

3 Alison Bechdel’s *Dykes To Watch Out For*: A White Fantasy of a Post-Racial Lesbian Community

3.1 A “CHRONICLE OF LESBIAN CULTURE AND HISTORY”

Alison Bechdel is one of the, if not *the*, most well-known LGBTIQ comic artist(s) in the U.S. She achieved crossover appeal and mainstream fame with the 2006 publication of her *New York Times* bestselling graphic memoir *Fun Home: A Family Tragikomic*, which also premiered as a Broadway musical and won the Tony for best musical in 2015. In lesbian circles, however, Bechdel has been well known for decades for her bi-weekly comic strip *Dykes To Watch Out For* (*Dykes*). She began publishing *Dykes* in 1983 as a series of snapshots of lesbian life with a revolving set of characters, which eventually morphed into a regular cast of characters grouped around Mo and her friends and lovers in 1987 (Bechdel, *Indelible* 27f). *Dykes* was syndicated in dozens of newspapers (around 50-60 in 2003 [London 10]) most of which, though not all, were feminist and/or gay and lesbian publications. Between 1986 and 2005, Firebrand Books published eleven collections of *Dykes* strips, which contain the syndicated strips as well as additional, longer stories that Bechdel drew specifically for the book publications, starting with the third volume in 1990. As Trina Robbins recounts, these volumes “were most often to be found in independent, gay, or women’s bookstores, so if you frequented the big chains, you were out of luck” (“Housemates” 10). Even though *Dykes* clearly benefited from the network of feminist and LGBTIQ newspapers, publishers, and bookstores, it is hardly a surprise that few people outside of feminist and LGBTIQ subcultures were even aware of the existence of *Dykes* prior to the publication of *Fun Home*. The increased interest in Bechdel and her work after *Fun Home*, however, led to the publication of *The Essential Dykes To Watch Out For* by a mainstream publishing house (Houghton

Mifflin Harcourt) in 2008. *The Essential Dykes To Watch Out For* contains a “Cartoonist’s Introduction” as well as 390 of the 527 strips Bechdel drew between 1987 and 2008.¹

It is difficult to overstate the importance of *Dykes* for lesbian culture in the U.S. and beyond. As Bechdel herself observes, there were almost no other visual representations of lesbians available when she first started drawing *Dykes*. She remarks that “lesbians were so desperate to see a reflection of their lives” that *Dykes* received “an incredibly positive and enthusiastic response” even though “the quality of the drawing and writing was wildly uneven” in the beginning (*In-delicible* 27). In order to remedy the scarcity of affirmative lesbian representation, Bechdel set out to “name the unnamed. Depict the undepicted!” (Bechdel, *Essential* xiv). As her writing and drawing matured, her strip succeeded spectacularly at the mission she had set out to accomplish. Robin Bernstein counts *Dykes* as one of only two lesbian comics (the other one is *Hothead Paisan: Homicidal Lesbian Terrorist*) “that stretch beyond their own artistic vision to enter the bloodstream of lesbian culture and achieve icon status” (20) while Lisa London sees *Dykes* as “a cultural institution” (10).

As Bechdel’s desire to “name the unnamed” and “depict the undepicted” already implies, *Dykes* strives for a certain measure of verisimilitude. The strip is clearly fictional and as a representation of the kind of lesbian feminist community that Bechdel longed for, but could never actually find (Klorman 7), it contains a utopian element that surprisingly few readers comment on. Harriet Malinowitz is one of the few critics who explicitly point out the utopian nature of *Dykes* when she describes its setting as “a multi-culti, wheelchair-accessible utopia with abundant vegetarian entrees and a recycling system in place years ahead of its time” (6). Even Malinowitz, however, goes on to emphasize that the lives of the characters “came to feel astonishingly real” (6). In fact, most commentators, reviewers, and critics seem to agree that *Dykes* ‘feels real.’ Christine Sanni sees

1 Since Bechdel numbered all of her *Dykes* strips after the introduction of the recurring cast of characters, I will refer to the numbers of the strips when quoting *Dykes*. Most of these strips can be found both in *The Essential Dykes To Watch Out For* and in one of the Firebrand volumes. The strips that were published after 2005 (i.e. strips 458-527) can only be found in *The Essential Dykes To Watch Out For*. The 138 strips that were left out of *The Essential Dykes To Watch Out For* can only be found in the respective Firebrand volumes. For better orientation, the bibliography lists which strips are contained in each of these volumes. When I quote material that Bechdel drew before the introduction of the recurring cast of characters or specifically for one of the book publications, I will refer to the respective book as well as the page numbers.

