dividual problems, not social or structural difficulties that involve questions of power. [...] oppression and inequality are virtually invisible, [...] the assimilationist goal is virtually unchallenged" (11 and 13).

In *Dykes*, the liberal multicultural rendition of racial difference goes hand in hand with a curiously bifurcated understanding of racism. *Dykes* does not subscribe to the ideology of post-raciality, as liberal multiculturalism often does (cf. Kincheloe and Steinberg 10). It recognizes racism – on a structural and cultural level, in the arena of 'official' politics, in public life. At the same time, however, it imagines a post-racial lesbian community entirely untouched by racism. As I outlined in chapter 2.2.1 and as Jonathan P. Rossing asserts, "Postracialism arguably represents the dominant interpretive framework for assumptions about the salience of race in contemporary society" (45), and Sherrow O. Pinder defines post-racialism as the myth "of a society without race, a society where the idea of race no longer has any role to play in shaping the lives of blacks and other non-whites " (79). While *Dykes* clearly would not make any such claims for the U.S. as a whole, it puts forth its own, lesbian version of post-racialism: It sees racism 'out there,' but not 'in here,' among lesbian friends and lovers. It is aware and critical of the existence of racism, but unfamiliar with its concrete, experiential effects in the lives of (LGBTIQ) People of Color. In this understanding, racism generally exists but has no 'real' consequences in the lives of actual people, particularly not those in the LGBTIQ community. I use the term 'armchair anti-racism' to capture this split understanding of racism that combines a general, even critical awareness of racism in society with a failure to perceive the effects of racism in one's immediate vicinity. Armchair anti-racism is a very white stance in that it can afford to know that racism is real but still imagine that it is possible for People of Color to lead lives (almost) entirely unaffected by it.

3.4 WHITE LESBIANS AS A BETTER KIND OF WHITE

In the following chapters I will analyze how the liberal multicultural depiction of difference and the armchair anti-racism that I diagnosed in the last chapter affect the portrayal of white characters in *Dykes*. How does *Dykes* understand whiteness and white privilege, the unavoidable flipside of racism, in the context of a post-racial lesbian community?

3.4.1 White Lesbians as Non-Racist

Since, as I described above, Characters of Color in *Dykes* almost never experience racism in their personal lives, it follows almost logically that white characters can also not perpetuate a whole lot of racism in their day-to-day interactions with their Friends and Lovers of Color. In fact, none of the central white characters ever do or say anything that is outright racist. Lois and Mo come close on a handful of occasions (Lois: 79, 151, 462; Mo: 6, 398), but their behavior is never explicitly framed as racist.

Among the recurring white characters, Cynthia is the only one who is portrayed as overtly racist. After her racism initially targets two of the central Characters of Color (see above when she demands a whiter world literature curriculum and when she suspects Samia of being a terrorist because of her name), it is then only addressed at other white characters that are even more marginal in the world of *Dykes* than Cynthia herself. This serves to downplay the significance of her racist behavior because it is neither directed at characters that would be directly targeted by her remarks, nor at characters that the readers know or care about. So, for example, at a social event for queer grad students, Cynthia uses her concern for gay rights to defend her imperialist and anti-'Muslim' views on foreign policy. When another white grad student asks her if she thinks it would be a good idea to invade Iran, she responds, "I think we need to take a hard line with them. I mean, they're executing gay people! I don't understand so-called progressives who demonize Bush, and tiptoe around Islamic fundamentalism" (519). The other woman is clearly turned off by Cynthia's homonationalist rhetoric (cf. chapter 5.2.1 for a more detailed discussion of homonationalism) and excuses herself, which prompts Cynthia to go home early and on her own.[9]

Her experience with this woman mirrors her undergrad experience, which she summarizes to Ginger as, "The gay kids here hate me, and the other conservatives think I'm a perv" (455). Ginger herself is surprised when she hears that Cynthia came out, as if Cynthia's conservatism logically precluded her queerness (447). To Ashley, Cynthia's love interest, conservatism and queerness are so mutually exclusive that she actually thinks that Cynthia is joking when she first tells her that she is an Evangelical who has signed a virginity pledge and a Republican who thinks that fiscal conservatives are not conservative enough (467). The narrative voice also gently mocks the oxymoronic nature of a "lesbian Republican" when she asks, "What's a lesbian Republican to do?", in the be-

9 Other instances in which Cynthia voices racist opinions include strips 478 and 486.

ginning of a strip in which Cynthia is angry at John Kerry for mentioning the fact that Mary Cheney is a lesbian in a presidential debate (452). As the strip suggests, there is not much a lesbian Republican *can* do because as a self-respecting lesbian, she would have to reject the Republican Party, and as a self-respecting Republican, she would have to renounce her queerness. In the logic of *Dykes*, being both a Republican and a lesbian is close to impossible. The impossibility of Cynthia's position is expressed in her isolation and marginalization within the LGBTIQ community on campus on account of her conservative, Republican politics. Within the entirety of the dyke universe of *Dykes*, she is an anomaly, the only lesbian who loves Ayn Rand, is a practicing Christian, supports Bush, believes in the necessity of war and torture, and wants to dismantle welfare programs. Politically, she is everything the other characters are not, and there is no community she could possibly truly belong to.

Narratively, this makes her the ideal foil on which to displace racism in the white lesbian community. The fact that she is the only overtly racist recurring white character gives the impression that only conservative, Republican lesbians are racist, while progressive lesbians are not. Racism is thus displaced onto the margins of the white lesbian community, while its existence at the center is denied. Since, according to *Dykes*, Republican lesbians are such an anomaly and definitely not a force to be reckoned with, the problem of racism within the lesbian community is also downplayed in its significance. Racism itself becomes an anomaly in the white lesbian community, brought in by people who are not only few and far between, but whose 'membership rights' in lesbian communities are also rather questionable. Cynthia's function within the *Dykes* universe is reminiscent of common discursive strategies that seek to displace racism onto the extremist fringes of society – the KKK, neo-Nazis, etc. – while portraying mainstream society as neutral and non-racist. However, as Zeus Leonardo reminds white people, "white domination is [...] constantly reestablished and reconstructed by whites *from all walks of life* [...] it is not solely the domain of white supremacist groups. It is rather the domain of average, tolerant people, of lovers of diversity, and of believers in justice" ("Color" 143). By displacing overt racism onto Cynthia, *Dykes* obscures the fact that even though all the other white characters are "lovers of diversity" and "believers in justice," white people who are as progressive as they are can still actively uphold white supremacy.

