3.2 A MULTICULTURAL UNIVERSE WITH WHITENESS AT ITS CENTER

The first thing one notices when analyzing the racial politics of *Dykes* is its obvious racial diversity. Martindale, for example, sees the strip as "representing all the factions as a multicultural multiplicity of lesbian diversity" (62). Indeed, while the largest group among the major and minor characters is still white (major: Mo, Lois, Harriet, Sydney, Thea, Stuart / minor: Naomi, Ellen, Deirdre, Maxine, Madeleine, Cynthia, Jerry, etc.), a good number of major and minor characters are Black (major: Clarice, Ginger, Jezanna / minor: Malika, Jasmine, Janis, Tanya, Audrey, Carlos, etc.). There are also a few Latinxs[2] (Toni, Rafael, Carlos, Ana), a couple of Asian Americans (Sparrow, June), and one Arab American (Samia).

When discussing the diversity of representation in *Dykes*, Bechdel's own so-called 'Bechdel Test' offers a good starting point: In one of her earliest strips, called "The Rule," Bechdel jokingly came up with a rule to determine if a movie is of any potential interest to a lesbian. In the strip, an unnamed Black lesbian states, "I only go to a movie if it satisfies three basic requirements. **One**, it has to have at least two women in it who, two, **talk** to each other about, three, something besides a **man**" (*Dykes To Watch Out For* 22f).[3] Since a disappointingly high number of movies do not fulfill these basic requirements, this humorous test is still widely used as a popular measure of sexism in the movie industry. By now there are also alternative versions of the Bechdel Test focusing on the portrayal of Characters of Color. Alaya Dawn Johnson rewrote the Bechdel Test as: "1. It has to have two POC in it. 2. Who talk to each other. 3. About something other than a white person." Geek Outsider came up with a slightly expanded Token Test: "A work of fiction that passes the test for biased treatment of characters of color in fiction will (1) have at least two characters of color, who (2) aren't somehow related or dating and (3) regularly speak more than a few lines (4) about something that has nothing to do with race or racial stereotypes." Quite obviously, *Dykes* passes both tests with flying colors, as it were.

2 In accordance with a common practice among many progressive Spanish speakers, I use 'x' as a gender-neutral ending for Spanish terms.

3 It is interesting to note that the Black lesbian in whose mouth Bechdel puts this rule is apparently only concerned about cis_hetero_sexism in movies, but not at all about racism. This curious lack of interest in issues of race on the part of Characters of Color will come up again later in my discussion.

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One of the strips that did not make it into *The Essential Dykes To Watch Out For* critically comments on the tokenizing treatment of disability and Jewishness in *Dykes*. Thea waves one of her crutches while complaining, "I thought I was gonna get to be a whole, 2-dimensional character like the rest of you! But **nooo**. I just show up on my **crutches** every tenth episode, like a goddamn **poster child!**", to which Naomi replies, "You think **you** have it bad? Try being a **Jew** in this goyisher cartoon! I got used **once** in a Passover strip 5 years ago, then **bubkes!**" (145). While this internal criticism is quite justified, *Dykes* can certainly not be accused of tokenism when it comes to race. It not only features a large cast of Characters of Color, they also relate to each other and to the white characters in many different ways. *Dykes* definitely fulfills the second requirement of the Token Test, in that it portrays a large number of relationships between People of Color that are not based on either kinship or dating. In *Dykes*, People of Color are each other's friends, housemates, accountants, customers, babysitters, psychologists, and nurses. Even though the Characters of Color do not seem to seek out spaces that are exclusively for People of Color, they occasionally appear in strips that feature only Characters of Color, which subtly conveys the message that they have their own lives and stories and do not necessarily need to be validated by the presence of white characters.

