3.5 POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES OF *DYKES*' ARMCHAIR ANTI-RACISM

3.5.1 Minimizing the Significance of Racism

The first effect of this externalization of racism is that the importance of racism is generally downplayed within *Dykes*. As Dean notes, "while Mo and her cohorts express their dismay at racist atrocities, one of the many evils of the patriarchal regime, conflict among them generally concerns personal relationships independent of socially constructed differences – the house is messy, someone is grumpy, girlfriends are arguing" (213). There is indeed a noticeable pattern in *Dykes* where time and again concerns about racism are portrayed as a diversion from the 'real' issues at hand, with the 'real' issues often being anxieties around relationships and intimacy.

This pattern is most consistently displayed by Mo. In a strip that is typical for *Dykes*' treatment of racism, Mo has a therapy session after Harriet broke up with her (see fig. 6). She states in the beginning that Harriet has left her but then proceeds to give an extended analysis of the Rodney King trial:

> I can't believe those cops got acquitted in L.A.! How could the non-black jury say their decision had nothing to do with the fact that Rodney King is black? I'm so sick of white people who think they're not racist just because they watch the Cosby show! This country is **built** on racism, and the sooner we all admit it, the sooner we can start fixing it. So what does George Bush do? Blames the riots on 'liberal programs of the 60's and 70's' then jets in for a photo op! (137)

It is only after she has worked herself up over this current display of racism in the U.S. that she can allow herself to break down and cry. In accordance with the theme of white lesbian innocence, this strip again emphasizes that racially aware white lesbians like Mo are 'good' white people, entirely unlike those 'other' white people "who think they're not racist just because they watch the Cosby show." Ironically, however, even though Mo is aware that "this country is built on racism," she is still not going to do anything to "start fixing it." Instead, she uses the sadness and rage generated by the Rodney King trial strictly for her own purposes to release her own pent-up emotions over her breakup. The structure of this strip is typical for *Dykes* in that it offers an astute critique of racism, demonstrating the racial awareness of the strip in general and of its white protagonists in particular, but then, instead of following up on the analysis with any concrete action or even real concern, the initial concern for racism is treated like a joke.

The concern for racism is funny because it is an almost pathological symptom of Mo's repressed, over-anxious personality and because Mo's political analyses are true, but out of place. As incongruity theory explains, "humor emerges from the sudden perception of an incongruity, or the 'bisociation' of two contrasting frames of reference" (El Refaie 90). Many of the racial analyses in *Dykes* are attempts to divert attention from one frame of reference (the [inter-]personal) to another frame of reference (the political). Both of these frames of reference are congruent and valid in and of themselves. However, because they are completely unrelated in these strips, their juxtaposition creates the incongruity that is necessary for humor to emerge. Using politics in this way to make a joke about Mo's social awkwardness and lack of access to her emotions makes light of the seriousness of the political issues she mentions and implies that they are not worthy of attention in and of themselves but only as the setup for a completely unrelated joke.

Figure 6

Bechdel, *Spawn of Dykes To Watch Out For* 30f

In a similarly structured strip, Mo is tense because she has not had a girlfriend in almost a year and worried because she is currently unemployed. She visits Clarice and Toni for dinner and instead of talking about concrete steps she could take to address the issues at hand, she goes off on a long rant about the terrible state of the world, "Here we are, going about our little counter-culture lives, right? But out there in the **real** world they're **bombing abortion** clinics … holding **Nazi** and **KKK** rallies … trying to **quarantine** people who might have **AIDS!** They're making secret **weapons** deals to illegally fund so-called **'freedom fighters'** and calling it 'the **Lord's** work'!!" (3). While reminding herself of all the atrocities going on 'in the real world' (but not in her counter-cultural dyke world) makes Mo feel better about her own personal problems, Toni and Clarice have diverging reactions to Mo's outburst. After Mo leaves, Toni looks somewhat shell-shocked and states, "Great! Now **I'm** anxious & depressed!" (3). Her response first of all indicates that Mo's concerns are generally justified and since Toni had apparently not been (as) concerned about these issues until Mo brought them up, her response also implies that Mo as a white lesbian is more aware of and passionate about important political issues including racism than Toni is as a Latina lesbian. The last word belongs to Clarice, however, who as a Black lesbian is more annoyed with Mo than concerned with the state of the world, "If I weren't so **principled**, I'd say it's high time she got herself a **girlfriend**" (3). This final remark frames Mo's political concerns as overblown and

as nothing but an annoying diversion from the 'real' issue, which is her lack of a girlfriend.

Figure 7

Bechdel, *The Essential Dykes To Watch Out For* 3

In both strips, the primary joke is about Mo's inability to deal with her feelings and personal issues. The political issues that Mo raises are not taken seriously

because she so clearly only brings them up to divert attention from what is really going on in her life. However, both strips also contain a secondary critique of white ways of talking about racism without doing anything about it. In the first strip, when Mo complains about "white people who think they're not racist just because they watch the Cosby show!" (137), the statement contains a subtle critique of Mo herself because it is implied that she herself thinks that she is not racist even though all she does is complain about racism to her friends and therapist. The strip highlights the self-absorption and solipsism inherent in Mo's approach by picturing her in six different close-ups during her nine-panel long rant. In two of the three panels in which her therapist is pictured as well, her therapist is framed by a bookshelf, which symbolizes her grounding in a shared universe of analysis and knowledge (see fig. 6). In contrast, Mo is consistently depicted in front of a white background, the top of which is shaded in black, which heightens the impression of Mo getting lost inside her own bubble of frantic ranting. Her concern about politics is not outward-focused on actually changing any of the condition she bemoans but remains inward-focused on Mo's own feelings and needs.

