GRAPHIC ECOLOGIES: AESTHETICS OF ENVIRONMENTAL EQUITY IN POSTWAR AMERICAN COMICS

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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In the postwar era of the United States, as military-industrial chemicals leak into airways, waterways, and foodways in unprecedented plumes and cancer clusters, comic art forms generate diverse environmental imaginations. Though historically disparaged as disposable ephemera, comics provide unique access to environmental expression in this critical period. This dissertation analyzes the formal registers of two independent newspaper strips and four graphic cancer narratives for an aesthetics of equity: a set of verbal-visual moves that chart awareness of environmental devastation as determined by privilege and power. The iconicity of the drawn body—its lines, shape, and movement—grapples with complex legacies of environmental harm and exclusion. Maps of environmental risk perception generated through game board motifs, collages, and icon repetition rely on the capacity of sequential art to engage readers in recognizing and analyzing postwar risk. In form and theme, an aesthetics of equity in comics deploys environmental knowledges subordinated and sharpened by interlocking social inequities. This aesthetics revises the elisions and assumptions of mainstream environmentalisms. Ultimately, comics demand a literacy particularly well suited to environmental justice (EJ) ecocriticsm.

The dissertation comprises three chapters of analysis. The first examines competing environmental discourses in Alison Bechdel's *Dykes to Watch Out For* (1982-2008). This newspaper strip coincides exactly with the start of the contemporary EJ movement. In examining three character arcs across a quarter of a century, I track the emergence of EJ discourse in Bechdel's distinctly lesbian environmental imagination. The second chapter examines the heteronormative limits of the EJ story arc in Jackie Ormes' midcentury romance strip *Torchy in Heartbeats* (1953-4). Published weekly in the *Comic Section* of the Black newspaper the *Pittsburgh Courier*, *Torchy* chronicles its eponymous heroine's quest to end environmental racism in the fictional small town of Southville. Torchy's affect and body language revise romance genre conventions and expose sexism and racism as intersecting environmental oppressions. The third chapter examines transcoporeal exchange in four contemporary graphic cancer narratives from the early 21st century. This chapter examines the extent to which graphic cancer narratives "move out," to use Diane Herndl's phrase, to form coalitions with disparate environmental communities.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In the postwar era of the United States, as military-industrial chemicals leak into airways, waterways, and foodways in unprecedented plumes and cancer clusters, comic art forms take up environmental problems in unexpected ways. A midcentury Black romance strip interrogates environmental racism through the love of an African American woman and her doctor boyfriend. A late-century lesbian newspaper strip rages at climate change as characters celebrate a long-awaited pregnancy at the local lesbian café. Graphic cancer narratives published by mainstream literary houses map carcinogenicy in floating dust from 9/11. Through their distinct verbal-visual codes, postwar comic art forms admit, trouble, and transform perceptions of environmental harm and collective action. These comics deploy expressive iconicity, taut page tensions, and striking use of color to activate a new environmental poetics. Ultimately, these sequential arts advance a distinctive aesthetics of equity that register and respond to postwar environmental destruction.

Independent and mainstream comic projects in this period of United States history take up diverse environmental concerns. Independent comic art forms offer unprecedented access to marginalized environmentalisms, including environmental justice, while comic art forms from mainstream literary houses, especially those forms that trouble norms of the body, further reconfigure what counts as an environment and what counts as an environmentalism. This dissertation examines comics as sites of competing environmental discourses in three critical decades of the US postwar period: Jackie Ormes's *Torchy in Heartbeats* (1953-4), Alison Bechdel's *Dykes to Watch Out*

For (1982-2008), and four contemporary graphic cancer narratives (mid-2000s). These comics do not style themselves as environmental projects, and thus mobilize vital environmental inquiry. As prominent ecocritical scholars from Lawrence Buell to Ursula Heise agree, "ecocriticism becomes most interesting and useful…when it aims to recover the environmental character or orientation of works whose conscious or foregrounded interests lie elsewhere" (Kern 11). Texts that don't declare their environmental character, or, alternatively, develop an environmental imagination not customarily analyzed as such, compel innovative environmental imaginations. This is because such comics tend to frame marginalized environmental issues within a host of interests that should be addressed in mainstream environmentalism but are often overlooked. Volatile emotional affect in these newspaper strips and tropes of risk perception in these cancer narratives define the relationship between human community and nature as determined by social disparities. Indeed, comics that eschew a self-conscious environmentalism tend to make more room for comprehensive environmental representation. These comics register and respond to marginalized environmentalisms in the midcentury Black press, in late-century gay and lesbian newspapers, and in mainstream literary publishing houses of the contemporary period. In their distinct forms and complex production histories, these comics map diverging environmental paradigms in the postwar United States.

