wishful thinking. Building on this analysis, I can then begin to describe how this affects *Dykes*' portrayal of lesbian whiteness and why this portrayal might be so attractive to white readers.

3.3 ARMCHAIR ANTI-RACISM: A POST-RACIAL LESBIAN COMMUNITY IN A RACIST SOCIETY

If one collects all the scattered comments, rants, musings, and conversations about race, racism, and colonialism in *Dykes*, a rather nuanced picture emerges. One of the first things one notices is the comparatively large number of instances, especially during the early years of its run, in which *Dykes* refers to racism and colonialism *outside* the borders of the U.S. In a realistic depiction of the many international solidarity movements connected to LGBTIQ activism (see chapter 2.3), the characters of *Dykes* are against apartheid in South Africa (6; *More* 53; 46; *Unnatural* 124), support the Sandinistas in Nicaragua (11; 20; 6; 25), root for a two-state solution for Israel and Palestine (46), and call attention to the genocide in Bosnia (151; 157). At first glance, this might suggest that *Dykes* is externalizing (cf. El-Tayeb xxiii- xxix) the problem of racism and colonialism, locating it elsewhere, outside the U.S. but not inside. However, this tendency is explicitly criticized in a strip in which Clarice tells Mo and Lois that she is writing a paper about political prisoners, and Lois immediately assumes that Clarice is writing about political prisoners in Siberia. She becomes the butt of the joke when Clarice corrects her and tells her that she is, in fact, writing about political prisoners in the U.S. She explains, "People who **resist** the violence this country perpetrates are spending **years** in prison. Radical people of color, anti-nuke activists, Central American solidarity workers …" (79). While Lois assumes that state violence takes place in a far-away elsewhere, but not in her immediate context, Clarice sets her straight by portraying the U.S. not only as the perpetrator of racist and colonialist violence in the first place but also as brutally suppressing the resistance against this violence.

Dykes also alludes to the fact that the U.S. often plays an active role in conflicts that happen 'elsewhere' as with the conflict between the Sandinistas and the Contras in Nicaragua, in which the U.S. supported the Contras (20). Also, as Mo rightfully points out, the U.S. is not only involved in these conflicts, but this involvement is financed directly through the taxes that individual people are paying (46). Because of this, individual people living in the U.S. are actually directly implicated in these conflicts, even if they mostly play out 'far away.' The

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characters' concern is thus less a sign of externalization and more a sign of paying close attention to U.S. racial and neo-colonial politics both at home and abroad. Even when *Dykes* points out racism in contexts in which the U.S. has no direct involvement, *Dykes* is clear that the U.S. is not exempt from the presence of racism. In one strip, the newspaper headlines change from panel to panel to document a surge of racist movements across Europe and in the U.S. The headlines read, "Serbs continue 'ethnic cleansing,'" "Rightists rampage in Italy," "Neo-Nazi attacks surge in Germany," "Fascists rally in Spain," and "Los Angeles riots: Recovery stalls" (151). As this enumeration suggests, racism is not displaced onto Europe, but through reference to the Los Angeles riots it is instead revealed as a reality in the U.S. that is every bit as worrisome as genocide, neo-Nazis, and fascism in Europe.

As these examples already show, *Dykes* is generally clear that racism is a reality in the U.S., shaping both the country's past and present. *Dykes* also refers twice to the Indigenous genocide on which the U.S. is founded (*More* 12f; 126), both times in the context of criticizing state-sponsored festivities (Thanksgiving and the Quincentennial respectively) that attempt to white-wash the country's colonial origins. Furthermore, in one of her political rants to her therapist, Mo states that "[t]his country is **built** on racism" (137, see fig. 6), and Lois is worried about Mo's apathy when George Bush's presidential address does not prompt her to demand that he should be doing "something about poverty and racism **here** instead of blowing up South American countries" (67). As these statements demonstrate, *Dykes* does not see the U.S. as 'post-racial' but instead clearly recognizes the fact that racism and colonialism are alive and well in the U.S.