On top of displacing racism onto the margins of the lesbian community and thus understating its extent and importance, *Dykes* further suggests that even when one of those rare, oxymoronic conservative white lesbians acts in unambiguously racist ways, this is still 'no big deal' and nothing that would threaten the harmony and cohesion within the dyke community around Mo. *Dykes* con-

veys this message by making precisely the person who is most targeted by Cynthia's racism her closest ally. Samia is the only Arab American in *Dykes* and is thus the only character who is directly impacted by the anti-'Muslim' racism that Cynthia constantly expresses. Even though Cynthia wants to learn Arabic so that she can work for the C.I.A. and take an active part in the 'war on terror,' Samia not only agrees to teach her but even defends her against Ginger's disapproval: "She may be a warmonger, but she's smart as a whip" (444). After Cynthia's love interest, Ashley, refuses her marriage proposal, Samia comforts her without making any reference to the fact that Ashley's refusal might have had something to do with the racist rant that Cynthia delivered right before the proposal (486). While Cynthia is snubbed by Ashley, a white lesbian, in connection with her repellent values, Samia, an Arab American lesbian, stands by her side without even so much as voicing the slightest criticism. When Cynthia returns for grad school after her summer internship with the CIA and finds herself without a place to live because her prospective roommates did not want to live with her anymore after they found out that she worked for the CIA, Samia and Ginger take Cynthia in as a lodger, albeit somewhat grudgingly (512). Their reluctance notwithstanding, it is still two Lesbians of Color, one of them Arab American, who consistently provide Cynthia with support, community, and even something like friendship.

Similar to how Characters of Color usually put concerns about cis_hetero_sexism above concerns about racism in *Dykes*, the strip again shows Characters of Color putting lesbian solidarity with a white student over any concerns that might have to do with that student's racism. The only person who seems to be harmed by Cynthia's racism is Cynthia herself. Her politics make it difficult for her to find friends, roommates, or lovers among her white (LGBTIQ) classmates, but they do not seem to offend the people they actually target. Even though the 'I have Black friends, I can't be racist' argument is never explicitly invoked in *Dykes*, showing Cynthia being friends with Samia has a similar effect. Samia's support for Cynthia makes her racism appear inconsequential and allows her to become a quaint addition to *Dykes*' rainbow of lesbian diversity, with her racist politics just one more 'interesting flavor' next to Thea's disability, Lois's sex positivism, Sparrow's bisexuality, Samia's Arab Americanness, and Janis's transition.

While the character of Cynthia serves to downplay the destructive effects of racism on LGBTIQ communities and to displace racism onto the conservative margin of white lesbian communities, all other instances of white people doing or saying something racist in *Dykes* serve to actually externalize racism from lesbian communities altogether. As I mentioned above, *Dykes* generally only de-

picts very few racist interactions and with the exception of those interactions in which Cynthia is involved, the perpetrators are always one-off, often anonymous characters, who are usually positioned outside the lesbian community and sometimes not even shown, only talked about. In combination with the fact that Cynthia's racist remarks are also typically addressed at characters outside the core lesbian community in *Dykes*, this creates the impression that racism does not affect the interpersonal relations within the lesbian community at all. This is indicative of a general tendency that Damien W. Riggs describes as: "white queers are at times seemingly placed outside of oppression" (9). By including a handful of racist interactions in *Dykes*, the strip demonstrates a general awareness that racism is also upheld and perpetuated by individual white people. However, this racism is displaced onto 'bad' white people outside the safety of the progressive LGBTIQ bubble and even if the odd racist character finds her way into the bubble, her racism still does not seem to affect anybody within the bubble.

This depiction stands in sharp contrast to Leonardo's analysis of the perpetuation of white racial dominance in the U.S. He writes, "despite the fact that white racial domination precedes us, whites daily recreate it on both the individual and institutional level" ("Color" 139). *Dykes* denies this reality and instead imagines a post-racial lesbian bubble populated almost entirely by 'good' white people, who do not recreate racial domination on the individual level. In her analysis of *Dykes*, Gabrielle N. Dean states, "In this dyke idyll, the reproduction of the family as the family of choice does not entail a reproduction of the ills of the larger social context. [...] racial conflict is a constitutive problem of the outside world, emanating from it but not intruding on the dyke domestic" (213). DiAngelo exposes this portrayal as utterly unrealistic:

> dynamics of racism invariably manifest *within* cross-racial friendships as well, through unaware assumptions, stereotypes, and patterns of engagement. Using an antiracist theoretical framework, it is not *possible* for racism to be absent from your friendship. I have not met a person of color who has said that racism *isn't* at play in his or her friendships with white people. Some white people are more thoughtful, aware, and receptive to feedback than others, but no cross-racial relationships is free of racism. (226)

Following Leonardo's differentiation between domination, "a process that establishes the supremacy of a racial group," and dominance, "its resulting everyday politics, [...] a state of being" ("Color" 140), it can be said that while *Dykes* does recognize a state of white racial dominance in U.S. society at large, this dominance is suspended in the dyke community, where white lesbians are portrayed as not participating in the racial domination that would create white dominance

and as sustaining a multitude of relationships with People of Color entirely free of racism. Even though they live in a context deeply marked by white racial domination, *Dykes* allows white lesbians in the U.S. to imagine themselves as innocent and non-racist, externalizing the actual process of domination onto 'bad' white people, who are entirely unlike the progressive, socially aware central white characters.

3.4.2 White Lesbians as Racially Aware Allies to Lesbians of Color

Three of the handful of instances in which one-off white characters are called out on their racism not only serve to establish the central white characters as non-racist but also as possessing a strong, progressive racial awareness.[10] In the strip in which Ginger is upset about her department chair's clueless reaction to Audre Lorde's death, both Mo and even Lois, who is at first unaware of Lorde's passing, are portrayed as 'better' white people because they are aware of the significance of Audre Lorde's life and work and are therefore appropriately saddened by her death (151). Not only that, their acute racial awareness even allows them to correctly predict the department chair's racist reaction (Mo) and comprehend the broader, structural significance of his individual reaction (Lois). While the department chair is depicted as an ignorant pillar of white dominance through his erasure of the knowledge production of People of Color, the contrast between his reaction and Mo's and Lois's reaction positions the two white lesbians as excellent allies to their Black friend.