Visually, the second strip contains an even stronger indictment of the ineffective self-absorption inherent in Mo's political rants (see fig. 7). The dinner at Clarice's and Toni's place begins with an eye-level frontal shot of Mo, Clarice, and Toni at the dinner table, with all three of them taking up equal amounts of space. Spatially, this shot suggests that they are having a calm conversation, in which they all take an equal part. When Mo starts her rant in the next panel, she is suddenly in the foreground with the viewer seeing her from a point behind and above her left shoulder. The viewer seems to tower over the dinner table and to look down on Clarice and Toni, whose faces have retreated to the background before disappearing completely for a sequence of three panels. With her enraged soliloquy, Mo takes over the entire space at the dinner table. The point of view of the viewer also moves around Mo in a full circle, mirroring on a visual level that, in all her ranting, Mo only revolves around herself in endless circles, never actually getting anywhere. The narrator thus delivers a wordless indictment of Mo's sudden burst of political fervor as ineffectual and self-serving. At the end of her rant, the viewer sees Mo from the right as she towers over Clarice and Toni just like the viewer did when Mo started her rant. By merging the viewer's perspective and Mo's perspective, the viewer is almost forced to identify with Mo, to literally stand in her shoes. Similarly, the sequence of close-ups, during which the viewer seems to move closer to Mo with each of the three panels, sucks the reader into her rant, and we feel her intensity when her facial expression becomes increasingly distraught, the lettering gets larger, and drops of

sweat fly from her face. One could read these devices as an attempt on the narrator's part to extend the critique of Mo's behavior to the (progressive white lesbian) reader who might be prone to exhibit similar tendencies of political speechmaking that is not backed up by any concrete engagement.

This subtle critique of progressive whiteness notwithstanding, the fact remains that *Dykes*' penchant for portraying the expression of anti-racist perspectives as rants that distract from more important, personal issues downplays their importance. This is particularly true, since the strips in which a character's concern about racism is taken seriously and does not end up as (contributing to) the butt of the joke are in the minority in *Dykes*. Even when Characters of Color talk about racism, it is sometimes treated as a diversion. For example, Ginger tries to avoid talking to Malika about the status of their relationship by reading from and commenting on a newspaper article documenting "higher levels of chronic stress" among Black lesbians (190). When Clarice talks about *Adarand Constructors v. Peña*, which further restricted affirmative action programs, over dinner, Toni gets mad at her and asks, "Could we at least **try** to have a conversation?". When Clarice retorts, "I'm having a conversation!", Toni snaps, "With **who?** I was talking to you about how to come out to my parents, when you picked up the newspaper and started ranting!" (217). Toni does not share Clarice's interest in a Supreme Court case that significantly affects race politics in the U.S. and instead frames her comments as a "rant" and a diversion from what is in her eyes the actual topic of conversation, namely her coming out to her parents. Again, an interest in racial politics is portrayed as insensitivity towards the more pressing concerns of immediate interpersonal dynamics. *Dykes* thus frames even the interest of the Characters of Color in racial politics as a sign of their emotional immaturity and their inability to attend to the issues that really matter.

Apart from treating concerns about racism as a diversion from more important, interpersonal issues, Bechdel further downplayed the significance of racism by leaving many of the most poignant strips about race out of *The Essential Dykes To Watch Out For*. The regular strips that were left out include, for example, Jezanna's, Thea's, Mo's, and Lois's reaction to Clarence Thomas's confirmation as Supreme Court Justice (122), Mo's analysis of the Rodney King trial (137, see fig. 6), Ginger's, Mo's and Lois's reaction to Audre Lorde's death (151), Jezanna's and her dad's reaction to the O.J. Simpson verdict and the white woman's racist comments to Jezanna (223), and both instances in which Cynthia says something racist directly to or about one of the central Characters of Color (433 and 441). Sequences that were left out of *The Essential Dykes To Watch Out For* because they were backstories for one of the individual volumes include

Ginger's and Mo's conversation about Mo's ex-lover Beatrice Buell and Clarice's re-telling of her breakup with Mo.

In fact, *The Essential Dykes To Watch Out For* eliminated all instances in which recurring white characters got close to doing or saying something racist in the presence of their Friends of Color. The book, whose cover exaggerates the multiracial diversity of Mo's dyke universe, thus also further exaggerates the portrayal of racial harmony between the characters. There is literally no hint of racial conflict left in the only collection of *Dykes* strips that is currently still in print. In *The Essential Dykes To Watch Out For*, white lesbians are portrayed in a state of complete racial innocence that contributes to making this harmonious, liberal multicultural dyke universe so enjoyable to white readers.

It is quite obvious that the decision as to which strips would be included and which would be left out was often based on whether or not a certain strip was part of a continuing storyline. However, even if that was the decisive criterion, it still shows that the topics of race and racism are not as seamlessly integrated into the storyline as other issues. As the high percentage of left-out strips about race and racism demonstrates, these topics were often addressed in one-off strips that were not tied into any on-going storylines, which shows on the level of narrative structure that dealing with race and racism is not something that is woven into the every-day fabric of the characters' lives, but it is something unusual, something that happens only every now and then on special occasions.

The limited significance of issues of race and racism in the essentially post-racial lesbian community in *Dykes* is also mirrored in Beirne's enumeration of the "pressing cultural or political issues of their day" that the characters of *Dykes* discuss: "trans inclusion in women's events; gay and lesbian mainstreaming; the book publishing industry; drag kinging; globalization; changing sexual mores; war; the position of lesbians in society; and government policy on a variety of issues" (168). Similarly, literary scholar Audrey Bilger also provides a list of topics that *Dykes* mainly deals with: "[c]ommunal living, gay marriage, FTM transitioning, multiple marches on Washington, vegetarianism (of course), lots of sex, and heaping doses of dyke drama" (64). As these two summaries show, *Dykes* clearly does not portray racism as centrally important or one of the "pressing political issues" that U.S. lesbians have to deal with around the turn of the millennium. It thus allows white (LGBTIQ) readers to persist in treating racism as a problem of lesser concern than all the issues mentioned by Beirne and Bilger.