Dykes also recognizes that racism in the U.S. is not a matter of isolated instances or personal prejudice but a systemic issue that is also inextricably linked to class and material inequality. Even in one of the earliest strips, before the stable cast of characters is introduced, *Dykes* points to the connection between race and class in its depiction of an interaction between a white lawyer and a Black mother and her two children. The lawyer is shocked by the family's living situation, "You mean they doubled your rent and you haven't had heat all winter? But that's **against** the **law!!**" (*Dykes To Watch Out For* 75). The Black woman rolls her eyes at the lawyer's naivety and thus communicates non-verbally that her living situation is far from unique because economic exploitation of Black people is nothing new, but is, in fact, business as usual in the U.S., where "systematic efforts from colonial times to the present [...] create[d] a possessive investment in whiteness for European Americans" (Lipsitz 371). The systemic connection between race and class is again made explicit much later in the strip

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in the context of hurricane Katrina. Ginger comments, "Well, one upside. Who ever thought we'd hear network TV discussing the intersections of race and class?" when the TV newscaster says, "The tragedy of hurricane Katrina has revealed startling levels of poverty and racial inequality," while the words "Who knew?" are displayed on the TV screen, indicating the narrator's awareness of the obviousness of this connection (474).

In less than a handful of strips, *Dykes* also mentions how this systemic racism plays out at the level of culture and knowledge production. In a strip in which Toni and Clarice visit a group for lesbian mothers a white woman points out the racist imagery in a children's book, where "the pink pig is 'clean' and the brown pig is 'dirty'" (158). While her comment calls attention to the widespread problem of racism in children's books, in another strip, it becomes clear that Toni and Clarice are actively trying to supply Raffi with non-racist children's books like "Heather Celebrates Kwanzaa with Daddy's Roommate" (*Hot Throbbing* 113). The title is a multicultural riff on the popular children's book *Heather Has Two Mommies*, emphasizing that Toni and Clarice care about cultural as well as sexual diversity. In the strip, Toni reminds Clarice that they bought this book at Madwimmin, Jezanna's lesbian feminist bookstore, because big corporations like Wal-Mart do not sell books like that. Toni's comment points out that non-racist, LGBTIQ content is marginalized in mainstream publishing and retail and that its dissemination is dependent on alternative institutions like Madwimmin.

A third strip shows that LGBTIQ, Black content is not only marginalized in publishing but also in academia. After Audre Lorde's death, Ginger is aghast that the white male chair of her English department has never heard of "a poet and activist whose work is this important" (151). Lois chimes in with, "Important according to **who**, is the problem" (151), thereby alluding to white men's power to determine who and what counts as important within academia and in general. White supremacy in combination with cis_hetero_sexism makes it acceptable for a white male professor to completely ignore one of the most influential Black lesbian writers of the second half of the twentieth century. This white male ignorance serves to deny (queer) Women of Color the recognition and resonance they deserve and thus perpetuates the dominance of white male culture and white male standards of measuring merit and importance. In a fourth strip, Ginger and Sparrow analyze the media coverage of school-shootings and, while Sparrow criticizes the lack of attention that is being paid to the role of masculinity, Ginger observes that the perpetrators' whiteness is also never discussed: "**White** boys. Can you imagine if it was girls, or African-American kids wiping out their homerooms with TEC-9s? All these laments about our generic 'chil-

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dren' would get awful specific awful quick" (314). Ginger's analysis gestures towards the role of the media in normalizing and invisibilizing the specificity of whiteness, while constructing Blackness as always specific, pertinent, and, most often, negatively connoted.

While *Dykes* thus demonstrates a general awareness of racism on the level of culture, by far the largest number of strips makes reference to racism on the institutional level. *Dykes* mostly comments on institutional racism as embodied and practiced by the state apparatus. Mo criticizes the racial politics of presidential candidates by referring to the whiteness of both candidates in 1988 (40), by calling David Duke a "bona fide **Nazi**" (126), and by pointing out Pat Buchanan's "immigrant-bashing agenda" (234). She is also worried about the (white) electorate's penchant for actually voting for anti-immigrant politicians and measures (204, 209). Even Janis, who is still a child in this particular strip, cannot understand why openly racist politicians like Trent Scott continue to hold positions of power within the U.S. political system (406). Clarice is disappointed about Thurgood Marshall's retirement from the Supreme Court (115) as well as Clinton's withdrawal of support from Lani Guinier as assistant attorney general for civil rights (165).