In the second instance, Mo tells Ginger that she was once involved with a woman called Beatrice Buell, to which Ginger responds, "Beatrice **Buell?** That white woman who does shamanic drumming rituals for rich suburbanites?" (*Unnatural* 114). While Ginger calls attention to that woman's highly problematic appropriation of Indigenous cultures, Mo defends herself by saying, "Yeah, well.

10 When I talk about 'a strong, progressive racial awareness' in the context of *Dykes*, it has to be kept in mind that I am talking about racial awareness within the parameters set by the comic itself. The racial awareness that the white characters display is still the same armchair anti-racism that I analyzed above. Since this armchair anti-racism is the standard against which all people are measured in *Dykes*, however, white characters appear as progressive and anti-racist in the logic of the comic when they express this type of racial awareness. In this chapter I analyze how this armchair racial awareness functions within *Dykes*, where it is seen as firmly establishing the anti-racist credibility of the white characters.

That was **after** she went into recovery. When I was with her, she was still a big politico. I learned a lot from her" (*Unnatural* 114). Because her association with Beatrice Buell could potentially call into question Mo's own anti-racist credentials, Mo immediately agrees with Ginger's assessment of her ex-lover's current behavior and disassociates herself from it by claiming that Beatrice was actually very different (one assumes: anti-racist) when Mo was with her. Again, Mo's reaction positions her not only as non-racist but also as currently more racially aware than Beatrice and completely on the same page with Ginger.

This same dynamic of Mo being the 'good' white person to another white person's racism is again in evidence during the interaction between Jezanna and an anonymous white woman after the O.J. Simpson verdict that I recounted above (see chapter 3.3). After Jezanna leaves, the woman turns to Mo, "Jeez, did I offend her? I should have said 'African American,' right?" (223), completely misunderstanding Jezanna's criticism of her seeing white people as the 'objective' norm and making generalizing statements about the emotionality of Black people. Mo, however, is in total accordance with Jezanna and responds to this woman's ignorance by saying, "Uh … I think you should've said 'Can you direct me to your 'Unlearning racism' section, pronto?'" (223). Mo's response is the final punch line of the strip, thus elevating Mo as the 'good' white lesbian to the superior position of being able to make fun of the 'bad' white woman, whose racial awareness is not as keen as Mo's. Taken together, in all three instances one-off racist white characters serve as negative foils to highlight the central white characters' heightened racial awareness and their worthiness as good allies to their Friends of Color. While there is, of course, nothing wrong with white people calling out other white people on their racism, the fact that the central white characters are always the ones doing the calling out, never the ones being called out, puts this depiction in line with what Audrey Thompson calls white peoples' desire to be "Tiffany, friend of people of color:" "Although we can acknowledge white racism as a generic fact, it is hard to acknowledge as a fact about ourselves. We want to feel like, and to be, good people. And we want to be *seen* as good people" (8). Quoting the work of Leslie Roman, she warns, "white 'redemption fantasies,' in which the good white 'supposedly comes to know and be at one with the 'racialized other' and his or her 'struggles against racism,' may even be a new form of white privilege" (17).

In one strip, a white lesbian's racial awareness is actually depicted as superior to that of her Black partner. She is reading from a children's book to her Black daughter and when she comes across some racist imagery in the book, she looks sternly at her contrite-looking partner and asks accusingly, "Where'd this racist book come from?" (158), as if it the Black woman was personally respon-

sible for making sure that none of their daughter's books contained any racism. More typically, however, the white characters' racial awareness allows them to be an equal and unquestioned part of the anti-racist lesbian 'we' that *Dykes* constructs. In one very early strip, Clarice casually mentions that she and Harriet are both part of the Central American Task Force (11). In a strip called "Modes of Resistance," Ginger, Sparrow, and Lois talk about U.S. involvement in Nicaragua and when Lois sees in the newspaper that Congress will vote on whether or not to give financial aid to the Contras, she asks, "What're we gonna **do** about it?" (25), clearly expressing that there is indeed a shared 'we' that agrees that something should be done to stop U.S. support to the Contras. They subsequently disagree on what exactly should be done, but it is noteworthy that Lois, the only white lesbian at the table, favors the most radical course of action when she suggests, "We should all **drop** what we're doing, **go** to **D.C.**, and **chain** ourselves to the Capitol **doors!**" (25). Ginger's letter writing campaign to their representatives and Sparrow's meditation ritual represent liberal and new-agey approaches that contrast with Lois's radicalism on behalf of the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua. Lesbians of Color are thus depicted as more centrist in their political strategies than white lesbians even though they are all in agreement when it comes to opposing the Reagan administration and their politics in Nicaragua.

In another strip, Jezanna, Thea, Mo, and Lois are collectively "**reeling** with post-Thomas confirmation **stupefaction**" (122). Mo again posits the same 'we' that Lois assumed in support of the Sandinistas when she asks, "**So what are we gonna do about it?!**" (122). In this case, this multiracial lesbian 'we' agrees that Clarence Thomas's confirmation as a Supreme Court justice was bad for women, will be bad for Black people, and is worst for Black women in the U.S. In response to Mo's question, Thea further confirms the existence of this 'we' when she says, "Keep doing what we've been doing. Confront harassers. Picket. Boycott. Do anti-racism work. Fund women candidates …" (122), thus claiming that they have all long been united in their anti-racist, feminist activism. I already mentioned above that the Characters of Color in *Dykes* are not actually very involved in anti-racist activism at all, and I will discuss the question of how involved the white characters are in a subsequent chapter. For now, I just want to note that like Lois in "Modes of Resistance," Mo and Thea assume that there is a shared anti-racist 'we,' which includes both white lesbians and Lesbians of Color, and that like Ginger and Sparrow in "Modes of Resistance," Jezanna does not contest this assumption but instead seems to agree with it implicitly. As Alana Lentin points out, this assumption of a shared, anti-racist 'we' is common among people who adhere to a post-racial logic: "What remains is a language of inclu-

sion and shared struggle, which lingers while being stripped of content and meaningful action" (163).