While Geek Outsider sees the inclusion of Couples and Families of Color in otherwise white movies as a ploy to avoid charges of tokenism, in an article on *Autostraddle*, Helen McDonald points out that "the media doesn't create images of Black women in love." She states that "many of us Black women (and perhaps, more generally, women of color) are starving to see healthy and happy depictions of *our* love for each other" because "the prevalence of images of women of color dating white women feeds a fear that queer relationships are only viable or valuable when at least one partner is white" (n. pag.). *Dykes* in fact depicts a huge variety of relationships between Women of Color, from one-night stands to short-term affairs to long-term relationships to marriages. Many of these relationships are between women who share the 'same' racial background, such as Sparrow and June (both Asian American), while others are interracial like the relationships between Clarice and Toni (Black and Latina). Even though not all of these relationships are necessarily "healthy and happy," in the long run, many of them are, at least for a while. Through the prism of these many relationships, *Dykes* shows Women of Color enjoying all the joys of dating as well as facing all of its challenges. Especially the relationship between Toni and Clarice, which is the longest running relationship in the entire series and is explored in great depth and in all its ups and downs, palpably demonstrates the viability and value of relationships between Women of Color within the *Dykes* universe.

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Dykes also features a plethora of friendships and other relationships between People of Color and white people. For example, Clarice is friends with Mo, Lois, Harriet, Sydney, Ellen and Alexis while Ginger lives with Lois and Stuart. Samia mentors Cynthia and Toni works in an equal marriage coalition with Beth and Liz McLaughlin-Farkas. Sparrow has a white father, and Jezanna employs Mo, Lois, and Thea. Given these extensive (friendship) networks between Women of Color and white women, it is rather perplexing that there is almost no dating between them. We find out in retrospect that Clarice used to date Mo, and Sparrow used to date Lois after dating a white guy named Ralph, but these relationships are only mentioned in passing without much detail to elucidate their dynamics. The only ongoing interracial relationships between Women of Color and white people in *Dykes* are the relationships between Sparrow and Stuart, between Lois and Jasmine, and between Toni and Gloria. In the overwhelming majority of cases, white people date white people, and People of Color date People of Color in *Dykes*.[4]

It is evident that Bechdel took great care in developing her Characters of Color. As she herself explains, "I hate that stereotype of the big, wise black woman who nurtures all the spiritually deprived white people around her, so I've made Jezanna the polar opposite of maternal" (*Indelible* 67). Indeed, even though many of the characters in *Dykes* embody recognizable lesbian stereotypes (Mo as the overly politically correct couch-potato radical, Lois as the sex-positive, experimental womanizer, Sparrow as the new agey do-gooder, Clarice as the upwardly mobile luppie, Sydney as the cynical and slightly nihilistic queer theorist, etc.), *Dykes* carefully portrays the Characters of Color as individual people, whose histories and perspectives on life differ quite substantially from one another: Toni and Clarice are married while Ginger cannot seem to find the right partner. Jezanna is a no-nonsense business woman while Carlos is at best marginally employed. Raffi yearns to fit in with his friends and their straight families while Janis wants to educate other high school students about the issues she is facing as a trans girl. Toni worries about retirement while Clarice worries

4 Incidentally, this serves to reduce the potential for conflict between Characters of Color and white characters. Portraying a harmonious, multiracial lesbian community is easier when the people who benefit from racism and the people who are targeted by it are 'only' friends and not also lovers because, as Stephanie K. Dunning points out in her analysis of lesbian novels that feature interracial relationships, these relationships are often a rather "vexed terrain," and most writers also (realistically) "do not present interracial love as a site of salvation but rather as the site of an intense struggle around identity" (82).

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about selling out. Toni's parents are extremely heterosexist while Sparrow is surprised by how accepting her parents are. Sparrow supports Hillary while Jasmine supports Obama. The list could go on and on. By depicting Lesbians of Color in such a diverse way, the strip not only avoids the stereotype of the 'Black mammy' in Jezanna's case but generally tries to stay away from a generalizing treatment of Lesbians of Color. This is all the more noteworthy, since non-stereotypical depictions of Black characters in newspaper comics are, unfortunately, still the exception rather than the norm. As Tia C.M. Tyree concludes after her study of 13 newspaper comics in 2011, "Similar to the findings of past studies, Black females in this study were presented in stereotypical ways [...]. They were more likely to be positioned as background or minor characters, utilized to set up jokes for major or star characters, and the primary parent to discipline children, provide childcare and perform household chores" (54).