When Clarence Thomas's appointment to replace Thurgood Marshall on the Supreme Court is confirmed despite allegations of sexual harassment, Lois voices the characters' collective anger when she states, "The boys won! They pit their biggest enemies, the Black community and the feminists, against each other, they get a Black justice who'll vote to **abolish** Civil Rights, they give a tacit nod of approval to sexual harassment, **and** they'll repeal Roe v. Wade in the bargain! You gotta admire their **technique!**" (122). She thus criticizes the common practice of tokenizing, which "describes an intergroup context in which very few members of a disadvantaged group are accepted into positions usually reserved for members of the advantaged group, while access is systematically denied for the vast majority of qualified disadvantaged group members" (Wright and Taylor 648). As Judith Long Laws explains, "Tokenism is likely to be found wherever a dominant group is under pressure to share privilege, power, or other desirable commodities with a group which is excluded. Tokenism is the means by which the dominant group advertises a promise of mobility between the dominant and excluded classes" (51). As the example of Clarence Thomas shows, tokenism not only does not substantially alter the balance of power, but it can even serve to reinforce domination by picking only those people as token representatives who are willing to further the interests of the dominant group. Clarice makes a similar point when she sarcastically frames affirmative action as a form of tokenism: "Affirmative action is a way to give women and minorities a fair

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chance to become rich, powerful Republicans, so they can help protect other rich, powerful people from the surly poor folks who are always waging 'class war' on them" (418). It is important to note that Clarice does not critique affirmative action as such in this strip but only those instances where affirmative action is used to promote tokens such as Colin Powell and Sandra Day O'Connor, whose politics ensure that their promotion will not upset the balance of power but will instead serve to reinforce the dominant order.

Clarice also accuses the Supreme Court of wanting "to go as far back as **Jim Crow**" (219) when they decide against Black-majority voting districts in Shaw v. Reno while Mo sees racial bias at work in the acquittal of the cops who beat Rodney King (137, see fig. 6). Jezanna and Audrey protest against the unjust incarceration of Black people in the U.S. when they go to a demonstration holding a "Free Mumia Abu-Jamal" sign (220).

While these remarks and analyses frame racism as deeply entrenched in and practiced at the highest levels of the state apparatus, other remarks frame institutionalized forms of racism such as racism in the police force, racism in the educational system, and redlining in more individualistic terms. After the O.J. Simpson verdict, Jezanna's dad tells Jezanna, "A Black man was finally given justice in this country! [...] You know as well as I do those cops set him up!" (223). His reading of the verdict interprets the trial as a symptom of the systemic racism built into the U.S. criminal justice system that unfairly incarcerates disproportionate numbers of Black men. To him, O.J. Simpson's individual victory is a victory against the larger issue of systemic racism in the U.S. Jezanna, however, retorts, "just because Mark Fuhrman is a racist dirtbag doesn't mean your hero didn't kill his wife – they're **both** guilty!" (223). In the context of *Dykes*, where Jezanna is a likeable, recurrent character while her father is a rather annoying minor character, whom the readers do not even know by name, Jezanna's position appears as the more balanced opinion on the subject, which is perhaps also due to her explicit lesbian feminist perspective. However, it is noteworthy that Jezanna's supposedly more complex analysis completely downplays the systemic issue of a racially biased criminal justice system and instead portrays the O.J. Simpson case as an individual instance of racism on the part of Mark Fuhrman, the detective who procured (or planted?) the evidence against O.J. Simpson and was later convicted for perjury during the trial. While Jezanna's dad's concern about how systemic racism affects the lives of Black men is portrayed as 'too simplistic' and one-sided in the context of *Dykes*, Jezanna's 'more nuanced' analysis ends up reducing the racist dimensions of the case to a question of individual wrongdoing.

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When Raffi starts school, Clarice and Toni meet with his first-grade teacher to discuss their questions, "You know … basic stuff, like what kind of experience you've had with interracial and lesbian and gay families. How do you define family in the curriculum? How do you handle Mother's Day and Father's Day? Do you use books that reflect a multicultural perspective? What are your techniques for dealing with homophobic and racist slurs?" (321). When it becomes apparent that the teacher is completely stumped by the simple fact that Raffi has two mothers and has absolutely no strategies, let alone experience in dealing with racism and cis_hetero_sexism, this could be read as a critique of a racist and hetero_sexist educational system that systematically diminishes the life chances of Students of Color (cf. for example Flores; Gonzales and Shields; Hartney and Flavin) and gay and lesbian students (cf. for example Aragon et al.; Macgillivray; Robinson and Espelage). However, since the strip begins by explaining that Clarice and Toni intentionally picked this school because they expected Raffi to be taught by a teacher Toni describes as "nice" (321), the subsequent interaction with the new teacher appears to be an individualized case of bad luck. The new teacher's obvious cis_hetero_sexism as well as her presumable racism do not point to a systemic problem but rather to an individual problem with this particular teacher that could have been solved if Raffi had only been taught by the "nice" teacher he was originally assigned to.