There is only one instance in which a Character of Color rejects a white character's aspirations towards this shared anti-racist 'we,' and this instance is tucked away in the back-story written for *Unnatural Dykes To Watch Out For*. Clarice tells Ginger about the affair she had with Mo in college, and she portrays Mo as constantly whining about her own shortcomings: "I'm not political enough for you, am I? I don't know what you see in me. I'm passive and uninformed, and ... and **bourgeois**" (*Unnatural* 122). Mo even tells Clarice, "I wish I could share your oppression," to which Clarice responds, "I can't take this shit any more" (*Unnatural* 122, see fig. 8). Mo is desperately trying to be like Clarice, which is also signified by a book on her table titled *The Black Woman*, but Clarice is so turned off by Mo's "white guilt" (*Unnatural* 122) that she eventually breaks up with her. *Dykes* thus critiques the common white strategy of responding to confrontations with racism by centering the feelings of the white person and our desire for goodness and innocence (cf. Srivastava). Even though *Dykes* avoids the trap of excessive white empathy that "reinforces the notion of the universally kind, helping white woman" (Srivastava 44) in this instance, in all other instances, the comic still depicts white lesbians as generally just as aware and passionate about race-related matters as their Friends of Color.

This depiction obscures the fact that People of Color often have a much deeper understanding of the workings of racism than their white peers because they are intimately familiar with the effects of racism in their personal lives in ways that white people are not (see chapter 2.2). *Dykes* erases this "perspectival cognitive advantage that is grounded in the phenomenological experience of the disjuncture between official (white) reality and actual (nonwhite) experience" (Mills 109) and denies People of Color the recognition of their superior knowledge and awareness when it comes to matters of race and racism. Instead of confronting white readers with our ignorance, *Dykes* portrays white lesbians as always already racially aware. While this could be read as simply holding white people to high standards, I would rather read it as denying existing differences between People of Color and white people, which allows white people to fantasize that we have already done all the work and are therefore entirely safe and valuable allies to People of Color.

In *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, bell hooks states clearly that Black people have critically observed white people for centuries and that "[u]sually, white students respond with naïve amazement," an amazement that hooks calls "itself an expression of racism," to the realization that "black people watch white people with a critical 'ethnographic' gaze" (167). Or, as Marie

Louise Fellows and Sherene Razack write, "Presuming innocence, each of us is consistently surprised when we are viewed by other women as agents of oppression" (1084). *Dykes* spares its white readers this shock of realizing that one's racism, one's (often enough willful) ignorance did not go unnoticed but was instead keenly observed by People of Color, who often know more about us than we care to know ourselves. *Dykes* allows its white readers to believe that it is possible for white people to become so completely non-racist and to be so racially aware that there is really nothing *to* see except white 'goodness' and 'innocence.' *Dykes* thus strengthens the "ideological and moral associations between whiteness and 'goodness'" (Leonard 3) and permits white people to entertain the comforting fantasy that we are safe from all critical gazes because we have successfully shed all the toxicity associated with racism and white supremacy.

hooks reminds white people, however, that "black folks associated whiteness with the terrible, the terrifying, the terrorizing" (170). Even though LGBTIQ people experience oppression on account of our gender and/or sexuality, we can still be terrifying on account of our whiteness. Hooks writes, "If the mask of whiteness, the pretense, represents it as always benign, benevolent, then what this representation obscures is the representation of danger, the sense of threat" (175). When white audiences praise *Dykes* as a realistic depiction of what lesbian life in the U.S. was like around the turn of the millennium, they are really saying that this sanitized "mask of whiteness, the pretense" feels real to them, that they (want to) believe that racial harmony has already been achieved and that they see white lesbians only as good and innocent, never as dangerous and threatening.

What feels 'real' to white readers is only a white fantasy that does not correspond to the actual experiences of People of Color in LGBTIQ contexts. Giwa and Greensmith interviewed LGBTIQ People of Color in Toronto as recently as 2012 and found that "participants questioned the meta-narratives of the accommodating, diverse, racially integrated, and inclusive community promulgated by the majority gay White men and women" (170). *Dykes* is a prime example of these very meta-narratives that need to be questioned because, as Giwa and Greensmith also warn, "The continual masking or concealing of the reality of racism makes it unlikely that the issue will get addressed" (171).

3.4.3 Excursus: Struggling with Cissexism, Monosexism, and Ableism

When analyzing how *Dykes* portrays white lesbians, it is instructive to take a brief, comparative look at how *Dykes* depicts lesbians in other dominant social

positions dealing with the respective forms of oppression, namely the depiction of cis, monosexual, and non-disabled lesbians dealing with cissexism, monosexism,[11] and ableism[12]. Similar to racism, these are forms of oppression that deeply affect(ed) lesbian communities in the U.S. and cause(d) considerable rifts and conflicts. With regard to cissexism, Aaran H. Devor and Nicholas Matte write that that even though trans people were a leading force in both the Compton Cafeteria Riot in San Francisco and the Stonewall Riot in New York City in the late 1960s, "[o]ver the next few years, while gay and lesbian rights organizing expanded rapidly, the distinctive gifts and needs of transgendered people were often marginalized by the leadership of early gay and lesbian organizations. Bull daggers and drag queens, transgendered and transsexual people, were largely treated as embarrassments in the 'legitimate' fight for tolerance, acceptance, and equal rights" (180). Amy L. Stone points out that the relationship between cis lesbians and trans women is particularly fraught: "in addition to the virulent anti-transsexual literature of the 1970s written by Janice Raymond, the lesbian community is home to one of the most visible disputes about transgender inclusion at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival" (337). In fact, as Dana Beyer reports in the *Advocate*, after 25 years of protest against its womyn-born-womyn admission policy, the 2016 Michigan Womyn's Music Festival will actually be the last because the organizers would rather end the festival altogether than allow trans women to attend. In an article for *Bitch Magazine*, Tina Vasquez also details the

11 Shiri Eisner defines monosexism as follows: "I define *monosexism* as a social structure operating through the presumption that everyone is, or should be, monosexual, a structure that privileges monosexuality and monosexual people, and that systematically punishes people who are nonmonosexual. I define *monosexuality* as attraction to only one sex and/or gender" (63).