3.5.2 All Talk and No (Anti-Racist) Action

For her 10th volume, *Dykes and Sundry Other Carbon-Based Life-Forms To Watch Out For*, Bechdel wrote a special introduction on the occasion of the strip's 20th anniversary. She describes the political analysis underlying the creation of *Dykes* as follows: "[S]ex was merely the tip of the lesbian iceberg. What lurked beneath was a worldview, an entire logical system in which homophobia was inextricably linked to sexism and racism and militarism and classism and imperialism [...]. And the beauty of it was this: That in order to address any one of these problems, we needed to address them all" (n. pag.). Bechdel clearly positions herself in line with the intersectional strand of LGBTIQ activism that I outlined above (see chapter 2.3). It is interesting that she not only calls for awareness of the intersectional inextricability of multiple forms of oppression but actually sounds eager to do something about them, "to address them all." She concludes the introduction by re-affirming this commitment to political change even after 20 years of writing *Dykes*: "I know now that you don't have to be a lesbian, in the technical sense, to want to do something about [racism, sexism, militarism, classism, imperialism, and homophobia]. You just have to be a human. Or at the very least, a carbon-based life-form" (n. pag.) If anything, her commitment seems to have broadened, since she now sees the fight against intersectional oppression not just as the exclusive terrain of politically aware lesbians but as everybody's responsibility. Given this political self-positioning, one would expect that anti-racist activism is an important part of a comic in which the characters participate in "rallies, marches, and protests as regularly as breathing" (Shoss 5). However, as the preceding chapters might have already suggested, this is actually not the case.

Most of the main characters' activism is focused on issues of gender and sexuality. Even a brief overview of their LGBTIQ activism is rather long and impressive: When Mo is out of work and looking for a new job in the beginning of the series, she tells Lois about her previous work-experience. She worked as "proofreader and production assistant for the [...] **Gayly Forward News** [...] office assistant at the **Abortion Rights Action Council** [...] delivery-person for the **Common Womon** Bread Collective" and she volunteered "on the staff of the **Lesbian Rag** [...] at the Battered Women's Shelter with the **C**lara **L**emlich **A**ffinity **G**roup and **G**raffiti **G**uerillas" (9). Lois then invites her to apply to Madwimmin Books, where they work together for the next 15 years until the store closes. Mo's entire work- and volunteer-experience is thus shown as being exclusively centered on lesbian feminist issues. Jezanna's lesbian feminist bookstore, where Mo works with Lois and Thea, is also a central focal point in the

characters' lives. The bookstore itself serves to, in Mo's words, "make the world safe for feminism" (397) by providing books and information that cannot be found at corporate chain stores. It is also the site of Mo's "reading series for local lesbian writers" (193) and inspires all the characters to pull together and organize a fundraiser when it threatens to go bankrupt (*Hot, Throbbing* 95ff). As a group, the characters not only went to both Women's Pentagon Actions in 1980 and 1981 when they were younger, they also participate in many other national LGBT events roughly until the turn of the millennium, when only Sophie, the young intern at Madwimmin Books, goes to the Millennium March on Washington, which has become too corporate for the other characters' taste (335). Similarly, the main characters enthusiastically go to local Pride marches for many years until they realize in 2000 that none of them, except Stuart, went to the march that year (340). In 2004, Stuart and Mo go to Gay Shame to protest "how Pride has gotten so corporate" while all the other characters go to Pride (442).

Apart from organized marches, the main characters also engage in other forms of lesbian feminist activism: Lois threw paint at a display of porn magazines with the group "Furious Women Avenging Pornography" (*Unnatural* 135) when she was younger. Later, she takes part in some actions of the Lesbian Avengers (174; 211). Towards the end of the strip, Lois extends her lesbian feminist politics to include trans issues. While she went to the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival herself in the early days of the strip (15), 18 years later she is back with Jasmine protesting the exclusion of trans women with the people from Camp Trans (471). Together with Janis, Lois organizes a Trans Day of Remembrance (477). Jasmine and Janis are also involved in trans activism of their own, with Jasmine continuing to go to Camp Trans, even when Lois cannot join her (527), and Janis wanting to join "the speaker's bureau of the queer youth group to talk about being trans" (524). Ginger and Clarice help organize a Gay and Lesbian Studies Conference at the university (31); Thea encourages Mo to email the White House to protest the Defense of Marriage Act (240); and, as a councilperson, Ellen works on a domestic partners bill (186). When the mayor of the city briefly legalizes gay marriage, the main characters flock to city hall to "check out the scene" (436) while Clarice and Toni actually want to get married and Sydney proposes to Mo (436f).

Apart from these various forms of feminist and LGBT activism, the central characters also engage in some activism that is not specifically concerned with issues of gender and sexuality. Their other activism is largely focused on U.S. foreign policy and national elections. Early on in the strip, at least some characters seem to be involved in supporting the Sandinistas in Nicaragua and opposing U.S. aid to the Contras (25, 11, 73). They all go to numerous demonstrations

against both the First and the Second Gulf War (96, 102, 103 and 281, 381, 402, 502). The situation in Israel_Palestine is also addressed in a handful of strips over the years (46, 402, 492).

After the 'election' of George W. Bush, the characters become much more involved in national party politics. Clarice, in particular, is devastated by Bush's rise to power. In 2003, Toni discovers that she has been giving large amounts of money to Howard Dean's presidential campaign, which Clarice defends by saying, "Maybe the best thing we can do for the causes we care about it to funnel as much money as possible into the election! What's the point of giving to **NARAL** or the local **Food Shelf** or **Greenpeace** if Bush axes abortion rights, drives the middle class into poverty, and melts the polar **icecaps?**" (428). Clarice also convinces Raffi to join in her activism against Bush (cf. 433, 449). After Bush's reelection, Clarice tries to persuade Toni to withhold their taxes because half the budget "goes to pay for killing people in other countries" (463). Toni is worried about the financial risk but eventually agrees to withhold at least part of their taxes. Stuart is similarly opposed to Bush and works on a campaign to impeach him (cf. 482, 500, 511). Meanwhile, Lois regularly attends protests at both parties' National Conventions (344, 445, 448, 527).

As this overview shows, the main characters engage in an impressive array of activism from calling politicians, donating money, collecting signatures, and volunteering to organizing fundraisers, withholding taxes, attending local and national protests, and direct action. If one compares the issues they address to the (incomplete) list of issues that Bechdel sees as interconnected (racism, sexism, militarism, classism, imperialism, and homophobia), one notices that they are indeed involved in activism against sexism, militarism, imperialism, and homophobia – both as separate issues and as intersectional issues. However, their activism never focuses on classism and the list of instances in which characters actually do something about racism in the U.S. is very short: Toni is part of a Women of Color anti-violence project (14); Ginger and Malika "confront racism" at the National Lesbian Conference (111); Ginger attends the National Black Gay and Lesbian Conference (184); Lois mentions that she once attended an anti-racism conference (111); Ellen claims that she has been doing coalition work with Communities of Color (176); and Jezanna and Audrey protest the incarceration of Mumia Abu-Jamal (220). Unlike the other activism they engage in, none of these activities are actually pictured. They are only mentioned in single strips, without any detail or background information, and then never brought up again.