Dykes discusses the well-documented practice of redlining, i.e. the denial of services such as bank loans to specific racial groups, in a similarly individualistic vein. As Lipsitz details, there is a long history of discrimination against Black people in the allocation of home loans, dating back to the Federal Housing Act of 1934 (372) and continuing until today. When Ginger tells Clarice that the bank she applied to for a loan "asked for a lot more documentation than I was expecting. And they said it looks like my income might not be enough to qualify" (293), Clarice's lack of surprise at first frames redlining as a common and wide-spread issue that systematically affects Black people. However, immediately after alluding to the systemic nature of redlining, Clarice tells Ginger that she actually got a loan from the very same bank by speaking to them on the phone instead of in person and by "using my best Katie Couric impersonation" (293), i.e. by talking like a white person. Thus, even though *Dykes* concedes that the racist practice of redlining might be systemic, its effects do not seem to be equally systemic and can apparently easily be remedied through individual fixes like avoiding face-to-face interaction. While this is a clever strategy on Clarice's part, this depiction nevertheless minimizes the severity and perniciousness of systemic racism. As these examples show, *Dykes* displays a general, but not entirely consistent understanding of the systemic nature of racism.

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This inconsistency becomes all the more glaring when it comes to the question of how the Characters of Color experience racism in their personal lives. Since racism is, in fact, woven into the very fabric of life in the U.S. and *Dykes* also clearly recognizes this, one would expect that this pervasive racism also affects the Characters of Color in the comic. This is, however, almost not the case. As I described above, *Dykes* sees a link between race, class, and economic exploitation in principle, but this link is all but inexistent when it comes to the actual Characters of Color in the comic. Virtually all of them, except maybe Carlos, who is unemployed for long stretches at a time, and Jasmine, who works as a waitress, are economically successful and upwardly mobile. Clarice works as an environmental lawyer and makes enough money to support Toni and Raffi as well so that Toni can take an extended break from working as a CPA in order to take care of Raffi. Sparrow is a social worker but rises through the ranks of the women's shelter for which she works and later becomes an executive director at the state NARAL office so that she is eventually also able to support Stuart and their daughter Jiao-Raizel. Sparrow's ex, June, gets an MBA and finds a well-paying job afterwards, Ginger is an English professor, and Jezanna owns a bookstore with three (white) employees. Even when Characters of Color are unemployed (like Carlos) or lose their livelihoods (like Jezanna when the bookstore closes), they are never portrayed as being financially distressed. Acute poverty or even just financial insecurity is never once an issue for any of them.

The Characters of Color do not only have well-paying jobs and apparent safety cushions for when they lose their jobs, they also rather effortlessly manage to accrue wealth through buying houses. Even though Clarice's job as an environmental lawyer is framed as the more ethically responsible, but less well-paying choice of two possible jobs she could take (165), and Ginger complains that "Buffalo Lake is only giving me a pittance" (289), they are nevertheless both able to afford houses together with Toni and Sparrow respectively. Towards the end of the series, Sparrow can even afford to buy Ginger out even though the value of their house has doubled since they first bought it (508), and Ginger and Samia are able to buy a new house together (511). Given that, as of 2004, "many studies have [...] shown that black and Hispanic households are dealt with less favorably than majority whites at each stage of the process [of becoming homeowners], from locating to acquiring to financing housing" (Krivo and Kaufman 585), "the median net worth of whites in 1995 was 8 times that of blacks, and the income ratio was 4 to 1" (Krivo and Kaufman 587), and that "[o]ver 70 % of white households own their homes, compared with 46 % of black households and 49 % of Hispanic households" (Krivo and Kaufman 592), *Dykes*' scenario of a whole group of well-off, home-owning Lesbians of Color is

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not a particularly representative portrayal of the socio-economic situation of People of Color in the U.S. around the turn of the millennium. In the attempt to counter prevailing stereotypes of a supposed inherent link between Blackness and poverty, *Dykes* neglects to depict the very real systemic racism that leads to huge wealth and income disparities between white people and People of Color and instead imagines a world in which these inequalities have magically disappeared.

