7> Although at least one of the genres *Dark Angel* draws upon (science fiction) is traditionally seen as produced by and for male audiences and therefore might be assumed to maintain conservative gender politics, the fantastic is precisely where

gender reversals (can) take place because it transgresses and blurs boundaries. Like many recent television shows (such as *Buffy* and *Xena*) *Dark Angel* contrasts active female characters with passive males in an apparently simplistic role reversal. However, role reversal has its own limitations. James Cameron, one of *Dark Angel*'s creators, previously directed *Aliens* (1986) and the first two *Terminator* movies (1984, 1991), films featuring female action heroes who have been the subject of many discussions about gender representation. Whether these discussions take Ripley or Sarah Connor, and subsequent television versions like *Buffy* or *Xena*, as positive or negative, they tend to revolve around issues of gender essentialism (whether women taking on "masculine" roles and attributes, especially violence, can be considered progress, and what relation such female characters have to motherhood, romance, or domesticity). Such debates are not easily resolved (or summarised) but they demonstrate the ways that popular culture taps into current ideas about power and gender. Some of these issues are discussed further below in relation to Max.

<8> Furthermore, as I suggest in the final section, the genre hybridity of *Dark Angel* can align it with what has been dubbed the "critical dystopia," texts that "reject genre purity in favor of an impure or hybrid text that renovates dystopian science fiction by making it formally and politically oppositional" (Baccolini and Moylan 7). I make reference throughout to another hybridised science fiction television show, *The X-Files*, in discussing *Dark Angel*.

## **Intersection 2: Hybrid Gender and Sexuality**

<9> *Dark Angel* appears to be the usual postmodern, postfeminist representation of the female action hero with (at least) a reversal or (at most) a mixture of traditional gender traits. Like other supergirl protagonists of the late 1990s and early 2000s, Max is constructed as alienated. She strives for a sense of belonging, of being normal, but Max is a supergirl because she is a freak and a freak because she is a supergirl: the two are interdependent and related. The superpower of many female action heroes translates as exceptionalism: the supergirl can never be "normal" because her powers and responsibilities set her apart from other people, and do not allow her to lead a "normal" existence. Instead, like the typical comic book superhero, she often leads a double life. Here Max initially hides her nature as a transgenic from her closest friends and her day- and night-time existences bear little relation to each other.

<10> For Max, this situation as "freak" is exacerbated because (again in a recognisable version of the superhero) her special powers are inherent in her genetic make up, her body – she is literally non-human, a "monster." Although male transgenics feature in the show, particularly in season 2, the female X-5s are more clearly marked by difference that is racial/ ethnic and sexual rather than simply physical. Season 2 regular Joshua and other male transgenics may be more obviously "monsters" because of physical differences (like Joshua's dog-like features) but the hybridity of Max's character takes in other binary oppositions and notions of difference too.

<11> Max exhibits some of the physical appearance we recognise as traditionally feminine but this exists in conjunction with traditionally "masculine" characteristics. Take her motorcycle, for example. "This is a motorcycle," Max tells housemate Kendra in the pilot episode, "Its sole reason for being is to go fast, very fast, not for

you to use as a clothes line.” This quip distances Max from traditionally “feminine” domestic concerns and aligns her instead with the “masculine” desire for speed and power. It may be true, as Sherrie A. Inness points out, that “in the often barbaric and excessive world of the post-apocalyptic narrative, women are freer to act tough and be independent because it is evident that the world has been turned topsy-turvy” (123). At the same time, contemporary television viewers are now – relatively speaking – accustomed to seeing female action heroes in shows like *Buffy*, *Xena* and *Alias*. But the binary opposition operating in these shows is not just “masculine” and “feminine”; the apparent opposition of “femininity” and “feminism” is also played upon.

<12> Max rarely wears skirts or dresses yet her appearance is coded as feminine through tight clothing, make-up and hairstyling. She may kick ass and ride a motorcycle, but in the pilot episode she also goes undercover as a prostitute and in a later episode when she works as a bodyguard for a bad guy turning state’s evidence his estranged wife assumes Max is a stripper (“Red” 1.10). In one sense this allows the show to display Max’s body in conventionally feminine or “sexy” ways, what Linda Mizejewski calls in a review of female action protagonists the “forced-to-wear-a-swimsuit ruse” (121), a prime television example being the “jiggle” factor in 1970s show *Charlie’s Angels*. Here the fact that Max’s femininity is part of what allows her to succeed in her various missions is pointed out frequently and with some irony. At one point Max escapes imprisonment by flashing her breasts at a young male guard. He tells her, “You can’t win,” but she replies, “Oh really? Not even if I do *this*?” (“Exposure” 2.16).