Going back to Thea's assertion in "Modes of Resistance" that there is a shared anti-racist, feminist 'we' in *Dykes* that has collectively "[c]onfront[ed]

harassers. Picket[ed]. Boycott[ed]. Do[ne] anti-racism work. Fund[ed] women candidates …" (122), it becomes clear that the strip shows neither the Characters of Color nor the white characters engaging in any substantial "anti-racism work." There is no anti-racist 'we' in *Dykes* because there is almost no anti-racist activism. The only activism they engage in that could be seen as having anything to do with racism and colonialism is related to U.S. foreign policy. However, while their activism against U.S. wars is framed as anti-imperialist and anti-militaristic, it is never placed within an anti-racist or de-colonial framework. Even if it were, though, the fact remains that, while the characters are actively opposing the killing of Black and Brown people elsewhere, they are not equally engaged in opposing the diminishment of the life chances of People of Color and Indigenous people in the U.S. through racism and colonialism.

When it comes specifically to white people's anti-racist activism, it is instructive to take another look at how *Dykes* treats the question of white guilt. I already mentioned above that Clarice once broke up with Mo because she was fed up with her white guilt. In the strip, Mo laments that she is too "passive [...] uninformed [...] **bourgeois** [...] insecure [...] privileged" (*Unnatural* 122). Clarice tries to motivate Mo to vote in the 1981 Presidential election, but Mo refuses, "Why bother? The whole system is corrupt. And besides, Reagan's not gonna win!" (*Unnatural* 122, see fig. 8). This sequence offers a clear critique of Mo's self-absorbed whining in the absence of any type of actual political engagement, and it seems to suggest that in order to overcome her white guilt, Mo should stop feeling sorry for herself and actually do something to change things. This argument would be in line with common critiques of white guilt that typically criticize white guilt for serving as a road-block to effective anti-racist action and for keeping white people passive and only concerned with ourselves. Grada Kilomba, for example, describes guilt as one of the "ego defense mechanisms the *white* subject goes through" (22). Ideally, the white subject works through these ego defense mechanisms in order to be able to offer reparation, which Kilomba defines as "the act of repairing the harm caused by racism by changing structures, agendas, spaces, positions, dynamics, subjective relations, vocabulary, that is giving up privileges" (23).

Dykes, however, immediately undercuts this message by introducing Tanya, a Black lesbian, as the negative foil of the over-the-top radical activist, who is portrayed as going overboard in her critiques of racism and capitalism. Where Mo is not active enough, Tanya is too active. After Clarice breaks up with Mo, she gets together with Tanya, which she describes as, "Out of the frying pan, into the fire" (*Unnatural* 122, see fig. 8). Tanya is depicted as wearing a "Power to the ANC" shirt and berating Clarice for being too bourgeois. A feminist anarchy

symbol decorates her wall and Mo's *The Black Woman*, which she reads out of her desire to "share [Clarice's] oppression" (*Unnatural* 122), is replaced by *Das Kapital*, *Reinventing Anarchy*, and *This Bridge Called My Back* on Tanya's desk (*Unnatural* 122).

Figure 8

Bechdel, *Unnatural Dykes To Watch Out For* 122

Whereas the breakup sequence starts with a dejected looking Mo feeling guilty about her white middle-class privilege, it ends with Clarice in the exact same pose, being made to feel guilty for her class privilege by Tanya (*Unnatural* 122). The two figures of Mo and Clarice bookend this sequence, and the mirror images of their guiltily bowed heads serve to underscore that Tanya's outward-directed righteousness is as destructive as Mo's inward-directed guilt. Each of the three more times that Tanya is mentioned in *Dykes*, she is shown as a radical activist against racism, imperialism, and capitalism, and each time the comic gently mocks her stance as too passionate and too critical (*Unnatural* 124, 76, 87). Since Tanya is introduced in direct juxtaposition to Mo's white guilt, *Dykes* sends the message that the appropriate answer to white guilt is not radical anti-

racist, anti-capitalist activism but voting in Presidential elections as Clarice does (*Unnatural* 122). According to *Dykes*, white guilt is annoying because it involves too much self-absorbed whining, not because it keeps people from actively working against anti-racism.

This message is reinforced in a strip called "Diversions." Mo is unhappily in love with Thea and spontaneously stops by Sparrow's, Ginger's, and Lois's house. Lois invites Mo to join the "burnout brigade" (157) for an evening of light entertainment in front of the TV, which prompts an attack of white guilt on Mo's part: "Oh, great. Order pizza, pop in **Sister Act**, and forget all about genocide, starvation, and mass rapes in Bosnia! The true American way" (157). Sparrow retorts, "Listen, Mo. I have been doing crisis intervention with battered, homeless women and kids all week long. Tonight, I am going to vegetate in front of the TV. If you're so worried about Bosnia, go join the Red Cross" (157). While Sparrow has actually done a lot of anti-oppression work during the week, Mo has not. Again, however, the suggestion is not that Mo should actually join the Red Cross – or really *do* anything, for that matter – she should just relax and stop complaining, which is exactly what she does in the end. *Dykes* thus echoes critiques of white guilt and suggests to white people that whining about privilege, racism, and oppression is futile, but it stops short of also holding white people responsible for actually doing something about racism.

Given my previous analysis, this political outcome is hardly surprising. If one is able to conceive of oneself and one's friends as outside of racism, which is only seen as a problem in the world 'out there,' it becomes possible to imagine that the general awareness of the existence of racism is enough to make one anti-racist, even in the absence of any concrete anti-racist action in word or deed. *Dykes* thus vividly illustrates how the white LGBTIQ fantasy of a post-racial LGBTIQ community can lead to a de facto abandonment of struggles for racial justice, even if an allegiance to these struggles is theoretically proclaimed. Despite paying lip service to the importance of racial justice, *Dykes* therefore participates in what David Eng calls "the cleaving of race from (homo)sexuality, and (homo)sexuality from race, the systematic dissociation of queer politics from critical race politics, the denial of their coalitional and intellectual possibilities" (4).