In the *Dykes* universe, Clarice and Toni can even move from a more racially diverse neighborhood to the much whiter suburbs without race ever being a serious issue. The only time that race actually comes up in this context occurs when they first drive around the new neighborhood looking for a house. When they stop at a playground, Clarice is mistaken for a nanny by one of the white women there (191). As this short interaction demonstrates, People of Color, and Black people in particular, are not seen as equals in this neighborhood but essentially as servants. When Clarice tells Toni about this incident, Toni responds defiantly, "Dammit. Let's move here to spite them" (191). When they do move there, their white neighbors do, in fact, object to their moving into the neighborhood – but not because of their race. The fact that Clarice is Black and Toni and Raffi Latinx never once causes any problems between them and their (straight, white) neighbors, Bill and Anne. Instead, Bill and Anne have a problem with Clarice and Toni being lesbians (310, 332) and with Clarice's stance on environmentalism (313; 322). Once again, in light of the fact that numerous studies have documented white homeowners' readiness to move away once a certain number of Black people move into previously white neighborhoods – a phenomenon known as 'white flight' (e.g. Bobo and Zubrinsky; Emerson et al.; Farley et al.; D. Harris; Krysan; Charles) – it seems at least a bit curious that Bill and Anne would be more worried about Clarice's and Toni's sexuality than about their race.

Characters of Color in *Dykes* are not only unaffected by systemic racism in the educational system, the job market, and the housing market, they generally do not seem to experience much racism at all in their everyday lives. Clarice and Ginger occasionally refer to unspecified difficulties Women of Color face. In an early strip, when Mo is afraid that Clarice is selling out, Clarice makes fun of her by encouraging her fears. Among other things, she says, "Goddess **knows**, us women of color have a hard-enough time in this country … why shouldn't I **enjoy** the fruits of my **labors?**" (4). A bit later, when Mo complains about the cis_hetero_sexism she experiences during a cross-country trip, Clarice tells her, "Think of yourself as a walking **educational experience**. You should try being the **first black person** one of these kids has ever seen!" (18). In a much later

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strip, Ginger comments on a newspaper report, "Here's a news flash. 'A recent study shows African American gay men and women have substantially higher levels of chronic stress than heterosexual Blacks and whites, and lesbian African Americans suffer from more stress than their gay counterparts.' I guess people can grasp the concept better if you call it 'stress' instead of 'oppression'" (190). In all three instances, racism against Lesbians of Color is mentioned, but not spelled out. Even if Clarice has a "hard time" and Ginger faces "oppression" because of racism, the reader never finds out how exactly this plays out in their lives. In the strip in which Clarice points out the oppression she faces as "the first black person one of these corn-fed kids has ever seen," the reader witnesses Mo recounting a graphic example of what it means to be a visibly gender nonconforming woman, when she tells her friends that a child just asked her mother whether Mo was a boy or a girl when she saw her in the women's bathroom. The reader never hears about a comparably specific situation in which Clarice experiences racism in this all-white environment.

A similar dynamic is at play when Toni tells Mo and Harriet, "Well, I **know** we decided on a Latino donor. The kid's gonna have a hard-enough time with an interracial lesbian couple for parents, let alone being mixed-race herself" (123). As it turns out, Raffi sometimes does have a hard time – because he has two mothers. His mothers' race, however, is never an issue. The only times that his being Latino plays (an indirect) role is when people are confused about Clarice being his mother (277; *Split Level* 97). While he experiences his fair share of cis_hetero_sexism, racism does not seem to affect his life at all.

This is true for the other Characters of Color as well. Just like Raffi, Janis never seems to have any problems because she is Black, but she is homeschooled because her mother is afraid she will be bullied for being a trans girl (452). In one strip, Jasmine states that before Janis's transition, she was anxious "about being a single mother raising a young black man in this culture," but since Janis has started living openly as a girl, this anxiety has "completely disappeared" (446). While it is certainly true that racism affects Black men and women differently, this statement makes it sound as if racism was only of concern to Black men, but not at all to Black women. When Toni and Clarice travel to Vermont for their civil union, Clarice points out how very white Vermont is, but they do not encounter any overt racism while they *do* encounter overt cis_hetero_sexism in the form of anti-civil union signs (349). When somebody throws a brick at Madwimmin's storefront window, everybody assumes that this is an anti-lesbian, anti-feminist attack. Thea explains to Lois and Mo, "Looks like it was aimed at the display copy of 'I Was a Lesbian Marine'" and speculates, "We don't know if it was a lone creep, or a posse from the Traditional

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Values Coalition" (159). While Lois assumes that the perpetrators were "testosterone poisoned assholes," Mo is shocked that something like this could happen "here in the queer ghetto," and Jezanna orders Thea to call the "Gay and Lesbian Anti-Violence Project" to report the incident (ibid.). No character ever considers that Jezanna, the storeowner, is also Black and the attack could also be interpreted as a racist attack on a Black business owner. The characters can easily understand this incident from a lesbian feminist perspective, but an anti-racist perspective seems to be unavailable to them.