<13> Alternatively, as Inness notes, “one reason the tough woman who adopts a persona that is strongly coded as masculine is disturbing to many is that she reveals the artificiality of femininity” (21). Thus elements of Max’s appearance and presentation, in conjunction with her more “masculine” traits draw attention to femininity as a construct, as parody/ performance. In “C.R.E.A.M.” (1.4), for instance, Max and her friend Original Cindy act up as dumb chicks in a casino, and this sense of performance is what enables Max to be convincing when she is under cover. Lisa Parks suggests that in *The X-Files* Dana Scully’s “feminized body [is] made monstrous because it produces an excess of power that the dominant norms of heterosexual femininity cannot accommodate” (122) and the same could be said about Max. Yet the emphasis on verbal sparring in the show and its combination of femininity and feminism ironically plays with notions of gender, in a typically postmodern, postfeminist style that *The X-Files* did not fully embrace.

<14> Max’s “freak” body is also presented as “Other” through race or ethnicity. On-line bios for Jessica Alba, the actor who plays Max, tend to cite her mixed heritage (for instance, “a Spanish/Mexican-American father and French-Danish mother” on Dark Angel Fan. Com/ Eyes Only) and this inevitably carries over to the character. Because of prevalent typing of Latina women in film (and to a lesser extent in television), they (like other non-white females) can be overidentified as exotic, sexualised, maternal (or otherwise excessively “feminine”) (see Mizejewski 157). Max’s racial/ ethnic identity (never acknowledged or named within the text) certainly functions in some ways to highlight her sexuality, but this is complicated by other factors.

<15> Ethnic marking also fits the various genre strands to the show. Halberstam notes that the twentieth century Gothic monster is the negative of the human (that is, when “human” is defined as white, male, middle class, and heterosexual) (22) and that the monster thus “disrupts dominant culture’s representations of family, heterosexuality, ethnicity, and class politics” (23). Science fiction (even its popular television forms) has in its recent history drawn analogies “between gender and other sites of repression and difference, namely race and class” (Kubek 192). A literary antecedent for Max is Connie Ramos the working class Mexican-American protagonist of Marge Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1978), who, like Max, embodies all these differences. These traditions are employed in *Dark Angel* to highlight Max’s body as a site of difference, to demonstrate the links between “difference” and institutionalised oppression, and to disrupt notions of what is “normal.”

<16> Furthermore, Max’s questions about her birth mother in early episodes of season 1 underline the need for a female (feminist?) protagonist to retrieve her motherlines, her female heritage if she is to challenge hegemonic power. As a product of Manticore Max has no conception of “normal” family structures: “[the] attack leaders never told us about where we came from. It was more like we came from each other, inspired teamwork. It wasn’t until I escaped that I found out about parents and babies and all” (“Heat” 1.2). Reading the show in the dystopian tradition, the recovery of memory/ history is an important step towards political action in the present. Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan note that this “is a crucial weapon and strategy in moving dystopian resistance from an initial consciousness to an action that leads to a climactic event that attempts to change society” (6). Such a movement is emphasised (and gendered) when Max’s original assessment of her mother as “just another girl looking to get paid” is reversed by ex-Manticore staff member Hannah’s admission that Max’s mother “wasn’t like the others... she tried to escape because she didn’t want to give you up” (“Heat”). This revelation leads directly to Max’s statement at the end of the episode that knowing about her mother “changes everything” (though it also offers a possibly more essentialist view of motherhood). From this angle, Max’s search for her birth mother is the first stage of her struggle to come to terms with Manticore, and is a key motivator in its eventual destruction and in the political movement supporting transgenic integration into society.

<17> Like other television shows of the same period, *Dark Angel* presents heterosexual romance as a problem for its characters. Max’s relationship with Logan highlights the impossibility of fulfilled heterosexual romance for an independent female protagonist. The two seem to be in the position made familiar by Mulder and Scully in *The X-Files* – characters who may be romantically or sexually attracted to each other but whose professional relationship is of greater significance. *The X-Files* demonstrated how successful this formula could be for a serial television show, playing (until the final season) on the deferral of narrative resolution as well as viewers’ desires for alternative gender relations. Rhonda Wilcox and J. P. Williams argue that

the eroticism of Scully and Mulder is not in the display of their bodies to the gaze of one another or of the viewer; rather, it is in the sharing of equal looks, in the hints of a sensuality that exists beneath the surface of their relationship, and in a respect for one another that allows each a space to explore his/her liminality (116).