her “own experience” represented in *Dykes* (27) while Robbins claims that “Bechdel’s characters are alive. You know them, you recognize them, you’ve seen them before. They are the dykes next door, or the dykes you didn’t know lived next door” (“Housemates” 11). Adrienne Shaw believes that *Dykes* can teach its readers “what it means to be a lesbian and what the lesbian experience and community looks like” (96), and Bernstein calls *Dykes* “culturally accurate” (23). London sees a generational difference in how older and younger lesbians relate to *Dykes*: “While Bechdel’s contemporaries see the comic strip as a mirror for their lives, the generation that grew up with Bechdel’s strip see it somewhat differently. For those of us in the third wave, the characters in the strip were our future public face and concrete evidence of a vital lesbian subculture” (10). Accordingly, Rebecca Beirne reads *Dykes* as “a unique historical documentation of lesbian cultural and political history” (168), a statement that is echoed by Marianne Dresser and Beren deMotier, who call Bechdel “the preeminent chronicler of everyday lesbian life” (Dresser 29) and “an important chronicler of lesbian culture and history” (deMotier 20) respectively. According to deMotier, “you can take a walk through time and history by reading the details of the strip” (20). It is hardly surprising then that Deb Shoss recommends *Dykes* as “an apt addition to a time capsule for the late twentieth century” (5) and that Robert Keller-mann reports at the *Queers and Comics* conference on May 7th, 2015 that he teaches *Dykes* in his introduction to queer studies class at the University of Maine in Augusta as a way to provide historical context in which to place queer theory. Briana Smith summarizes these statements when she writes:

Since 1983, [Bechdel’s] iconographical characters have simultaneously reflected lesbian trends and passed on a legacy of lesbian identification [...]. We see ourselves in Bechdel’s everydyke characters [...]. The *Dykes to Watch Out For* series encapsulates lesbian thought and culture so accurately that these books serve as much-needed historical texts for the queer community. Alison Bechdel’s dykes seem real to us because they are us. Black, Latina, Asian, white, disabled, trans, eco, consumerist, feminist, academic, bisexual, activist – they are as varied as we are. Rarely has a cultural artifact so successfully reflected the very culture that it represents [...]. I went on to learn, through the *Dykes to Watch Out For* collections and ongoing strips, the history I hadn’t been taught in school: that of contemporary lesbians [...]. Bechdel has been immortalizing queers since 1983, integrating current events into accurate portrayals of everyday lesbian life [...]. Alison Bechdel has successfully recorded our history and contextualized our existence within American society. (1)

It is important to note that while *Dykes* is fictional and contains utopian elements, virtually all of the commentators I was able to find do not read it as a utopia but instead see it as a historically accurate depiction of contemporary lesbian life. Bechdel herself fuels these expectations when she writes that “[d]iscussing current events and reflecting trends is as important to me as rendering the characters’ lives in a believable, psychologically accurate way” (*Indelible* 62) or when she states that it is her goal to have “the changes in the strip reflect changes the lesbian community is facing” (Duralde n. pag.). Bechdel’s “traditionally representational visual style” (Martindale 72) makes it easy to read *Dykes* as an accurate historical record. The characters look like cartoon versions of photographs of actual people, and the detailed backgrounds anchor *Dykes* in its historical time and place. As Beirne writes, “the inclusion of background materials such as newspaper headlines, radio and television programs [...], or the shifting titles of books [...] create[] a pictorial record of lesbian texts, trends in gay and lesbian magazines, mainstream attitudes, and political debates” (168).

Interestingly, as far as I was able to ascertain, the above commentators appear to represent largely white perspectives. In any case, none of them explicitly identify as People of Color. In fact, I was unable to find any written commentary on *Dykes* specifically from a perspective of color. Given that *Dykes* is also one of the most popular lesbian comics of all times, it is thus uniquely well suited to study a public narrative of how white lesbians in the U.S. saw and see themselves and their place in the lesbian community at large around the turn of the millennium.

I will argue that while *Dykes* acknowledges that racism is a pervasive reality in the U.S., it nevertheless presents white lesbians with the (unacknowledged) fantasy of a multi-racial lesbian community in which racism has been overcome. In this fantasy world, white lesbians and Lesbians of Color are united in their theoretical opposition to the racism that operates outside their community, which, however, never leads to any concrete anti-racist activism. This portrayal allows white lesbians to feel innocent, benevolent, and good without having to grapple with the ways in which white lesbians benefit from racism, perpetuate it both inside and outside of LGBTIQ communities, and are responsible for dismantling it. In order to lay out my argument, this chapter will begin with an examination of the representation of racial diversity in *Dykes*, which is followed by an analysis of the general understanding of racism that is expressed in its pages. The chapter then moves on to a discussion of how *Dykes* depicts whiteness and concludes with a delineation of the political consequences of the way it portrays race relations.