As these examples already show, the Characters of Color frequently experience concrete, direct expressions of cis_hetero_sexism in their day-to-day lives, but almost no racism. I already mentioned three of the only six instances in which Characters of Color personally encounter racist situations (when Ginger is initially denied a loan, when Clarice is mistaken for a nanny, and when Ginger's department chair is unfamiliar with Audre Lorde). Another situation occurs after the O.J. Simpson verdict when an anonymous white woman says to Jezanna, "It sounds like the verdict was based on emotion, not evidence. I mean, the jury was mostly black. They're obviously sending a message to the L.A.P.D.!", to which Jezanna responds, "Yeah. If only there were more **objective** people like **you** on the jury, who don't make rash racial generalizations! **Then** we'd see some justice!" (223). The last two situations involve Cynthia, a right-wing lesbian student of both Ginger and Samia. The first instance occurs when Ginger assigns a paper about the Gilgamesh epos and Cynthia writes about the Odyssey instead. She defends her choice by saying, "Look, I know you're all about the multicultural thing. But we live in Western civilization! Odysseus is just more **relevant** than this freaky Gilgamesh" (433), discounting the importance of non-Western world literature and advocating for an exclusively Western, implicitly white literary canon. The second instance takes place a bit later when she tells Ginger that she wants to learn Arabic so she can "join the C.I.A." and that she hopes Samia, her new Arabic teacher, is "not a terrorist" on account of her "Arab-sounding name" (441). Her desire to join the C.I.A. is indicative of her support for Bush's 'war on terror' both abroad and in the U.S. and her suspicions vis-à-vis Samia are clear expressions of anti-'Muslim' racism, i.e. the "bigotry, discrimination, policies and practices directed towards Islam and a racialized group of people that includes Muslims" (E. Love 402)[8], which increased dramatically

8 Erik Love actually defines the term 'islamophobia' here. As I explained in chapter 2.2.3, I do not find it useful to refer to a form of oppression as a 'phobia.' For this reason, I use the term 'anti-'Muslim' racism' instead of 'islamophobia' in this book.

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in the U.S. after 9/11. These instances, however, are few and very far between and do not seem to be of any pressing concern to the characters.

This absence of urgency around issues of racism is also reflected in the activism the Characters of Color engage in and in the (support) groups they seek out. Early on in the strip, both Clarice and Toni seem to be involved in activism that focuses on racism and imperialism. In one strip, Clarice introduces Mo to Harriet, whom she knows from the "Central American Task Force" (11), and in another, Toni mentions that she has to go to a meeting of the "Women of Color Anti-Violence Project" (14). A bit later, one strip mentions that they are in a "support group for lesbians in **multicultural relationships**" (76). None of these groups are ever mentioned again throughout the series. When Ginger goes to the National Lesbian Conference, where she meets Malika, she explains their not having sex at the conference by telling Lois, "Lois, we were busy! There was racism to confront! Battles to join! Stages to storm! And anyhow, we only just met" (111). Her comment suggests that racism is a rather pervasive problem in lesbian circles, but neither Ginger herself seems interested in telling Lois and Sparrow what exactly happened at the conference, nor are they at all interested in hearing more about the racist dynamics at the conference. Instead, their attention is entirely focused on the budding romance between Ginger and Malika. Three years later, Ginger goes to the Black Gay and Lesbian Leadership Forum Conference instead of visiting Malika because, as she tells Malika, the conference is "important" (181). She even reports back to Lois and Sparrow that "[t]he grassroots organizing workshop really got me all charged up!" (184), but again the focus is mostly on the short affair she has with a woman at the conference, which leads to her eventual breakup with Malika. Meanwhile, the readers never find out about any concrete outcomes of the workshop Ginger is so excited about. Before Ginger, Lois, Sparrow, and June leave for the Gay Games and Stonewall 25 in New York City in 1994, Sparrow and June show off the fancy clothes they plan on wearing for the "Asian Lesbian Network Gala" they want to attend in New York City (191). Attending the gala event suggests that they might be in touch with other Asian American lesbians, but they remain the only two Asian Americans in the strip and are never shown in any actual contact with other Asian Americans. Jezanna once mentions that she received her initial politicization from a Black professor, who was the first Black activist she had ever met (52). However, the only concrete political action about racism within the U.S. that the readers ever actually see her (or any other Character of Color) engage in is a non-specified demonstration that she and Audrey attend with a "Free Mumia Abu-Jamal" sign (220). In all other instances, their anti-racist activism is mentioned but not shown.