By taking up comics from the alternative press and from marginalized author-artists, this dissertation pays attention to environmental knowledges produced by multiply minoritized subject positions. Intersecting minority experiences—including those determined by race, class, gender, sexuality, and disability—converge with and depart from one another, yielding subordinated strategies of environmental engagement that

transform the bedrock of mainstream environmental discourse. Mainstream environmentalism, as represented by the ethical aims of dominant environmental institutions like the Sierra Club and the Environmental Protection Agency, typically assumes nature to be an entity distinct from human industry and culture. Yet marginalized environmentalisms, including environmental justice, understand the relationship between the natural world and human life as flow: humans are materially and socially implicated in the life of the natural world. This sense of intra-relationship enables environmental justice discourse to reclaim representational sites typically disregarded by mainstream environmentalists, including the water and foodways in the rural African American town of Southville in *Torchy in Heartbeats*, in low-income urban neighborhoods in *Dykes to Watch Out For*, and in the very bodies of cancer patients in contemporary graphic cancer narratives. These sites generate a set of aesthetics that denotes nature not as exclusive pastoral sanctuary or untamed wilderness, but the place where people live, work, play, and worship.

Environmental justice poetics comprise a wide range of representations of environmental health and vitality. Because environmental oppressions follow intersecting legacies of social disparity, environmental poetics engage the knowledges produced by these legacies. As Patricia Hill Collins argues in *Black Feminist Thought* (1990), transforming interlocking systems of oppression necessitates a paradigm shift in how scholars conceptualize knowledge itself. Rather than merely adding minority concerns into mainstream discourses, for example, subsuming women of color feminisms as a subset of White feminism, or neatly labeling environmental justice as a vector of mainstream environmentalism, Collins argues that subordinated knowledges alter the

fundamental assumptions of privilege and power that produce mainstream discourses in the first place. The knowledges produced by intersecting minority subject positions radically alter any and every launching point for meaningful environmental analysis. Such knowledges resonate strongly with environmental justice (EJ) ecocriticism.

EJ ecocriticism reveals concealed environmental communities in concealed environmental texts. Rather than following mainstream ecocriticsm with universalizing narratives of environmental harm or accepting one set of approaches to nature as comprehensive, EJ ecocriticism seeks to honor the environmental knowledges and activism of multiply minoritized communities. Such engagement produces a distinct ecocriticism attentive to negotiations of systemic injustice and complex oppression. Indeed, though it arrives late in the chronology of environmental literary analysis, EJ ecocriticsm exposes the political grounds from which all other ecocriticisms emerge. The congruent and yet distinct knowledges of women, multiethnic groups, queer communities, and people with disabilities find purchase in the EJ comics ecocriticism that this dissertation seeks to mobilize.

The medium of comics is especially receptive to generating a poetics of environmental justice. In the *Environmental Justice Reader* (2002), Joni Adamson, Mei Mei Evans, and Rachel Stein define EJ poetics as an "exploration of the many expressive arts used to transform toxic landscapes, to voice community experiences of environmental racism, and to imaginatively convey issues at stake in environmental justice struggles" (9). EJ poetics are thus as varied and interdisciplinary as EJ discourse itself. The term encompasses representation, community expression, and imagination in pursuit of environmental health. In comics, verbal-visual forms demand a flexible,

creative literacy from readers. Just as environmental justice discourse requires scholars to read environmental disparities across time, comics requires scholars to read complex combinations of word and image across sequences. The work of reading the comic page replicates the work of reading environmental justice in real world. When comics take up the reality of environmental harm disproportionately burdened on vulnerable communities, the formal registers of page layout, panel design, iconicity, lineart, and color configure the stakes of environmental equity.