This portrayal of white lesbian anti-racist apathy is in line with Frankenberg's findings from interviewing white women about racism. She writes, "only a few women [...] had taken what would seem to be the next step toward altering the meaning of whiteness in a significant way – using a critique of the racial order and their own positions within it as the basis for participation in changing that which is more 'given' than either subjecthood or discourse: the material re-

lations of racism" (241). In so far, *Dykes* probably paints a realistic portrait of the lack of concrete anti-racist activism within white U.S. lesbian feminism during the late 20th century. The fictional world of the comic bears out Frankenberg's conclusion that the "interviews did *not* [...] suggest that one experience of marginality – Jewishness, lesbianism – led white women automatically toward empathy with other oppressed communities, nor that participation in one kind of liberatory movement – feminism, the 'left' – led automatically to antiracism" (20).

The backstory in *Unnatural Dykes To Watch Out For* offers a hint at how this abandonment of anti-racist struggles is justified in white lesbian logics. It tells the story of how Mo met most of the central characters at the Women's Pentagon Action in 1980. As the *Unity Statement* of the Women's Pentagon Action states, the historical action to which the strip refers was clearly intersectional in its goals, demanding an end to the industrial-military complex, imperialism, cis_hetero_sexism, environmental destruction, and, explicitly, racism: "We want to see the pathology of racism ended in our time. There can be no peace while one race dominates another, one nation dominates another, one people, one nation, or where one sex despises another" ("Unity Statement" 162). In the comic, after Lois and Sparrow help Mo retrieve a menstrual sponge that is giving her cramps at the action, Mo exclaims, "Women are so wonderful! Can you imagine if we ran the world?! No more neutron bombs or racism or feminine hygiene spray!" (*Unnatural* 119). Young Mo also sees connections between different issues, but she seems to assume that men are the root-cause of all evil while women are "naturally" peaceful and non-racist. Older Mo immediately contradicts this sentiment when she comments after recounting her exploits at the Women's Pentagon Action, "This is depressing me. Where did that fervor and optimism go? I haven't said women are wonderful since Margaret Thatcher invaded the Falklands" (*Unnatural* 119). Even though older Mo lost the belief in women's inherent superiority, the spirit of her earlier analysis nevertheless pervades the pages of *Dykes*. This analysis also echoes a wide-spread tendency in Western feminism: "As a historically humanist project, feminism [...] has often been imagined as inherently egalitarian and inherently nonracist" (Srivastava 36). If one starts with this assumption of white female racial innocence, a feminist struggle against racism in and of itself becomes obsolete because, in this analysis, the overthrow of the patriarchy will inevitably lead to a dismantling of racism. In a lesbian feminist twist to Karl Marx's theory of the primary contradiction of capitalism, whose solution will simultaneously resolve all secondary contradictions, *Dykes* thus posits that the best way to tackle all forms of oppression is to dedicate one's energy primarily to ending the patriarchy and building alternative

women's communities, which will automatically be free of racism simply because they are run by women, even in the absence of any type of actual anti-racist engagement.

In 1983, the same year that Bechdel started drawing *Dykes*, Cherríe Moraga pointed to a problem she saw with lesbian separatism:

> The lesbian separatist retreats from the specific cultural contexts that have shaped her and attempts to build a cultural-political movement based on an imagined oppression-free past [...]. The mistake lies in believing in this ideal past or imagined future so thoroughly and single-mindedly that finding solutions to present-day inequities loses priority, or we attempt to create too-easy solutions for the pain we feel today. ("Vendidas" 120)

Despite its constant references to current politics, *Dykes* similarly retreats from its specific cultural context when it comes to race. *Dykes* does this not by imagining an oppression-free past but the possibility of a lesbian feminist oppression-free present – right inside a country that is founded on and riven by oppression, as *Dykes* itself states so clearly. *Dykes* then goes on to prove Moraga's prediction right: Finding solutions to racial injustice does indeed lose priority when one believes that the problem has already been solved for one's own community. Since racism does not affect them, the main characters do not even seem to feel the pain that would make them look for solutions. In discussing Anzaldúa's work, Ian Barnard writes that Anzaldúa's "centralizing of colored female queerness implies a radical revisioning of white male queer agendas, rather than the token addition of queers of color and/or female queers" (78). I would add that a truly anti-racist lesbian feminist agenda that centers the voices of Lesbians of Color requires a similarly radical revisioning of white lesbian feminist agendas. *Dykes* demonstrates that it is possible for a white artist to portray Lesbians of Color in diverse and non-tokenizing ways but still leave the political agenda as white as it ever was. Clearly, a "radical revisioning" of white lesbian politics has not taken place when, after paying lip service to the evils of racism, the main characters never actually take up any specifically anti-racist causes but are instead shown as attending Pride marches, lesbian feminist demonstrations, anti-war rallies, and protests at Democratic and Republican National Conventions. This type of racial politics that leaves white political agendas intact lets white readers off the hook. It allows us to feel that we have already done all the work when, in fact, we have done nothing except substitute a general awareness of racism in society for concrete anti-racist action.

3.5.3 No Way out of Homonormative Trajectories

As several commentators have noted, conflicts over lesbian assimilation into the straight mainstream and the disappearance of a politicized, lesbian subculture are central topics in *Dykes* (Beirne 185f; Gardiner, "*Dykes*" 82f). Bechdel herself stated, "I'm having assimilation anxiety [...]. How can I keep doing this subcultural comic strip in a world where there's no more subculture?" (Lehoczky 47). Within the world of *Dykes*, the way in which the intersections of lesbian assimilation and race are depicted reveals the central political aporia of a white, liberal multicultural approach to LGBTIQ politics: Without paying close attention to race and racism, LGBTIQ people have no way to resist our incorporation into the conglomerate of neoliberal, imperial, and racist projects of the countries we live in.