Max and Logan are modelled after this kind of relationship and certainly both demonstrate gender “liminality” or hybridity, though their verbal sparring is more reminiscent of much older screwball comedies where the independent heroine gives as good as she gets. This begins in the pilot episode when Logan catches Max breaking into his apartment to steal an objet d’art.

LOGAN: You’re a thief?

MAX: Girl’s got to make a living.

LOGAN: Thank God.

MAX: First time I ever heard that one.

LOGAN: I was expecting someone else.

MAX: Guess it wasn’t the pizza delivery guy.

LOGAN: ... You have good taste. French, 1920s, attributed to Chitarus.

MAX: Whoever that is.

LOGAN: Oh. So – what, you liked it ’cause it was shiny?

MAX: No, because it’s the Egyptian goddess Bast, the goddess who comprehends all goddesses, eye of Ra, protector, avenger, destroyer, giver of life who lives forever. (Pilot)

It continues throughout the first season though it is not always so light hearted, as in the following exchange from “Haven” (1.15):

MAX: You can’t right every wrong.

LOGAN: You’ve got to at least try.

MAX: Whatever. Go talk to your source. This girl’s gonna kick back, make S’mores, and relax.

LOGAN: Fine. I’ll be back later.

MAX: Don’t hurry.

LOGAN: Have fun. Because that *is* the most important thing.

MAX: I’ll try. Even though I’ll be wracked by guilt since I don’t have enough to share with every single person on this planet.

<18> The failure of lasting heterosexual romance again demonstrates the tension between “femininity” and “feminism” in juxtaposing the idea of heterosexual romance as complicit in male dominance with the desire for more equal relationships. To begin with Max and Logan deny their feelings and believe that a relationship will endanger them and those around them; by the second season a deadly engineered virus prevents them from even touching. Unlike earlier protagonists, therefore, Max and Logan never get together in a progressively more exaggerated take on the problematic nature of romance for the independent postfeminist heroine. Even this is presented in a playful manner: “What fun is being in love if everything’s easy?” as one character asks (“Fuhgeddaboutit” 2.15).

<19> Of course, that Max never actually has a relationship with Logan also leaves open the possibility that her sexuality is not strictly hetero. The inclusion of a black lesbian character like Original Cindy further conflates various kinds of difference (race, sexuality, gender) in *Dark Angel* and underlines the show’s strategy of surrounding Max with other ex-centric subjects. The refusal of romance, however playful, also indicates that in this show there are larger concerns than the fulfilment of personal desire.

<20> While romance is constantly deferred or denied, sexuality is an integral part of Max’s identity. Her feline DNA causes her to go into season three times a year

("Heat," "Meow" 1.20), giving her "uncontrollable cravings" for sex ("Meow"), in what could be interpreted as a literal kind of compulsory heterosexuality. This can be seen as an exaggeration, a parody of the hot kick-ass "babe," or the sultry Latina, or in contrast as another role reversal – Cindy ironically describes Max as "acting like an average male" at these times ("Meow"). It could also be an allusion to other cat/women such as Lota from *Island of Lost Souls*, or Irena in the 1942 film *Cat People* and "Proof of Purchase" 2.3 and "Boo" 2.5 include much more obviously feline female transgenics. Clearly this uses sexuality to conflate or confuse ideas of monstrosity and femaleness (the first three episodes – the pilot, "Heat" and "Flushed" all highlight Max's difference, focusing on her escape from Manticore, her feline DNA and resultant sexuality, and her dependence on Tryptophan, a food supplement that she and other X-5s require because of a glitch in their genetic programming). That this heightened sexuality is related to identity is clear when Max tells Logan: "It's just something Manticore tricked up inside of me that I can't control" and when she distinguishes between her own feelings and her genetic urges, "This isn't Manticore. This is me" ("Meow").