With regard to the visual representation of characters of different races, Bechdel notes the following:

> I've never used any kind of shading to differentiate the skin color of my African-American characters. When I was starting to draw 'Dykes,' I noticed that a lot of white cartoonists, on the rare occasions when they included people of color at all, used shading as the only way of indicating that a character was black. They would basically draw a white person, give them curly black hair, and fill in their faces with grey shading. So I tried to convey my characters' race by focusing on their features. Many of the shading styles I've seen other cartoonists use tend to obscure the characters' faces or seem prohibitively labor-intensive. (*Indelible* 70)

While Bechdel is well known for her detailed renditions of backgrounds, which often include witty or funny elements, and while she actually shades the backgrounds of many of her panels to give them more spatial depth, her faces are indeed rather simple with few details. Her style is generally very similar to Hergé's *ligne claire* style, which, according to Scott McCloud, also "combines very iconic characters with unusually *realistic* backgrounds" (42). McCloud claims that this style creates a "masking effect" (43) that allows readers to more easily identify with the characters. The cartoony faces resemble the mental images we have of ourselves, whereas the more detailed backgrounds reflect the fact that we visually perceive the world around us in much more detail than we perceive ourselves. This drawing style might very well play a big role in how relatable and likable many readers find the characters of *Dykes* (see above).

Given that her faces are generally rather cartoony without much detail, one might ask how exactly Bechdel achieved her goal of differentiating her charac-

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ters by race through the use of different facial features. First of all, she uses a large array of different, racially specific hairstyles. Her white characters have different hair colors from blond to dark brown (indicated by more or less shading), straight, wavy, or curly hair, long hair, flattops, or any number of short hairstyles. The Characters of Color all have dark hair with very tight curls for Black characters, slightly looser curls for Samia, wavy hair for Toni, and straight hair for the Asian American characters. They also sport a number of different short hairstyles as well as afros and dreads. In addition to giving them straight, black hair, Bechdel indicates that Sparrow and June are Asian through slightly altering the shape of their eyes compared to all other characters.

The most defining visual feature of the Characters of Color is their full lips, however.[5] All Characters of Color (except Raffi) share this feature, regardless of their racial background, while all the white characters have thin lips, often rendered by nothing more than a short line. It is the lips more than anything else that distinguishes Characters of Color unequivocally from white characters. This portrayal is in line with common ways of depicting Black people in comics. As Tyree summarizes the findings of her study: "Besides the shading of the skin, hair and lips were the two other most distinct signifiers of Black female characters" (55). Bechdel's rendition of Characters of Color with full lips is also an effective and rather subtle way to differentiate between white characters and Characters of Color: When I first read *Dykes*, I was able to 'correctly' identify all but one character (Sparrow) as either white or of Color, but, even after studying the comic extensively, I did not realize that the shape of the lips serves as a differentiating feature. Several people I asked reported similar reading experiences.

However, the choice of specifically full lips as a visual marker denoting that a character is of Color seems somewhat questionable, since exaggeratedly large lips were a stock feature in white drawings of Black people, intentionally employed to make fun of and dehumanize Blacks (cf. for example Von Blum and Cooks; Strömberg). In his analysis of visual representations of Black people on American postcards from 1893 to World War I, Wayne Martin Mellinger concludes, "Another iconographic technique used to simianize the African American in these caricatures involves the enlargement of the lips. [...] Virtually all of the illustrations in this paper have grossly exaggerated lips" (419). As Mellinger also notes, Black people have publicly and explicitly criticized these depictions at least as far back as the early 20th century (428f).