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This contrasts with the engagement of the Characters of Color in various other, most often lesbian feminist, causes. Both Clarice and Sparrow work in social justice contexts, but while Clarice's work focuses on environmentalism, Sparrow works against violence against women and for reproductive choice. All of these issues are deeply enmeshed with racism (environmental racism, lack of accessibility of women's shelters for Women of Color, forced sterilizations of Women of Color, etc.), but none of these connections are ever made by any of the characters in the comic. By never explicitly spelling out how environmentalism and feminism are connected to racism, the strip creates the impression that even the Characters of Color frame the issues they work on in very white, non-intersectional ways. Similarly, in one of the earlier strips, Ginger and Clarice meet while planning the "annual gay and lesbian studies conference" (31), where they both sign up for the accessibility committee. As lesbians, they apparently both care about cis_hetero_sexism and even though they are both non-disabled at that point in time, they also care about accessibility. Their shared positionality as Black women, however, does not seem to lead to a similar interest in issues of racism.

Later in the series, there is a long, complex storyline about Toni's involvement in the "Freedom to Marry" initiative (289), where she fights tenaciously for the rights of gay and lesbian people to get married. In one of the earlier strips, when Clarice and Toni first discuss the possibility of getting married themselves, Toni actually opposes the idea. They are at a Laundromat when Toni exclaims, "It just has so many **negative connotations**. Marriage is about property transfer and creating state-approved **nuclear families**" (68, see fig. 5). As she says this, we see a person holding a screaming baby in the foreground to the right and an annoyed toddler tugging on someone's shirt to the left. These two children convey the impression that nuclear family life is exhausting and everything but enviable. Visually, the panel thus underscores Toni's criticism of marriage as a conservative and undesirable institution that is not worth emulating. Significantly, while this panel voices common queer critiques of marriage, it stays well within the parameters of a race-neutral critique that does not make any reference to anti-racist arguments against marriage.

Several strips later, when their Black friend Tanya accuses them of "making a pathetic bid for approval from a racist, imperialist, misogynistic, heterosexist system that wants to **destroy** everything [they] stand for" (76), Toni explicitly brushes this critique aside. At their actual commitment ceremony, Tanya is the second of three friends to "offer affirming testimony" (87). Her testimony, "I just wanna say I love you both like **sisters**. Maybe that's why I give you so much shit about being **yuppie sellouts** and why I sincerely hope that in your

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wedded **bliss** you don't abandon the struggle of radical lesbians of color against the **imperialist patriarchy**!" (87) stands out as particularly 'un-affirming' and thus comically misplaced. This tension between Tanya's radical criticism and the festive occasion that calls for statements supportive of long-term commitment already dismisses the implication of her testimony that Lesbians of Color might have particular reasons to oppose the institution of marriage as overly critical. The dismissal is complete, when Jezanna offers the third testimony, "Well I am hard pressed to think of a more **radical** act than two courageous women challenging the powers that be by publicly celebrating their lesbian relationship" (87). The voice of another Black woman is thus used to make it completely clear that *Dykes* does not see any reason why Lesbians of Color might oppose marriage from an anti-racist perspective.

Figure 5

Bechdel, *New Improved Dykes To Watch Out For* 99

Toni's and Clarice's wedding ceremony is, in fact, the last time that the possibility of something like a Queer of Color critique of marriage is ever brought up in *Dykes*. All throughout her later pro-marriage activism, Toni never once stops to consider how marriage laws have adversely affected People of Color and have been used against them to portray them as particularly cis_hetero_sexist (cf. Farrow). As Dean Spade argues, equal marriage is unlikely to remedy many of the problems LGBTIQ People of Color face, while further bolstering privilege for the already privileged:

The quest for marriage seems to have far fewer benefits, then, for queers whose families are targets of state violence and who have no spousal access to health care or immigration

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> status, and seems to primarily benefit those whose race, class, immigration, and ability privilege would allow them to increase their wellbeing by incorporation into the government's privileged relationship status. (*Normal* 62)

As Chandan Reddy notes, "the right to make contracts for that which queers of color do not have – such as inheritance, patrimony, property, autonomous personhood, and land" (211) is not a particularly useful right to have for most LGBTIQ People of Color. Toni's unequivocal support for a white, mainstream issue such as marriage equality is never matched by any even remotely comparable support for Chicana or generally anti-racist causes. Toni's Puerto Rican identity and her positionality as a Latina in the mainland U.S. seem to be of no consequence or political interest to her while her lesbian identity propels her to dedicate all of her free time (and more) to the fight for equal marriage.