12 In a widely cited definition, Vera Chouinard writes, "Ableism refers to ideas, practices, institutions, and social relations that presume able-bodiedness, and by so doing, construct persons with disabilities as marginalized, oppressed, and largely invisible 'others'. This presumption, whether intentional or not, means that one's ability to approximate the able-bodied norm, influences multiple facets of life: such as the character and quality of interpersonal relations, economic prospects, and degrees of physical and social access to various life spaces. Ableism entails a way of being that takes mobility, thinking, speech, and the senses for granted, and which includes largely 'unconscious' aversion to people and bodies that remind us that the able-bodied norm is an ideal [...]. An ableist society is, then, one that tends to devalue its non-able-bodied members; despite good intentions on the part of many of its citizens to treat these 'others' as equals" (380).

long history of trans-exclusionary radical feminists' (TERFs) hatred against trans women from the 1970 until today. She summarizes, "Trans women have been weathering a storm of hate and abuse in the name of feminism for decades now and for the most part, cisgender feminists have failed to speak out about it or push against it" (19). It was only in the mid-1990s that many formerly gay and lesbian organizations first began to include trans issues in their mission statements and to add the term *transgender* to their names (Devor and Matte 182).

Similarly, Weiss wrote in 2003 that "[b]isexuals are also subject to community exclusion and invisibility. The addition of the term 'bisexual' to 'gay and lesbian' in the titles of political groups, community centers, pride marches and other arenas is often a subject of bitter debate" (Weiss 34). Weiss details that "bisexuals are looked down upon by gays and lesbians, that it is thought that they enjoy same-sex encounters as a temporary diversion, that they will return to their 'real' heterosexual orientation sooner or later, deserting same-sex partners, and that they are getting the best of both worlds by denying their gayness to avoid societal prejudice" (30), and she quotes Lani Ka'ahumanu as demanding "a sincere effort to confront biphobia and transphobia [...] by the established gay and lesbian leadership" (27) at the March on Washington for Lesbian, Gay, and Bi Equal Rights and Liberation in 1993. That this effort is still needed today is evidenced, for example, by Cyd Sturgess's 2015 *Diva* article titled, "Lez Be Honest: Isn't It Time We Said Bye To Biphobia?".

Over the years, *Dykes* mirrors and engages with these real-life conflicts. In the early years of the strip, trans people do not figure as real people at all but only as material for cissexist jokes. After a particularly bad haircut, Mo complains to Lois that she looks "like a **transsexual marine!**" (2), which is apparently a terrible look that will keep her from finding both a job and a girlfriend. When the characters discuss what to do after the confirmation of Clarence Thomas as Supreme Court justice, Lois jokes, "Get a sex change operation. Join the G.O.P." (122), treating gender transition as a funny, but completely unrealistic idea, not a valid life choice deserving of respect. In a strip that takes place on a meta-level where all the characters discuss which plot developments they would like to see, Mo, who is still smarting from her breakup with Harriet and does not want her to get together with Ellen, suggests, "I think it would be an interesting plot development if Ellen turned out to be a pre-op transsexual!" (145), as if this would make Ellen entirely unsuitable as a partner for Harriet. Jezanna, however, supports the idea, "Hey, I like it! It's timely, hip, plenty of human interest!" (145), using trans people not as joke material for once but, in an equally dehumanizing way, as interesting, exotic gimmicks that could spruce up the comic. In all of

these cases, *Dykes* depicts cis characters as casually cissexist without giving any indication that there could be anything wrong with this type of behavior. In these instances *Dykes* normalizes and perpetuates cissexism, very much in line with contemporary lesbian feminist discourses about transsexuality.

In 1994, at a time when gay and lesbian organizations in the U.S. first began to discuss at least nominal support for trans issues, a shift also began to occur in *Dykes*. Mo organizes a reading series called "Madwimmin Read," and a trans lesbian sends in a submission and asks Mo to consider "changing the name of your reading series for local lesbian writers to be inclusive of transgender and bisexual women writers too" (193). Mo reveals the extent of her mono- and cissexism when she proclaims, "What am I supposed to do? Have bi women and drag queens come in here and read about schtupping their boyfriends? [...] What am I supposed to make of a man who became a woman who's attracted to women? [...] I'm not gonna add this unwieldy 'bisexual and transgender' business to the name of my reading series. I don't even know what transgender means!" (193). The strip makes explicit reference to the many conflicts over including the T and the B in formerly LG organizations that were occurring nationwide at the same time. Even though Mo is still voicing extremely mono- and cissexist opinions, this is the first time that the joke is not on trans (and bi) people but instead on Mo, who gets schooled by Lois, who has been learning about transgender issues from the very trans woman who sent in the submission for the reading. From that point onward, Mo begins a journey of unlearning her cissexism, prodded along by Lois, who starts experimenting with gender herself by becoming a drag king, finds herself attracted to a trans man, and eventually becomes Janis's strongest ally in her fight to be allowed to live as a girl and to start hormone replacement therapy as a teenager. Bisexuality is tackled later and only becomes a more serious topic in *Dykes* in 1997, when Sparrow starts going out with Stuart.

Even though the central characters are slowly learning to be more inclusive of bi and trans people, this does not mean, however, that they and others would not continue to engage in quite a bit of mono- and cissexist behavior. When Mo decides to invite the trans woman to the reading, she is criticized by another woman in the audience who sees trans women as men. Even though Mo manages to stumble through a defense of her decision, she appears at a complete loss at the end of the strip when another woman suggests that she invite a trans guy for the next reading (194). When Sparrow starts dating Stuart, she is initially reluctant to tell Ginger and Lois because she is afraid they will disapprove. Ginger is offended that Sparrow would not trust them enough, only to prove promptly that all of Sparrow's fears are justified (280). In fact, both she and Lois display some

very monosexist attitudes. When Stuart comes over to their house for the first time, they have the following dialogue in the kitchen:

Ginger: 'Well … I guess I am disappointed in her. It's just so … **conventional.**'

Lois: 'Don'tcha feel left in the lurch? She'll be showered with approval and appliances while we stay here fending off **promisekeepers** and 'pro-family' **perverts**.'