5 I thank Zian Kropka for this observation.

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In addition to the obviously racist history of depicting Black people with enlarged lips, I see several problems with Bechdel's choice of full versus thin lips as a racially differentiating feature. First of all, unlike her use of individual hairstyles, Bechdel equipped all Characters of Color with the exact same pair of full lips. She thus not only fails to differentiate between individual Characters of Color but also between different racial groups. In the process, she visually lumps all Characters of Color together, thus erasing difference, as if Blacks, Latinxs, Asian Americans, and Arab Americans all looked alike in this respect. In fact, the *only* racial group that is visually set apart as uniquely different from all other groups is the group of white people. This drawing decision runs counter to Bechdel's attempt to portray Lesbians of Color in non-generalizing, non-stereotypical ways.

Furthermore, the visual difference between these two groups (white people and People of Color) is not value-neutral. In most drawing styles, thin lips are the norm. Fully realized lips, on the other hand, are used to indicate femininity or that a character is wearing lipstick. Possibly, Raffi was drawn with thin lips for the very reason of avoiding this feminizing effect. Reflecting on her inability as a young person to draw girls or women, Bechdel states, "The way to draw a girl, I somehow absorbed, was to draw a regular person, then add certain signifiers: long hair, a skirt, high heels, huge curling eyelashes. [...] there was something offensive to me about overgeneralizing women merely as a way to differentiate them from 'regular' – i.e. male – people" (*Indelible* 16). I cannot help but read Bechdel's use of full lips for all of her Characters of Color in a similar light: They are drawn as "regular" – i.e. white – people, with full lips added as a differentiating signifier, and there is also "something offensive" about the overgeneralizing effect achieved by this drawing choice. My observation that thin lips represent 'the norm' in the *Dykes* universe, whereas full lips represent racial 'otherness,' is further corroborated by Bechdel's reflections on how to draw Characters of Color, which I quoted at length above. It is telling that she is concerned about how "to differentiate the skin color of my African-American characters," i.e. about how to portray Black characters as Black, but not about how to portray white characters as white. In her statement, white characters are the norm, from which Black characters somehow need to be differentiated.

Bechdel's decision not to shade her characters' skin color, while certainly understandable in the context of her general drawing style, also has the unintended consequence of further establishing whiteness as the default norm. Since *Dykes* is drawn in black and white, the characters' faces are outlined in black, but their skin color is white like the paper on which the comic is printed. This default whiteness is accentuated by the fact that Bechdel does shade other things

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(hair, clothes, backgrounds …) to indicate lighter or darker coloring – just not skin. This effect is particularly visible on the first two pages of volume 6, *Unnatural Dykes To Watch Out For* (see fig. 1). On these two pages, Bechdel introduces the characters by grouping them in a "Mo-centric Universe" (6). The characters are represented as planets with their white faces floating in front of shaded backgrounds. These 'planets' revolve around the 'sun,' i.e. Mo, on elliptical orbits. The orbits themselves are surrounded by an equally elliptical cloud of white light while the four corners of this two-page spread are black with a few white stars indicating the depth of the universe. Visually, it seems as if the color that is drained from the characters' faces is pushed out to the margins, outside of the white universe of Mo.[6] Blackness only exists at the margins of the *Dykes* universe, not at its center.

Figure 1

Bechdel, *Unnatural Dykes To Watch Out For* 6f

This spread is also instructive in analyzing how whiteness remains central in *Dykes* not only visually but also narratively, despite its multiracial cast. This image makes explicit the narrative structure, which focuses on Mo, who is white, and then includes other characters based on their relative closeness to Mo. The further away they orbit around Mo, the less narrative space they take up in the comic. This spread also describes a rather dejected looking Mo as "our hapless heroine. Bookstore clerk by day, celibate by night" (6). Even though her depiction makes it clear that Mo is more of an anti-heroine than an actual heroine, she is still the central narrative focus, around which *Dykes* revolves. Martindale concurs with this assessment when she writes,