In the beginning of the strip, it is quite clear that all the central characters lead more or less subcultural lives and that assimilation is their worst nightmare. They all live close to each other in rented apartments in the 'alternative' part of town, with Sparrow, Ginger, and Lois even living in a shared house. Ginger and Clarice are still in school; Mo, Lois, and Thea work at Jezanna's bookstore; Sparrow and Harriet work in the non-profit sector. Toni, who works as a CPA, is the only one who has what could be considered a mainstream job. In one of the earliest strips (see above), Clarice tells Mo, "Toni and I are thinking of buying a **house** and having **kids** [...]. Get a microwave, a Volvo station wagon … private schools for the kids, … quiet evenings with Toni, poring over our **stock portfolio** ..." (4). Mo is aghast, but Clarice quickly tells her that she was only joking. While this lifestyle seems unfathomable to them in the beginning of the strip, in hindsight, Clarice's joke turns out to be a pretty accurate description of her own and Toni's trajectory. Nine years later, she exclaims in a fight with Toni, "It's just a bad dream, right? I can't really be leading such a pathetically bourgeois existence! I'm not **really** going through this demeaning adoption process, or discussing 'better' neighborhoods, or spending my vacation entertaining my virtual in-laws" (244). Another five years later, when bankruptcy looms on the horizon for Madwimmin's, Lois similarly confronts Mo when she finds out that Mo has been applying for library school: "Huh. You of all people, working inside the system." Mo defends herself by saying, "What's my choice? There's no **outside** left! You can buy 'Best Lesbian Erotica' at the 7-11" (373).

In this instance, Mo voices a perception that is ultimately shared by all characters in the strip: There used to be a lesbian subculture that made it possible to live outside 'the system,' but this 'outside' is rapidly disappearing, as gay and lesbian culture is moving into the mainstream. While all the characters in *Dykes*

experience this pull into 'the system' in one way or another, it is noteworthy that the two most assimilated characters, Clarice and Toni, are both Lesbians of Color, while the three least assimilated characters, Mo, Lois, and Stuart, are all white. This rift begins to open up when Toni and Clarice want to have a baby:

Mo: 'Why not leave breeding to the hets? A lesbian's job is to change the **world**, not **diapers**.' [...]

Clarice: 'Listen. Lesbians having babies is **gonna** change the world! The P.T.A. will never be the same!'

Mo: 'That's just it, Clarice! Instead of being on the front lines against the patriarchy, you'll be driving the kid to **band practice**.'

Clarice: 'Think of it as infiltration. **You** work the front lines. We'll slip inside and change things right under their noses.'

Mo: 'If they don't change you first.' (119)

Mo's prediction is later proven right when Clarice proclaims in a fit of anger at her bourgeois life, "Mo was right! We're not changing the system, it's changing us!" (244). The juxtaposition between Clarice and Toni and their more radical, white peers is obvious throughout the strip. While Clarice and Toni carefully plan to have a baby, Stuart and Sparrow become parents by accident. While Clarice and Toni live in a nuclear family unit with Raffi, Stuart, Sparrow, and Jiao-Raizel live in a shared house with Lois and Ginger. While Clarice and Toni move into a 'better' neighborhood, Mo, Lois, and Stuart stay in the more diverse neighborhood. While Clarice and Toni have a station wagon, Stuart sells theirs as a political statement against their dependence on oil (468) and switches to biking, just like Mo, who has never owned a car. While Clarice and Toni get married multiple times – in a commitment ceremony (87), as a political action (162), as a registered civil union (349), and as a bona fide state-sanctioned marriage (436) – Mo refuses Sydney's proposal by saying, "I won't be complicit with the enshrinement of **coupledom** as a privileged civic status. Look, I just don't want the national **security state** in **bed** with me! And besides, while we stand here fretting about our trousseaus, the Bushites are **liquidating** the **republic**" (437).

This depiction brings to mind contemporary critiques of the overwhelming whiteness of most alternative cultures. In a much-discussed editorial for *Pitchfork* on the specific subculture of indie rock, Sarah Sahim criticizes that People of Color are forever "seen as interlopers and outsiders" in this particular alternative culture, where "white is the norm." Similarly, Inda Lauryn writes that it is a common perception "that alternative culture [is] the property of whiteness" and

Tonya Pennington lists the statement "Blacks in alternative culture are as rare as unicorns." as one of the "5 Biggest Misconceptions Many People Have about Black Alternative Culture." While these articles do not specifically refer to the alternative culture of lesbian feminism, *Dykes* certainly feeds into this general tendency of seeing white people as more alternative, more rebellious than People of Color.

However, as Mo's reasons for refusing to marry Sydney show, assimilation in *Dykes* is not just about more or less alternative lifestyle choices but also about different political positions. While Toni vigorously campaigns for equal marriage (see above), none of the other central characters share her enthusiasm but instead critique the institution of marriage. These differences in LGBTIQ politics are also echoed in a strip in which two white characters (Mo and Stuart) go to a Gay Shame event carrying a sign that reads "I'll be proud when Bush is gone" while four Characters of Color (Ginger, Samia, Sparrow, and June) go to Gay Pride (442). Similarly, even when it comes to party politics, Lois and Mo vote for the more radically left-wing Nader in the 2000 presidential election while Clarice and Ginger support the democratic candidate, Gore, which prompts Lois to call Ginger a "centrist wanker" (346). As I already mentioned in the chapter on white lesbians as racially aware allies, these examples show that white lesbians are often portrayed as more radical than their Counterparts of Color. Toni's politics in particular, but also those of other Characters of Color like Clarice and June, in fact get rather close to homonormative agendas.