<21> The number of X-5s who are pregnant or already mothers demonstrates the key relationship between female transgenics and sexuality/ reproduction: Jace in "Female Trouble" (1.14), Tinga across various episodes (starting with "Hit a Sista Back" 1.19), and Jen in "Freak Nation" (2.21). We are told that transgenic reproductive sexuality is strictly controlled: "X5 males are routinely dosed with birth control medicines, as are most of the females. Only a few of the older ones are allowed to maintain their normal cycles for research purposes" ("Female Trouble"). Tinga is recaptured by Manticore after her son is discovered to be "showing signs of accelerated motor control, as well as heightened spatial recognition, and advanced logical thinking" ("Hit a Sista Back") and she is then kept in a tank as part of Manticore research. This striking display of the female reproduced/ reproductive body is, as Ximena Gallardo C. points out in relation to *Alien Resurrection*, reminiscent of "the 'pickled punks' of carnival sideshows" (26). That is, it offers up both femaleness and monstrosity as spectacle, effectively presenting the hybrid *as female and as monstrous*. Max and fellow X-5 Zack destroy the DNA banks at Manticore at the end of season 1, preventing any further cloning of supersoldiers from existing Xs. In season 2, a breeding programme is instituted among remaining X-5s to continue the project.

### **Intersection 3: Personal and Political**

<22> Despite Max's exceptional situation as a female action hero, transgenic, supergirl, and freak, her position is politicised via gender and racial/ ethnic difference. In this way I would argue that *Dark Angel* situates its postfeminism in a wider social context by contrasting political activism with a bureaucratic/ capitalist system encompassing science/ the military, joining personal and social history in (the body of) Max.

<23> Unlike other "girl" action heroes who are generally white, middle class and at school or in college, Max has to work for a living [4] – the double life of the superhero is shifted into different class territory. Perhaps as a result, the representation of Max is less focused on individual identity and action and contextualised more within communities and institutions. Max moves from individual action to cooperative action, a paradoxical return to the values Manticore instilled in its "kids"

(one Manticore training scene in the pilot episode includes the words DISCIPLINE DUTY TEAMWORK flashed onto a screen in front of the group) but without the rigid military hierarchy. Max is increasingly situated as part of various communities (the workers at Jam Pony, the bike messenger company employing Max; the other X-5s, and eventually all the transgenics from Manticore; the SIW and political organisations in season 2) and all of these groups are constructed as resistant. Even the riders at Jam Pony often demonstrate a kind of worker solidarity against manager Normal.

<24> To begin with, Max is recognisably the pragmatic, amoral thief who cares only for her own gain (“I steal things in order to sell them for money. That’s called commerce” Pilot). In his first attempt to persuade Max to help in his struggle to raise political consciousness by broadcasting the “truth,” Logan states, “If you accept the way things are, you’re an active participant in making them worse.” Max simply dismisses this, asking, “Is the social studies class over for today?” She initially assists Logan because a “friend of [hers] died on account of” the villain of the week (Pilot), in other words, for personal, not political reasons. In a slightly later first season episode (“Flushed”), she even causes the eviction of a whole floor of her building because she uses the kickback money meant for the security guard to buy Tryptophan [5]. Fairly early, however, the show emphasises that while staying in Seattle puts Max in danger of recapture by Manticore, over and over she chooses to remain with her various communities. Max can pass as human but finally chooses to “out” herself as a transgenic in season 2 as part of the struggle for recognition and acceptance of these “freaks.” That she feels some anxiety in doing so is amply demonstrated in the Halloween episode “Boo” and at the end of the episode a dream-version of Original Cindy tells her: “the worst part wasn’t some talking head in a bag, or nomalies eating haggis, or even Joshua getting hauled off by the Po-pos, it was my girl denying who she really is, denying the people that she loves.”

<25> This presentation works to undermine one popular view of the postfeminist “superwoman” as a middle class individualist who succeeds because privilege allows her space to make choices that can change her own life, but whose “independence” does not affect or even appear within a larger political context. Joanne Hollows describes “how popular feminism emphasised individual problems and solutions rather than the notion of collective struggle that had been so fundamental to the feminist project,” noting that “individualism can be positive with its emphasis on entitlement, independence and sexual power” yet pointing out how this can remove the larger social and systemic context, as well as closing down the need to link with others in collective action (195). In a study of women’s detective fiction, Mizejewski suggests that Sara Paretsky’s V. I. Warshawski novels also challenge this construction through plots focused “on bureaucratic injustice and white-collar crime, clearly implicating and criticizing big power structures” (25). Placing Max’s struggle for self-definition within a larger context, *Dark Angel* does something similar, if in less clearly delineated terms.