As I analyzed in the preceding chapter, Bechdel visually differentiates between Characters of Color and white characters. However, as the above examples show, these visual differences literally make no difference in the world of *Dykes*. Lesbians of Color experience (almost) no racism, they do not seem to feel any particular allegiance to other People of Color, and they are at best marginally involved in anti-racist activism or politics. In stark contrast, they do experience cis_hetero_sexism, are very involved in the lesbian community, and are engaged in various types of lesbian feminist activism. This portrayal is very much in line with how white U.S. lesbians often treat Lesbians of Color, according to Gloria Anzaldúa: "Often whitefeminists want to minimize racial difference by taking comfort in the fact that we are all women and/or lesbians and suffer similar sexual-gender oppressions. They are usually annoyed with the actuality (though not the concept) of 'differences,' want to blur racial difference, want to smooth things out – they seem to want a complete, totalizing identity" ("Hacienda caras" 131). Many white lesbian feminists in the U.S. expect Lesbians of Color to identify primarily as women and lesbians and to dedicate themselves primarily to the fight against cis_hetero_sexism, while breaking with their families of origin and letting go of racial identifications and alliances, or as Anzaldúa puts it, "they wanted me to give up my Chicananess and become part of them; I was asked to leave my race at the door" (*Borderlands* 231). Barbara Ellen Smith has analyzed the work of the Southeast Women's Employment Coalition (SWEC) during the 1980s to show how profoundly misguided such attempts at separating the fight against cis_hetero_sexism from the fight against racism really are. She came to the following conclusion:

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> An implicit assumption in much of SWEC's internal work on racism was [...] that racism added a heavy burden on top of sexism for women of color but that the element of oppression involving gender could be isolated and utilized as the basis of unity and common purpose among women. Clearly, these assumptions were misplaced. Race, gender, and class are neither additive nor parallel, but interactive forms of oppression. They intersect in ways that create not simply *more* oppression for working-class women of color but profoundly different oppressions for women of various races and classes. (689)

Insights such as these are absent from *Dykes*. Instead, *Dykes* panders to the white fantasy that white lesbians and Lesbians of Color share the same oppression as lesbians, which unites them in the face of a hostile environment. Both the lived experiences and the political commitments of Lesbians of Color in *Dykes* are virtually indistinguishable from those of white lesbians. *Dykes* thus portrays racial difference as an issue of superficial, no more than skin-deep 'diversity,' leaving out all aspects of racial difference that have to do with power differences and the uneven distribution of life chances. In *Dykes*, Lesbians of Color are basically white lesbians with fuller lips and curlier hair. *Dykes* thus helps to keep up the myth of the de-racialization of People of Color in white LGBTIQ contexts that Barbara Smith critiques as follows, "One of the myths that [is] put out there about Black lesbians and gay men is that we go into the white gay community and forsake our racial roots. People say that to be lesbian or gay is to be somehow racially de-natured. I have real problems with that [...]. We are as Black as anybody ever thought about being" (Gomez and Smith 54).

It is probably unsurprising that Bechdel ended up de-racializing her Characters of Color, given that she states that "all my characters are based on me" (*Indelible* 62). As I discussed earlier, Mo most closely resembles Bechdel and functions almost as her alter ego in the comic, but, as Bechdel herself writes, the main Characters of Color also represent certain aspects of her, "Clarice is my driven, ambitious, workaholic side; Toni the flip domestic side. Sparrow is the part of me that wonders if maybe my chakras are blocked, and Ginger the part of me that alternates between thinking I'm a genius and thinking I'm an utter fraud, all the while procrastinating hopelessly" (*Indelible* 62). Since there is simply no side of Bechdel that experiences racism, it is probably only logical that her Characters of Color do not experience or engage with racism in any meaningful way either and instead embody some of Bechdel's own, racially non-specific character traits. This flattening of difference is in tune with liberal multiculturalism, which according to Joe L. Kincheloe and Shirley R. Steinberg tends to depict People of Color as "just regular people like all the rest of us, who rarely are affected by the fact that they are non-white. The problems they encounter are in-

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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?

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