Ginger: 'Yeah. Her life will be completely different with a man. A **white** man at that! What is she **thinking?**'

Lois: 'I dunno, but I feel **had.**'

Ginger: 'Yeah, **betrayed**. Sparrow seeing a guy is like **Clinton** turning out to be just another hypocritical, family values spewing, welfare-slashing, saber rattling **thug!**' (284)

When Sparrow catches them in the middle of their rant, and they both look extremely guilty, *Dykes* makes clear that their attitudes are unacceptable, but Bechdel nevertheless lets her characters repeat common stereotypes about bisexual people as untrustworthy and 'not really queer' at great length. The strip also shows that this type of behavior puts a strain on Ginger's, Lois's, and Sparrow's friendship when Sparrow temporarily moves out of their shared house to live with Stuart and to be in a more "supportive environment" (286). If Ginger and Lois cannot get over their monosexism, Sparrow cannot live with them.

Some time later, when Sparrow has moved back in and actually co-signed the mortgage on their house, she demands respect for her identity as a "bisexual lesbian," a concept that Ginger is still not entirely comfortable with (323). When they find out in the same strip that one of their acquaintances transitioned from female to male, it is then Sparrow who shows her lack of respect for trans male identifications by proclaiming, "Are you serious? Like, with surgery? And testosterone? God, I just can't understand that! [...] Changing your body to conform to a rigid, conventional gender identity is just more binary thinking! What was wrong with being a butch dyke?" (323). When Lois prepares to perform as a drag king a few strips later, Sparrow continues this line of argument by berating her, "God, this drag kind craze is so **retrograde!** Men are destroying the planet! Why compete to see who can **mimic** them most convincingly?! [...] It just seems so … so **misogynist**. I could understand if you were **critiquing** masculine stereotypes instead of **glorifying** them, but …" (325). Again, *Dykes* has no problem showing characters in the middle of grappling with their own oppressive behavior towards others and reproducing extremely offensive opinions in the process.

The same pattern holds true when Lois decides to teach Mo a lesson about her cissexism by pretending to transition. Again, Mo is basically spewing cissexism left and right. This whole storyline starts because Mo goes on a rant about trans men and lesbian parents, "They're all off turning into **men** or getting **pregnant**. Or **both**. Between injecting themselves with sperm and testosterone, who has time to browse for books? [...] Any day now, our friend Lois is gonna saunter in here and tell us to start calling her '**Louis**' [...] She's giving off so much **male energy** lately, she's one whisker shy of a paternity suit!" (351). Later, she complains to Sydney about Lois's supposed transition, "God, she pisses me off! Acting like **I'm** being oppressive when **she's** the one betraying every tenet of feminism for a chance to grab some male privilege!" (354), and she accuses Lois, "why are you working in a women's bookstore? Have you told Jezanna yet? Or are you going to wait until the hair starts sprouting from your ears?" (359). As with the tension between Sparrow, Lois, and Ginger that was caused by Lois's and Ginger's monosexism, Mo's cissexism is threatening her friendship with Lois. Even though Lois is not actually trans herself, it still takes ten strips for Mo to let go of her cissexist behavior and for Lois to forgive her. Mo's rigid attitude throughout this sequence is consistently framed as outdated, incoherent, self-defeating, and offensive, but Bechdel is not afraid to show her central characters, and even her alter ego, Mo, repeatedly engaging in less than flattering and everything but politically correct behavior that tears at the fabric of their dyke community. In fact, it is not only Mo but also *Dykes* as a whole that undergoes a huge change of heart about trans issues from treating transsexuality as a joke in the early years to advocating for the rights of trans teenagers in the later years.

With regard to disability, Corbett Joan O'Toole, who is a disability activist and has widely published on the intersections of disability and sexuality, wrote in 2000:

> the lesbian community has been a long time pioneer in providing access for women with disabilities to community events. In the early 1970s lesbians were providing wheelchair seating and sign language interpreters at some major community events. [...] There are still many problems, but the lesbian community has shown a consistent pattern of attempting to address these issues even with barriers of limited funding, mostly volunteer efforts and lack of experience. (212)

Despite her positive assessment, however, a host of other writers also speak to the ableism present in the lesbian community. Based on their personal experiences, Sandra Hayes, for example, writes about her social isolation and a lack of

accessibility for wheelchair users at a lesbian festival, and Alanna Higginson talks about how difficult it is for disabled lesbians to find other lesbians (particularly non-disabled lesbians) willing to date them. J.D. Drummond's and Shari Brotman's research subject, Josie, describes a "fetishization of mobility" (541) in the LGBTIQ community that excludes her. Mya Vaughn et al. address the problem that people with disabilities are often seen as asexual (50), and they conclude that "[t]he current body of research suggests that [...] lesbians with disabilities find it difficult to find a place of acceptance within the lesbian community" (53).

Perhaps reflecting O'Toole's assessment of the lesbian community as a "long time pioneer" of access for people with disabilities, disability (unlike transsexuality) is never used as material for jokes in *Dykes*, and the strip also contains a prominent storyline about Thea, a lesbian with a visible disability, who is hired by Jezanna because of her extensive work experience, her professional connections, and likeable personality (118). Later in the storyline, Mo develops a crush on her and is heartbroken when she finds out that Thea has no intention of leaving her long-term relationship.