<26> The show moves between the criminal violence of the post-apocalyptic, cyberpunk streets of Seattle and the institutional violence of Manticore and its facilities, a bureaucratic/ capitalist system that is implicitly racist, sexist and oppressive. Race/ ethnicity and gender are used to highlight inequalities, and Max and other regular characters (from Jam Pony workers to transgenics) are used to contrast



the rich white privileged class, embodied by Logan's family, and WASP Americans, eventually embodied by the ironically named Ames White. (White is the new bad guy for season 2; initially he is in charge of hunting down transgenics after the destruction of Manticore but later he is revealed to be part of a breeding cult with a larger agenda. His name is assumed, he tells Max in "Love Among the Runes" 2.20 that the choice was a "symbolic thing. White as in unsullied").

<27> Logan Cale initially appears to be a rich white boy playing at rebellion via Eyes Only: when Max comments, "being a famous underground pirate saboteur and all this can't be much of a payday," he responds, "My folks were loaded" (Pilot). Enlarging on this, a later episode has Logan's ex-wife come back into his life solely to try and get money from him ("411 on the DL" 1.5). Subsequently Logan's uncle Jonas snipes, "On a clear day, I bet you can really see the class struggle from that penthouse of yours" ("I and I am a Camera" 1.18). Yet this episode ends with Logan rescinding his fortune because it is made from the manufacture of hover-drones and is therefore implicated in the repressive police-state he resists as Eyes Only. "This lifestyle of mine, Max, is bought and paid for with money made keeping people under police surveillance. It took a lot of people dying for me to finally face the fact that I've been living a lie." Typically Max deflates his sacrifice, or at least recontextualises it when she responds, "You know, only a bored, rich, liberal white guy would piss away a fortune to prove he wasn't a bored, rich, liberal white guy."

<28> Thus the power Logan accrues as a member of the privileged and traditionally dominant class is subverted by his chosen profession of political activist, and further undermined by the accident that loses him the use of his legs [6]. That the former leads directly to the latter is emphasised in early episodes as characters frequently refer to the incident in the pilot episode where Logan is shot in the spine trying to protect a witness.

<29> From the pilot episode on, the Jam Pony workers are presented as uniting to "take care of [their] own," in direct contrast to manager Normal who is often reprimanded by Rastafarian Herbal, the ethical voice of the employees, or by Cindy or Max. Normal's nickname indicates his position as part of the system and his characterisation at least superficially positions him as a "normal" white male. Normal effectively keeps himself outside the "family" of workers, and his exclusionist notion of how society should be is emphasised during season 2 when he repeatedly voices support for popular movements such as the "Coalition for a Transgenic Free Seattle" ("Love Among the Runes"). However, Normal's apparent prejudice is redeemed at the end of season 2 when he discovers that transgenics have been working for him all along, that his "golden boy" Alec (extreme fighter "Monte Cora") is a "mutant," and finally when he helps X-5 Jen give birth to a "bouncing baby girl" ("Freak Nation" 2.21). Indeed, Normal's response to a television interviewer's question, "So, you're saying they're not all monsters then?" is "Monsters? No, no more than you or me," optimistically summarising his first conscious interaction with transgenics ("Freak Nation").

<30> Many of the transgenics (especially the female X-5s) and their birth mothers appear to be non-white, though this is never articulated within the show. The implicit logic is that these are/ were second class citizens, and therefore more easily made victims of white male professionals, in a very similar scenario to that laid out in

Marge Piercy's novel *Woman on the Edge of Time*, or indeed in some alien abduction narratives (see, for example, Lavery, Hague and Cartwright 9). That it is specifically the female X-5s who initially embody racial and ethnic diversity might seem to subvert this logic (the first white female X-5 and first non-white X-5 male appear in "...And Jesus Brought a Casserole" 1.21), but it serves to reinforce the show's conflation of various kinds of difference and consequent oppression.

<31> Pushing this analogy further, the escalation of events in season 2 reinforces the idea of the transgenics as an oppressed racial or ethnic group trying to come to terms with a racist society [7]. Transgenics banding together in the area known as Terminal City call humans "ordinarys," while "true patriot" Ames White publicly denounces transgenics as "a threat to our American way of life" ("She Ain't Heavy" 2.19). People are seen preaching against transgenics on street corners and one X-5 is the victim of "a good old-fashioned lynching" ("Love Among the Runes"). Anti-transgenic protestors ask, "What are we supposed to do? Wait until they break into our houses and take our daughters?" ("Freak Nation") and display flaming Xs to warn transgenics of their zero-tolerance policy. In the ultimate identification of transgenics as inhuman monsters, one little old lady on television says, "Oh, there's no point in discussing human rights since they're not human so they don't have rights. They don't even have souls... These things were never even intended by God to exist" ("Freak Nation"). The show explicitly condemns post-Pulse Seattle's misidentification of the transgenics as "non-human" by invoking the racial tensions of U.S. history, presenting such attitudes as out-and-out bigotry.