6 I thank Adil Yilmaz for this analysis.

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When she [Bechdel] began to draw her lesbians of color, she says that she depicted them more like the central white character's 'ethnic sidekicks' than as fully fleshed lesbians in their own right. Nonetheless, even after five volumes, the center still belongs to the dominants within 'the' lesbian community [...]. While Bechdel's strip has interracial luppie moms, twelve-stepping Asian American new agers, a cute young queer girl, and a disabled dyke, they're all second bananas. The lead is still Mo, a white, downwardly mobile but middle-class lesbian feminist. (62f)[7]

Mo's central role is highlighted time and time again. The stable cast of characters of *Dykes* is first introduced in volume 2, *More Dykes To Watch Out For,* with a full-page panel that reads, "Still More Dykes To Watch Out For: with **Mo** and her pals" (31). This title already specifies that Mo is the central character of the series, and all other characters are only included because they are her "pals." When the cast of characters is introduced in the beginning of subsequent volumes, Mo is always introduced first, up until volume 7, when a recap of events replaces the introduction of individual characters. Mo is also centrally featured on six out of ten covers of the individual volumes.

The cover of *The Essential Dykes To Watch Out For* offers an illuminating study of the politics of diversity in *Dykes* (see fig. 2). First of all, it is one of only very few renditions of the characters in full color. For the cover, Bechdel actually did color in all the characters' faces and gave them different skin tones depending on their race. Interestingly, Characters of Color are in the majority on the cover (7 out of 12). In combination with the different skin tones, this serves to give a visual impression of *Dykes* as a racially very diverse comic – more diverse, actually, than the comic really is. As I wrote above, *Dykes* in fact has more white characters than Characters of Color and Bechdel had to exclude two of the more central white characters (Thea and Harriet) and include two rather marginal Characters of Color (Carlos and Samia) on the cover in order to achieve the desired effect. That the cover indeed strives for maximum diversity

7 This analysis is not meant to suggest that the problem of whiteness remaining at the center of the multicultural universe in *Dykes* could have been 'solved' if Bechdel had only used a Lesbian of Color as her lead. In fact, this 'solution' would have raised a whole other host of questions about cultural appropriation and white accountability. Rather, my analysis seeks to raise the question whether a white author on their own is likely to achieve a power-sensitive representation of racial diversity that decenters whiteness. In my reading, *Dykes* illustrates the common tendency of whiteness to reassert itself as the unnamed center of multicultural efforts, even when the exact opposite is intended.

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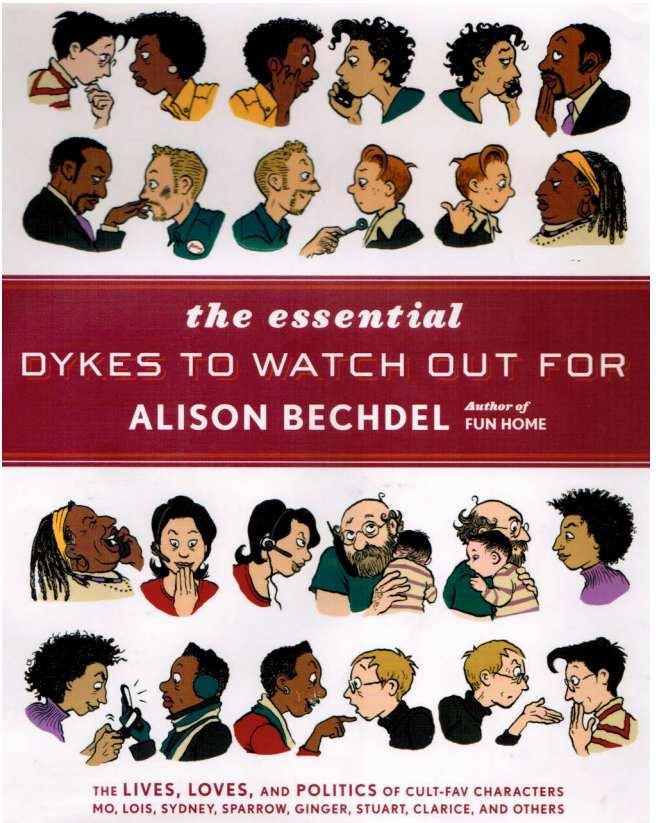
is also underlined by the fact that it includes all three men that populate the *Dykes* universe even though two of them (Carlos and Jerry) only play very minor roles. According to Judith Kegan Gardiner, this strategy was very successful at highlighting *Dykes*' harmonious diversity:

> Bechdel's cover updates Rockwell's all white world of 'The Gossip' while fulfilling the hope for a more integrated society adumbrated in Rockwell's famous illustration of 'The Problem We All Live With,' 1964, which shows a small, neatly-dressed African-American girl going to school surrounded by U.S. marshals and passing racist graffiti splattered like the tomato on the wall behind her. ("*Dykes*" 98)

Figure 2



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

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The world of *Dykes* is clearly not all-white, but the question of whether or not it actually "fulfill[s] the hope for a more integrated society" shall be explored in greater depth in the remaining chapter. For now, suffice it to point out that the fact that the number of Characters of Color on the cover is clearly exaggerated indicates that *Dykes* might not be quite as "integrated" as Gardiner seems to think. This strategy is reminiscent of the common practice in advertising brochures to feature the same few token People of Color over and over again in order to create the visual illusion of a diversity that does not really exist. Robin DiAngelo critiques this practice by pointing out that "[w]hen people of color are asked to be the face of a white-dominated organization in order for it to appear more diverse, they are put on the spot to promote something that is false" (202). It also bears noting that the very egalitarian chain of gossip depicted on the cover both starts and ends with Mo. Having the chain of gossip bookended by Mo once again underscores her central role in the comic and thus serves to center whiteness, even on a cover where white people are actually in the minority.

Mo not only fulfills a central narrative role, however. Her importance is further heightened by the fact that she is also very much based on the author herself. Bechdel writes, "Following the prescription to write what one knows, I made Mo like me: a young, white, middle-class, marginally employed lesbian-feminist. I tried to disguise her from looking too much like me by giving her glasses and longer hair" (*Indelible* 62). Despite these visual changes, Mo still looks very much like Bechdel herself, and this visual resemblance makes it easy to read Mo as the closest approximation to the voice of the author within the *Dykes* universe. This proximity is further underscored by the fact that Mo's values and world-views seem to be rather similar to those of the narrative voice of *Dykes*, which in turn is never explicitly differentiated from Bechdel herself, so that there is a rather seamless congruity between author, narrator, and central character in *Dykes*. This congruity finds its clearest expression in a strip called "Leadership Vacuum," which is the only strip in which Bechdel draws herself drawing the strip (detailed analysis: see below). *Dykes* usually has an omniscient extradiegetic narrator (cf. Rimmon-Kenan 93), whose distinctly acerbic, yet unobtrusive voice is discernible through the strip titles and short, often ironic comments linking one strip to another or linking different scenes within one strip. In a strip called "Life Force," for example, the narrator sets the scene by writing in the initial panel, "As the American Empire continues its inexorable decline behind a façade of yellow-beribboned **denial**, our patient heroines continue, in their own inexorable way, to nourish the **vital spark**" (110). The strip consists of three sequences, the first of which is introduced by the narrator as, "Mo and Harriet are getting down and dirty", the second, "Ginger is giddy with

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new agendas", and the third, "Toni and Clarice are starting from scratch!" (110). At least the first two of these introductions are wryly ironic because Mo does not, in fact "get dirty" at all at the new community garden she and Harriet are helping to plant because she "can't **stand** getting dirt under [her] fingernails" (110). Ginger is on her way back from the National Lesbian Conference and instead of pursuing any political agendas (as the nature of the event she attended might suggest), the only new agenda she pursues is a new relationship with a woman she met there. The initial introduction by the narrator also contains its own, dry critique because, while the characters do nourish something like the "life force" by planting a garden, starting a new relationship, and planning to have a baby, all of these activities could also very well be framed as a form of denial that does nothing to stop the First Gulf War. Their activities are also far from "inexorable," as Mo's gardening enthusiasm is hampered by the dirt under her fingernails, Ginger's political activism is sidetracked by a relationship prospect, and Clarice is too tired to stay awake long enough to track Toni's temperature. As this strip shows, the extradiegetic narrator is more subtle and ironic than Mo but generally shares Mo's exasperation at the state of the world as well as Mo's critique of the characters' ineffectiveness in bringing about social change.