Alongside this positive depiction of non-disabled lesbians as unbiased employers and non-ableist lovers, however, *Dykes* also shows some of the central characters behaving in extremely ableist ways. Initially, Mo accuses Jezanna of hiring Thea "just because she's **disabled**" (118) and "because disability is a hot issue and it makes the bookstore look p.c." (119). Out of jealousy that Thea was selected over her, Mo brings forth arguments that are often used against affirmative action, implying that minoritized candidates are not qualified for the job and are only hired because they increase diversity. Another strip shows Mo committing one ableist faux-pas after the other. First, she talks about Thea in her presence as if Thea's disability prevents her from hearing what is being said about her, then she insensitively draws attention to the fact that Thea is using a wheelchair instead of crutches that day, and finally she patronizes her for her unhealthy food choices (124). While Mo's behavior in this strip is condescending, tactless, and ill-informed, it later turns out that Sydney literally abandoned Thea, whom she was dating at the time, when she found out that Thea had multiple sclerosis (252). *Dykes* not only shows Sydney acting in an incredibly hurtful way towards Thea, the readers also learn that this type of behavior has consequences. Sydney's panicked, ableist reaction caused a rift between her and Thea that is hard, if not impossible, to mend even years later when Sydney finally tries to apologize (257). Mo and Lois are appalled when they first hear about this, and Sydney's betrayal of Thea initially stands between her and Mo dating. Mo only continues her flirt with Sydney after Thea tells her that while she still thinks that

Sydney is a "jerk," she will not be offended if Mo dates her (258). As this episode shows, ableist behavior can and does occur among the characters of *Dykes* and when it does, it poses severe challenges to their friendship network and even threatens to make it impossible for people to become or remain part of it.

Taken together, *Dykes*' portrayal of cis, monosexual, and non-disabled characters stands in sharp contrast to its portrayal of white characters. While *Dykes* depicts white characters as virtually non-racist and thoroughly racially aware, cis, monosexual, and non-disabled characters are often shown as ignorant, insensitive, and offensive when it comes to transsexuality, bisexuality, and disability. They have internalized the cissexism, monosexism, and ablism that is rampant in lesbian communities as well as in society at large, and they act it out in ways that are hurtful to the people who are or could be their friends and lovers. In all of these cases, systems of domination are not without consequences on the level of personal interactions in *Dykes* and because dominant behavior has deleterious consequences, the cis, monosexual, and non-disabled characters in *Dykes* need to unlearn their oppressive behavior in order to be in community with the people their behavior is hurting and excluding. With the exception of cissexism during the early run of *Dykes*, Bechdel manages to convey her characters' learning process without endorsing their hurtful behavior. When Mo and Sydney act out their ableism on Thea, when Ginger and Lois cannot come to terms with Sparrow's relationship with Stuart, when Sparrow voices cissexist opinions, *Dykes* always frames their words and actions in ways that mark them as uninformed, harmful, and in need of change. In all of these instances, *Dykes* rather truthfully depicts the conflicts that are almost inevitable when people who benefit from oppression and people who are harmed by it attempt to be in relationship with one another. With regard to these forms of oppression, *Dykes* actually lives up to its reputation of being a chronicle of lesbian life in the U.S. in all its complexity. It does not invent a fantasy world in which cissexism, monosexism, and ableism do not exist among lesbians.

If, as these examples show, Bechdel is more than capable of addressing the interpersonal dynamics of different forms of oppression in a complex, nuanced, and sensitive way in the format of a funny, bi-weekly newspaper comic strip, why does she not do this with regard to racism? Why is it virtually unthinkable in *Dykes* to show white characters initially resisting calls for greater diversity in all-white lesbian contexts, making racist remarks, and in need of unlearning racist behavior? Clearly, the reason is not that racism and racial conflict have already been overcome in lesbian communities. It seems to me that *Dykes*' anxious avoidance of any type of racial conflict actually points to the severity of the ongoing problem of racism in LGBTIQ communities. While it is obviously

possible to acknowledge the existence of ableism, cissexism, and monosexism in *Dykes*' lesbian universe, acknowledging racism in the same way could apparently open up a can of worms that would threaten the very foundations of this white fantasy of a diverse and largely harmonious lesbian community. Because of racism's very real power to tear and keep communities apart and to reveal some extremely ugly truths about white people, white people's need to pretend that it has already been overcome seems to be even stronger than in the case of other forms of oppression. Anzaldúa also sees this strong need when she writes, "[w]e [both white women and Women of Color] want so badly to move beyond Racism to a 'postracist' space, a more comfortable space" ("Hacienda caras" 132). While *Dykes* demonstrates that it is quite possible to bear the discomfort of revealing the actually existing cissexism, monosexism, and ablism in lesbian communities, the discomfort of confronting ourselves with the equally existent racism in lesbian circles seems to be unbearable for white people. As DiAngelo puts it, "It seems clear that we know race matters a great deal, but [...] we feel the need to deny this. Ironically, this denial is a fundamental way in which we *maintain* unequal racial power; the denial only serves those who hold racial power, not those who don't" (233).

3.4.4 White People as Less Privileged Than Their Peers of Color

Dykes not only conceals the reality of racism, however, it also conceals its flipside: white privilege. Given the pervasive nature of white privilege in the U.S. (see chapters 2.2 and 2.2.2), one would expect to find an echo of its workings in the pages of *Dykes* in the form of white characters having more material wealth, higher degrees, higher incomes, more influential positions, etc. than their Peers of Color. However, this expectation is not borne out in the pages of the comic.

Among the main characters, Sydney is the only white character who could actually be characterized as enjoying the benefits of white privilege. She comes from a wealthy family, with her father working as a professor (417) and her mother as a psychologist (479). Her father often tries to use his connections to further Sydney's career, thus giving Sydney access to his network of influential white people (278; 281; 380). Sydney eventually gets tenure at the university where Ginger got her PhD (395). Beirne identifies a clear hierarchy among the three lesbian characters in *Dykes* who work in the academy. Ginger, whose PhD is on literature by Black women, is at the bottom of this hierarchy with a job at Buffalo Lake State College. Sydney, whose work is on queer theory and whose "citational practices are largely based upon Foucault, psychoanalysis, and other

continental philosophies" (Beirne 180), i.e. on white theorists, gets tenure at a more prestigious research university. At the very top of the hierarchy is Sydney's rival, Betsey Gillhooley, "whose work appears to be infused with Marxist sensibilities" (Beirne 180), and who gets a job at Harvard. *Dykes* thus (realistically) shows that the white academics who write on white topics and draw on white theorists in their work are more successful in terms of both financial compensation and academic recognition than the Black academic who works on Black topics. In and of itself, this is a clear example of white privilege.