<32> The use of medical technology as a weapon by hegemonic power is common in *Dark Angel*, and is also directly related to oppression of racial/ ethnic groups when a genetically engineered pathogen "capable of distinguishing between population groups" is tested in Chinatown during "Radar Love" (2.4). The rhetoric of Ames White and the breeding "cult" in the same season further links medical technology to covert power and exclusionist agendas. White orchestrates the racial hatred of transgenics ("trannies") through the media and this implicates him as a racist. Furthermore, the ancient cult is explicitly designed to maintain racial purity through selective breeding. Notably, despite origins going back to Sumeria, all the members of the breeding cult appear to be white. This again ties together concerns from both science fiction and Gothic strands since Halberstam notes that "postmodern Gothic warns us to be suspicious of monster hunters, monster makers, and above all, discourses invested in purity and innocence" (27), while science fiction aliens and robots or androids have often stood in for society's Others in explorations of racism and xenophobia. These traditions unite in Max so that she becomes an overloaded symbol of difference.

## Conclusion

<33> *Dark Angel* may lack the humour and/or camp of, for example, *Buffy*, *Xena*, or *Farscape*, but it provides a much more obvious political and social context for its representation of gender. The difference between "utopian and anti-utopian positions" has been explained by Baccolini and Moylan as "texts which are emancipatory, militant, open, indeed critical" compared with "those which are compensatory, resigned, and anti-critical" (8). By this definition, *Dark Angel*, despite its gloomy, post-apocalyptic cyberpunk trappings, is more utopian than anti-utopian. In the pilot

episode Max rejects the nostalgic idea of a past Golden Age, preferring to deal with the present: “You always hear people yapping on how it was all different before the Pulse, land of milk and honey blah, blah, blah, blah with plenty of food and jobs and things actually worked. I was too young to remember so – whatever” but eventually she begins to look to and work towards a vision of a better future through political/social activism. On her escape from Manticore she takes the surname Guevara [8] and eventually she leads the transgenic revolution, establishing a “freak nation” at the end of season 2.

<35> In discussing critical dystopian novels, Baccolini and Moylan point out that the ambiguous, open endings... maintain the utopian impulse *within* the work. In fact, by rejecting the traditional subjugation of the individual at the end..., the critical dystopia opens up a space of contestation and opposition for those collective ‘ex-centric’ subjects whose class, gender, race, sexuality, and other positions are not empowered by hegemonic rule (7).

The same analysis can be applied to *Dark Angel*. Its cancellation and the end of season 2 leave resolution dangling but they also leave open the possibility that society (Max’s and the viewer’s) can change. The final words, “Now look what you’ve done” (“Freak Nation”) point to a potentially utopian future and this utopian movement is mediated through Max as a racialised female subject. Moreover, her various “differences” are integral to her understanding of the dystopian society in which she lives, to her resistance to it and other collective resistance, and to the show’s representation of her as a positive example of the hybrid or posthuman.

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## Notes

[1] The apocalypse was caused by the “Pulse,” an EMP that wiped out much technology and infrastructure, leading to the decay of society as we know it.

[2] The name is probably derived from the S1Ws of theme music writer Chuck D’s band Public Enemy.

[3] In addition, *Dark Angel* co-opts elements of the comic-book urban Gothic style (such as Batman) in terms of setting and atmosphere.

[4] Buffy does have to find paid work from season 6 of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* but she is definitely constructed as middle class. Yet Max’s position is problematised by her stealing art; perhaps she doesn’t really *have* to work.

[5] Admittedly this is after well-meaning friends Kendra and Original Cindy flush her previous supply down the toilet thinking she is a drug addict.

[6] There are a raft of issues connected to Logan’s accident and his consequent disability (for example, I have heard viewers arguing about whether Logan’s disability is the reason why he never gets the girl) that are too complex for me to do justice to here.

[7] Even the raised fist salute of the transgenics at the end of the final episode could be likened to the black power salute (“Freak Nation” 2.21).

[8] In the second episode “Heat” Logan wears a t-shirt with a print of Che Guevara on the front.