The shift towards homonormative politics in the gay and lesbian movement in the U.S. generally occurred under conditions where "[p]ower is not only that which says 'no,'" but where power "speaks in the affirmative" (Ferguson 17) by "work[ing] through and with minority difference and culture, trying to redirect originally insurgent formations and deliver them to the normative ideals and protocols of state, capital, and academy" (Ferguson 8). Spade sees this as "the neoliberal shift toward the politics of inclusion and incorporation rather than redistribution and deep transformation" (Spade, *Normal* 59). This affirmative power that seeks to redirect and include is in evidence everywhere in *Dykes*: it is present in the chain bookstore selling lesbian literature, in Ellen DeGeneres coming out on TV, in advertising targeted at lesbians, in the availability of civil unions and equal marriage and also in Clarice and Ginger being approved for housing loans, in Toni and Clarice being able to move "to the right side of the tracks" (298), and in Sydney, Ginger, and Betsey finding jobs in the academy. It is the pull of this seductive power that Mo rails against when she exclaims after reminiscing about how they all met during college, "It's **tragic!** Where did all that hope go? When did I sell out? What happened to **smashing patriarchy?**

[...] I've become a **good citizen**, forking over my taxes to subsidize star wars and massive corporations, so they can annihilate the few **shreds** of human dignity left on the planet! I even get **cable** now!" (*Unnatural* 141). Quite characteristically for *Dykes*, all the central Characters of Color are less worried about selling out, more confident in the political progress that is being made, and more comfortable with their current lifestyles than Mo.

This displacing of homonormative tendencies onto People of Color in *Dykes* is especially noteworthy because, as Eng observes, this particular brand of LGBTIQ politics for inclusion actually serves "the economic interests of neoliberalism and whiteness" (xi). Spade explicates this connection between homonormativity, whiteness, and wealth:

> [T]he lesbian and gay rights agenda primarily operates to restore privileges of the dominant systems of meaning and control to those gender-conforming, white, wealthy gay and lesbian US citizens who are enraged at how homophobic laws and policies limit access to benefits to which they feel entitled. Advocates of single issue politics seek to restore the ability of wealthy gay and lesbian couples to inherit from each other with limited taxation, to share each other's private health benefits, to call on law enforcement to protect their property rights, and other such privileges of whiteness and wealth. (*Normal* 160f)

It is obvious that if the inclusion that is sought (and offered) is actually a protection and extension of the privileges of whiteness and wealth in the manner described by Spade and illustrated by Kimberlé Crenshaw in her basement metaphor (see chapter 2.3), not all LGBTIQ people will enjoy the same access to that inclusion. The power that speaks in the affirmative does not affirm all marginalized people equally. It offers inclusion to some while clearly continuing to exclude many. As Heather Love puts it, "One may enter the mainstream on the condition that one breaks ties with all those who cannot make it – the nonwhite and the nonmonogamous, the poor and the gender deviant, the fat, the disabled, the unemployed, the infected and a host of unmentionable others" (10). Kenyon Farrow spells out quite clearly what that meant for the LGBTIQ movement in the U.S.: "in the 1990s, the white gay community went mainstream, further pushing non-hetero people of color from the movement. The reason for this schism is that in order to be mainstream in America, one has to be seen as white" (27). As homonormative politics thus further push LGBTIQ People of Color and other marginalized people to the margins, gender-conforming, white, wealthy gay and lesbian US citizens seek inclusion into a country that continues to exploit and oppress People of Color and Indigenous people both domestically and globally. As Reddy observes, "to occupy the place and logic of the US citizen is

to willy-nilly situate oneself structurally within an imperial neoliberal state and social formation" (154) and in doing so, one continues "the racial cruelty that is inextricable from the nation's material conditions of possibility and the set of institutions that reproduce the state form" (46).

By portraying People of Color as leading comparatively more homonormative lives than white people, *Dykes* upholds the illusion that inclusion is indeed offered to *all* LGBTIQ people. In fact, *Dykes* makes it seem as if inclusion/assimilation is an almost inevitable trajectory that nobody, not even the "ever-so-principled Mo" (244), can escape. When Mo tells Lois, "There's no outside left!" (373), she refers to the disappearance of a cherished subculture, but, in the context of *Dykes*, her statement could also mean that there are no outsiders left, nobody who is actually excluded from the curve of upward mobility that seems to sweep up all the characters of *Dykes*, whether they want to or not. In *Dykes*, no ties have to be broken in order to enter the mainstream and no schism ever opens up between white lesbians and Lesbians of Color. None of the characters even have to fight to enter the mainstream; quite to the contrary, it largely pulls them in against their will. Not becoming part of the system is not an option. Even college dropout, perennial lothario Lois tells Mo at the end of the strip, "Did you know I got promoted to assistant store manager at Bounders? Yeah. I'm too busy being the man to do any drag kinging. I'm raising a teenager. I'm practically married to Jasmine. Am I still polyamorous if I haven't been with anyone but her for three years?" (522). In depicting white lesbians as the last ones to reluctantly succumb to the demands of a system that seeks to include them, *Dykes* actually puts the machinery of power on its head. It obscures the reality that because of racism Lesbians of Color often have much less access to wealth, income, loans, property, and societal support than white lesbians – on average – can count on. Since Lesbians of Color still often hear the 'no' of power, where power has already begun to speak in the affirmative to white lesbians, they are also less likely to find homonormative lifestyles and politics appealing or even attainable. Homonormative politics do not further the interests of Lesbians of Color as a group because many of them do not benefit from rights like equal marriage that mostly protect resources that many of them do not have to begin with. *Dykes*, however, completely erases the differential workings of power, "this folding of queer and other sexual national subjects into the biopolitical management of life, [and] the simultaneous folding out of life, out toward death, of queerly racialized 'terrorist populations'" (Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages* xii). In *Dykes*, all LGBTIQ subjects are equally folded into life, with Lesbians of Color leading the march into normativity and white lesbians being the last rebellious hold-outs against this unstoppable process of inclusion.

Politically, this portrayal has several effects. First of all, it allows white LGBTIQ people to abdicate our responsibility for the prevalence and the effects of homonormative politics. If there is no alternative to assimilation and inclusion, as *Dykes* would have us believe, then white LGBTIQ people are only victims and not also instigators of a development that supposedly lies outside of our control. Since People of Color are the most active proponents of homonormative politics in *Dykes* and are also the most fully assimilated into the mainstream, white people are not only positioned as victims but as *righteous* victims who are still resisting when others have already given in. When white lesbians do become part of the system they used to fight, they are not actively perpetuating the further marginalization of those who do not possess "whiteness, wealth, citizenship, the status of being a settler rather than indigenous, and/or conformity to body, health, gender, sexuality, and family norms" (Spade, "Resistance" 1039) but are only giving in to what their Friends of Color have long embodied and championed. Conveniently, this portrayal allows white LGBTIQ people to imagine that our invitation into the mainstream is equally extended to all LGBTIQ people and comes at no cost to anyone. It thus obscures the white interests at the heart of homonormative politics and makes white LGBTIQ people's participation in these politics appear innocuous and innocent.