However, the comic undercuts this portrayal of Sydney as comparatively privileged by showing that she is actually worse off financially than her parents. She and her father routinely make each other extremely expensive gifts (302). While her father seems to be able to afford a lavish lifestyle, though, Sydney is not (282). Spending money as if she had the same financial means as her father actually lands her so deep in credit card debt that she has to move in with Mo to try to get her financial situation under control (294). Her portrayal makes it seem as if her middle class background is, at times, more of a curse than a blessing to her, causing problems by inducing her to live above her means. Sydney is also, surprisingly, worse off financially than Ginger, who can afford to buy her own house despite teaching at a less prestigious college.

Among the less central white characters there are some examples of relatively well-off white lesbians. Harriet seems to have a stable job that allows her to afford being a single parent by choice; Ellen is a successful local politician; Cynthia's parents can pay for her college tuition. Clearly, not all white lesbians in *Dykes* are downwardly mobile, but three of the most central white characters (Mo, Lois, and Stuart) are. While Mo complains in college that she is "bourgeois" and "so privileged" (*Unnatural* 122), this privilege never actually materializes during the series. In the beginning of the series, Mo is unemployed and so worried about her unemployment benefits running out that she eagerly jumps at Lois's suggestion to work as a cashier at Madwimmin's Bookstore for "$5 an hour, no benefits" (9). Nine years later, Mo, Lois, and Thea do seem to have benefits, but because of the store's falling profits, Jezanna has to raise their health care deductible to a thousand dollars, which prompts Thea to exclaim, "We might as well not even **have** health insurance!" (239). The topic of Mo's precarious financial situation comes up a few more times. For example, during a day at the beach, Mo complains, "I'm just so **anxious**. I'm thirty-five years old and I don't even have a net worth! How'm I gonna retire?" (271).

Lois's situation is similar to Mo's, since they both work at Madwimmin's until the store closes. However, Lois is actually even worse off than Mo because she never finished college (*Unnatural* 135) and defaulted on her student loans

(295). Unlike Sparrow and Ginger, she is thus ineligible for a loan and has to rely on her two Friends of Color to buy the house they all live in. Stuart's financial situation is depicted as equally precarious. When he is first introduced, Lois goes through his wallet and exclaims, "Thirty-four bucks cash, and three hundred seventy-one in the bank. Huh. If that's straight white male privilege, we're not missing much" (284). From the start, the strip thus explicitly negates any possibility that Stuart might in any way benefit from the systemic privileging of straight white men in the U.S. Like Sparrow, he, too, works in the non-profit sector, but when their daughter Jiao-Raizel is old enough to go to daycare, he quits his job and becomes a stay-at-home dad because he is so worried about the negative influences that his daughter might encounter in daycare (427) even though, just one strip earlier, Sparrow told him explicitly that they cannot afford for him to quit his job (426). For the remainder of the strip, Stuart stays home with Jiao-Raizel and has no income independent of Sparrow, who, in the meantime, finds a much better paying job and is actually able to support all three of them.

Despite their precarious financial situations, none of the white characters ever have to worry about actual poverty, though. They always have food to eat, clothes to wear, and a roof over their heads. In the same strip in which Jezanna raises their health care deductible, Lois makes a joke saying that the U.S.' financial priorities would make her sick if she could afford to be sick (239). However, none of the white characters are ever in a situation where they would actually need health care but cannot afford it. When Sydney is diagnosed with breast cancer, money is never mentioned in connection with her treatment. Apparently, her health insurance covers her treatment so that she can worry about her health first and foremost instead of about the cost of treatment. Similarly, when Mo decides to go back to school to get a degree in library and information science, money does not seem to be a factor in her decision (386). Paying for a graduate degree seems to be no problem for her. One could read the white characters' carefree approach to life, in which resources are somehow always plentiful enough so that they do not negatively impact their life decisions or life chances, as a depiction of white privilege. However, as I outlined above, *Dykes* actually portrays all characters as having access to the same magical safety cushion that keeps them afloat in times of unemployment, career transitions, sickness, or child-rearing, independent of how their financial situations are otherwise portrayed. The white characters' implicit and invisible safety net is thus not a depiction of specifically white privilege but might rather be a symptom of Bechdel's own white, middle-class, non-disabled bias that affects how she renders the financial circumstances of all her characters, not just the white ones.

Compared to their Friends of Color, the central white characters are actually portrayed as less successful and less financially secure. This comparison is made explicit when Mo complains about Toni and Clarice, "It's getting really hard to take! Their tenth anniversary, their hotshot careers, a baby coming. **Now** they're shopping for a **station wagon**. And lookit **me!** Broke, jilted, dusting shelves all day and going home to my cats at night. I'm a **tragic figure!**" (154) or when Stuart jokes after Sparrow and Ginger bought the house they live in, "Well, I just hope you won't take advantage of a simple peasant lad with your debauched, landed gentry ways" (301). This portrayal in fact denies that white lesbians (and white progressives more generally) could have any sort of privilege that Lesbians of Color do not have access to. It is as if, because the white characters in *Dykes* do not actively perpetuate racial domination, they also do not benefit from white racial dominance. In the world of *Dykes*, white lesbians (and their white friends) do seem to be able to opt out of receiving the benefits of white privilege. This impression is strengthened by the fact that the only central white character that does seem to enjoy a modicum of white privilege is Sydney, who is also, at the same time, the most cynical and least politically committed character in Bechdel's dyke universe. This suggests that white lesbians (and their white friends) can renounce white privilege as long as they are only progressive enough, which in turn allows white readers to indulge in the fantasy that we do not benefit from racism because we are LGBTIQ and/or politically aware. As Riggs points out, however, "being queer does not place white queers outside of whiteness, nor does it stop white queers from benefiting from unearned privilege" (95). Leaving out the very real effects of white privilege further strengthens *Dykes*' portrayal of white people as innocent: they neither perpetuate nor benefit from racism and are thus placed completely outside the terror of whiteness. It is difficult to imagine what would motivate white people who see themselves as entirely outside the injustice created by racism and white supremacy to actually do something against this injustice. In the remainder of this chapter I will therefore examine how *Dykes*' portrayal of a liberal multicultural lesbian community where Lesbians of Color are not targeted by racism, white people do not benefit from racism, and white lesbians are united with their Friends of Color in their racial innocence and armchair anti-racism affects LGBTIQ politics and their readiness to address issues of racism and white supremacy.