In "Leadership Vacuum," the congruity between Mo, narrator, and the author, Bechdel, becomes even more pronounced because Mo and the narrator literally switch roles. The extradiegetic narrator (whom, in the absence of any information to the contrary, one presumes to be Bechdel herself) becomes a character in the strip, and Mo becomes an intradiegetic narrator (cf. Rimmon-Kenan 95). In the first panel we see a headshot of Mo directly addressing the reader and explaining that the strip is "experiencing some technical difficulties" (304). In the second panel, Mo is drawn in the foreground, again directly addressing the reader in an aside, "The cartoonist seems to be suffering from a touch of the vapors" (304, see fig. 3). "The cartoonist" is pictured in the background, trying to draw while the political news around Bill Clinton's possible impeachment keep changing by the minute. The obvious visual resemblance to Bechdel makes it clear that the cartoonist is none other than Bechdel herself. After several panels of Mo-as-narrator in the foreground explaining what is going on with Bechdel-as-character in the background, Bechdel-as-character takes over the panel and Mo moves into the space of the caption above the panel, where her commentary is given in a speech bubble emanating from Mo's tiny head (304, see fig. 4). By placing Mo's discourse in the space of the caption, the extradiegetic narrator symbolically cedes her space to Mo. By using Mo as the obvious substitute for the narrator while the narrator/author is temporarily incapacitated, this strip highlights the close proximity between the narrator/author and her cen-

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tral character. This proximity serves to establish whiteness firmly as the gravitational center of *Dykes*. *Dykes* is clearly written from a white perspective, and the reader perceives the world of the comic through this white lens.

Judith Levine's analysis of the introduction of Stuart, Sparrow's partner, into the world of *Dykes* also highlights both the importance of Bechdel's own political vision as a structuring principle of the *Dykes* universe as well as the close proximity of Mo's worldview to Bechdel's own. Levine writes, "The most positive male in Bechdel's work, Stuart, resembles Mo in their radical political views [...]. Bechdel said she introduced him because she wanted more characters 'who share my worldview,' not just those who are 'queer like me'" (57). Stuart is introduced in strip 278 at a point in the narrative where Mo's centrality is slowly decreasing, and the storylines of Characters of Color such as Clarice, Toni, and Jezanna are gaining in prominence. When Stuart is introduced in volume 8, his introduction can be read as an attempt on Bechdel's part to re-center her own political perspective in the *Dykes* universe. Incidentally, his introduction also serves to re-center white perspectives, since even though Stuart is Jewish, he is also very much portrayed as white. His whiteness is conveyed through his thin lips as well as the light coloring of his skin and hair on the cover of *The Essential Dykes To Watch Out For*. Lois and Ginger also explicitly read him as white when they first meet him (284). With Stuart's entrance, *Dykes* features not one but two characters whose politics very closely resemble Bechdel's own, and both of these characters are white.

Figure 3

Bechdel, *Post Dykes To Watch Out For* 20

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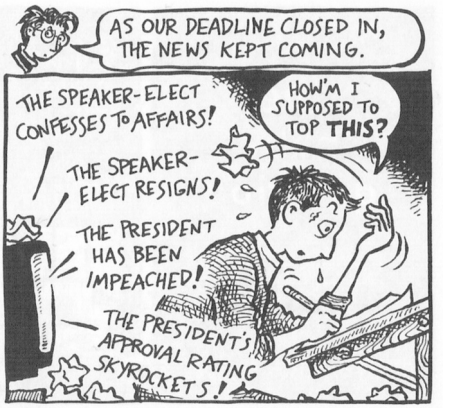
Figure 4