In this way, *Dykes* also neglects the resistant potential of those who continue to be folded "out toward death." As Reddy puts it,

> As historically excluded racialized sexual formations enter institutional domains and political life, inevitably forcing a future resignification of the norms that organize those domains, they reveal the limits of the historical and social discourses that seek to tame or hide their disruptive and non-analogous elements. As these discourses seek to translate what they necessarily excluded into their own terms, that translation leaves a racialized remainder. Though these remainders are subject to immense institutional and social violence, since they threaten the veracity of a present social order, they are also what haunts the felicity of inclusion. (181)

In Reddy's analysis, inclusion is flexible, capable of transforming the system to a degree in order to integrate what was formerly excluded. However, inclusion is never total so that there is always a remainder that cannot be included. As Reddy points out, under present conditions in the U.S., this un-includable remainder is racialized, and it is precisely this racialized remainder that makes visible the current limits of inclusion and reveals total inclusion as a lie. *Dykes*' harmonious vision of a post-racial lesbian community that is inevitably pulled into the mainstream is part of those very discourses that hide the fact that "disruptive and non-

analogous elements" necessarily remain. *Dykes* erases the "racialized remainder" by portraying middle-class LGBTIQ People of Color as fully included while banishing the poor, the Indigenous, and those without U.S. citizenship from its pages. The "felicity of inclusion" in *Dykes* is unhaunted and therefore impossible to challenge. *Dykes* effectively silences "race as that which remains our conditions of possibility for cultivating alternative trajectories of modernity" (Reddy 48), and this silencing leaves *Dykes*' progressive dykes at a complete loss as to how to challenge the racist, imperialist, settler colonial state they live in. As I discussed above, all the central characters of *Dykes* are aware that they "occupy the place of the US citizen" and therefore "willy-nilly situate [themselves] structurally within an imperial neoliberal state and social formation" (Reddy 154), but because the comic simultaneously erases the "racialized remainder," from which alternative imaginations and resistance could spring, they are unable to see a way out and to envision a positive role for themselves in the struggle for a more livable world for all. In the final analysis, *Dykes*' fantasy of a post-racial, liberal multicultural lesbian community leaves white LGBTIQ people (both characters and readers) in a political dead-end, still mired in the same inequalities whose workings in the lesbian community *Dykes* so copiously denies, but unable to address them in any way.

There are alternative trajectories of LGBTIQ politics, but they require an acknowledgement of the racialized remainder that *Dykes* hides. Spade lists a number of possible non-homonormative LGBTIQ interventions:

> Queer and trans activists focused on racial and economic justice have articulated copious demands and strategies that avoid a single-axis framework and center on re-distribution: fighting against police violence, supporting queer and trans prisoners, opposing jail and prison expansion, decriminalizing sex work and drugs, advocating for queer and trans immigrants in immigration prisons, fighting harmful welfare and Medicaid policies, fighting for queer and trans people in homeless services, centering stigmatized people with HIV/AIDS like drug users and sex workers within AIDS activism, and much more. ("Resistance" 1042)

None of these "demands and strategies" find even the faintest echo in *Dykes* because they remain outside the purview of what is imaginable within a white, liberal multicultural framework. This is not to say that these are the only or even the 'best' possible intersectional LGBTIQ interventions. I included this list of examples to show that concrete political alternatives to homonormative inclusion do exist and are actively being worked on. This does not mean that those of us who are hailed by the 'yes' of power can easily and of our own volition escape

the pull and, in many cases, also the material necessity of inclusion. It means that we need to listen to those who continue to be folded "out of life, out toward death" – and who have also been banished from the *Dykes* universe – for the articulation of viable, more liveable alternatives to (neo)colonial, neoliberal capitalism that seem unimaginable from inside the behemoth.

3.6 CONCLUSION: WHEN FANTASY IS READ AS FACT

As this chapter has shown, when it comes to the depiction of race relations within lesbian communities, *Dykes* is actually very far from being an accurate "chronicle of lesbian culture and history." It is clearly written from a white perspective and largely caters to the interests of white readers. Instead of offering a truthful account of how racism privileges white lesbians and disenfranchises Lesbians of Color, how white lesbians are responsible for upholding and perpetuating white racial dominance, how this dominance creates conflict in lesbian communities, and how both Lesbians of Color and white lesbians attempt to tackle these challenges, it presents an extended fantasy of a blissfully harmonious multiracial lesbian community unaffected by racism. As a fantasy, *Dykes* does not "fulfill the hope for a more integrated society," as Gardiner hoped. According to Gardiner, *Dykes* is "a resounding rejoinder to the stereotype that feminism, and especially lesbian feminism, is primarily for and about privileged white women. By example the lesbian community of *Dykes* is antiracist, multiracial, and religiously tolerant" ("*Dykes*" 85). A white fantasy of a diverse lesbian community untouched by racism, however, does not in and of itself prove that racism has indeed been overcome and integration achieved in the world outside the pages of the comic. It only proves that white lesbians fervently wish it to be so.

At the end of my analysis of the racial politics of *Dykes*, I find myself agreeing with Dean, the only commentator to-date who has critically remarked upon Bechdel's post-racial portrayal of lesbian communities: "[T]he price of unity is," indeed, "the disavowal of difference, here racial difference" (212). Dean sees clearly that the unity and harmony of the lesbian community in *Dykes* would be "threatened by racial friction," (213), which, therefore, has to remain outside the bounds of Mo's personal universe. Even though *Dykes* includes many multidimensional, non-stereotypical Characters of Color, in the final analysis, it remains a white fantasy of racial harmony that "sutures" (Yancy, "Un-sutured" xv) or closes itself off against critical Perspectives of Color that would question white lesbian innocence and political apathy in the face of white supremacy. As