Bechdel, *Post Dykes To Watch Out For* 21

As this preliminary analysis of the representation, number, and centrality of characters of different races as well as their relations to each other has shown, the *Dykes* universe keeps whiteness firmly at its center and thus offers ample opportunities for identification as well as reassurance about their central place in the lesbian community to its white readers. Apparently, as the comments I quoted above indicate, the centrality of our perspectives allows white lesbians to feel well represented by the story world of *Dykes*. It feels 'accurate' and 'real' to us that the lesbian community revolves around lesbians 'like us.' This is hardly surprising, given that much of lesbian culture in the U.S. did and does in fact revolve around white lesbians, as Cherríe Moraga observed as early as 1983: "During the late 70s, the concept of 'women's culture' among white lesbians and 'cultural feminists' was in full swing; it is still very popular today. 'Womon's history,' 'wommin's music,' 'womyn's spirituality,' 'wymyn's language' abounded – all with the 'white' modifier implied and unstated" (117). More than 10 years later, Trinity A. Ordona concurs when she writes, "There are no signs designating 'white only,' yet white lesbians and gay men almost exclusively hold the reins of leadership and dominate the membership of most all gay organizations – political clubs, churches, publications, athletics, professional associations, and businesses" (384). The same is true for the feminist movement, which has a large overlap with the lesbian movement. As Nancy A. Matthews stated in 1989, "Despite collectivist feminist roots in the civil rights movement and the

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new left of the 1960s, the women's liberation movement in the United States remained dominated by white and middle-class women" (519). After reviewing the available research in 2005, Ellen K. Scott also concluded "that most feminist organizations failed to establish and sustain racial diversity" (233). As recently as June 2015, an internal report about the state of diversity at the Human Rights Campaign, which is currently the largest LGBT rights organization in the U.S., revealed that the organization is not only 70 % white but also concentrates power in the hands of white people to such an extent that it was described as a "white men's club" by employees (Rivas, n. pag.). In this context, it makes historical sense that an accurate portrayal of lesbian culture from the 1980s to the 2000s would place whiteness at its center and that this portrayal would feel 'normal' and 'right' to white readers.

What is perhaps more surprising than the centrality of whiteness in *Dykes* is the simultaneous presence of a very multicultural cast of characters. As I already established in chapter 2.3, lesbian (and gay) spaces in the U.S. do not just 'happen' to be mostly white; they are white because of the "well-documented history of racism in the lesbian and gay movement" (Barnard 3). Suleimon Giwa and Cameron Greensmith similarly conclude, "Research from the United States [...] and to some extent Canadian research as well [...], suggest that in North America, racism and discrimination within White LGBTQ communities negatively affect people of color. Likewise, these findings imply that race relations between Whites and non-Whites are fraught with tension and ambivalence" (169f). If lesbian spaces in the U.S. were and are indeed often white-dominated, rife with racism, and fraught with the attendant "tension and ambivalence" between white lesbians and Lesbians of Color, it is somewhat baffling that a portrayal of a very diverse, but almost entirely harmonious group of lesbians with strong interracial bonds would feel so 'real' and 'accurate' to its white readers. This is all the more surprising because, as Ruth Frankenberg observes, since at least the 1980s, when Bechdel first started drawing *Dykes*, "white feminist women like myself could no longer fail to notice the critique of white feminist racism by feminist/radical women of color" (2).

Since conflict-free, multiracial, LGBTIQ spaces have clearly not been a very wide-spread phenomenon in the U.S. in the past 40 years, it is unlikely that *Dykes* feels real to white readers because it accurately mirrors our real-life experiences. What is more likely is that it feels real because it depicts a counterfactual fantasy of a harmonious, multiracial lesbian community that many white readers *wish* was similar to our own reality. In the next subchapter, I will trace precisely where *Dykes*' understanding of race relations truthfully reflects contemporary racial regimes and where it begins to veer into the realm of white

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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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