Though no comics scholarship has taken up meaningful environmental justice analysis, contemporary scholarship is alert to marginalized author-artists within comics history. Though once considered pure junk, comic art forms are now understood as complex registers of human expression and experience. Three recent volumes stand out among many others that together represent the collective urgency in the academy to create a comics canon attentive to discourses of ethnicity, gender, and sexuality: Frederick Luis Aldama's *Multicultural Comics: From Zap to Blue Beetle* (2010), Hillary Chute's *Graphic Women* (2010), Justin Hall's *No Straight Lines: Four Decades of Queer Comics* (2012). Aldama's collection explores how a wide range of comic genres trouble and occasionally capitulate to scripts of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. Chute's monograph examines how woman cartoonists deploy autobiographical comics to re-conceptualize history and memory. Hall's historical anthology of original comix captures the vibrancy and diversity of postwar queer cartoonists and comics with queer investments. Disability studies and the medical humanities further intervene in comic studies not only through critical literature by José Alaniz and Susan Squier but through the annual Syracuse University conference "Cripping the Comic Con" and the new Penn

State book series *Graphic Medicine*. Jeffery A. Brown, Ann Elizabeth Moore, Trina Robbins, Marc Singer, Gwen Athene Tarbox, and Qiana Whitted consistently point to the work of minority author-artists in their teaching and scholarship. Clearly, comic studies is in active pursuit of complex representations of race, class, gender, sexuality, and disability in mainstream and independent titles.

However, no comics scholarship has taken up meaningful environmental analysis of comics. No anthology of environmental comics or environmental analysis of comics yet exists. While there are promising ecocritical collections and monographs about cultural productions often associated with comics, for example, children's literature and ecocriticism (Dobrin and Kidd 2004) and environmental animated cartoons (Murray and Heumann 2011, Pike 2012), a distinct study of comics has yet to be incorporated into any scholarly collection on environmental literature, EJ or otherwise. We can speculate that the absence of such a collection may be the result of confusion within the academy about the relevance and availability of comics to ecocritical analysis. Scholars of ecomedia revise academic assumptions about what counts as a text and what makes a text worthy of ecocritical study. Indeed, comic studies itself remains self-conscious about its academic authority. Yet as Douglas Wolk attests, "Comics are not prose. Comics are not movies. They are not a text-driven medium with added pictures; they're not the visual equivalent of a prose narrative or a static version of a film. They are their own thing: a medium with its own devices, its own innovators, its own clichés, its own genres and traps and liberties" (14). Comics have a lot to offer ecocritical scholarship when approached as "their own thing," rather than being misunderstood or dismissed as an uneasy hybrid of existing media forms.

It is perhaps understandable that existing EJ scholarship on comics is generally not in conversation with the relatively new discipline of comic studies. Scholarship that examines how a comic registers environmental inequity tends to rely on questions and methods familiar to existing academic fields, and rarely takes up the study of comics as art forms. Finis Dunaway has sought to respond to comics through an EJ visual culture analysis. Dunaway examines Walt Kelly's comic strip *Pogo* in the discourse of the First Earth Day (67). This promising endeavor concerns the political implications of a slogan attributed to Pogo the Possum in comic art of a mainstream environmental protest poster ("We have met the enemy and he is us"). Dunaway compellingly argues that this phrase obscures the power relations inherent to experiences of environmental harm and typifies the failure of the mainstream movement to be transformed by EJ discourse.

While Dunaway's analysis of the erasure of environmental justice by images of the mainstream environmental movement is absolutely critical, his approach is in fact not an analysis of Walt Kelly's newspaper strip or the icon of Pogo himself. Instead Dunaway studies the cultural reception of a motto that originated in the comic and typified a phenomenon of the first Earth Day. By focusing on a slogan from *Pogo* rather than the newspaper strip or the icon himself, Dunaway's argument overlooks the comic art form of *Pogo* itself.

Perhaps the most developed vein of mainstream environmental scholarship about comics is about the single-panel political cartoon. Dale Goble, Paul Hirt, and Susan Kilgore chart the evolution of the 19th and 20th century American environmental imagination according to editorial cartoons published during across these centuries. These scholars study how political cartoons deploy the animal icon as a marker of

political change and thus signal different attitudes of conservationism and post-Earth Day environmentalism. In his corresponding project on the cultural anxieties of the post-*Silent Spring* era, Mark Barrow, Jr. chronicles the social reception of Rachel Carson's watershed book in eleven editorial cartoons and a single newspaper strip, Charles Schulz's *Peanuts*. After examining the use of caricature, irony, and symbolism in these comics, Barrow concludes that "this body of cartoons reveals a shared set of understandings about how modern technology presented potential dangers to both humans and the natural world" (Barrow 164). In other words, these comics generate a compelling mainstream environmental imagination that is sensitive to the pretense of the postwar chemical industry. Yet while such scholarship about political cartoons analyzes the tension between text and image and the role of iconicity in visual argumentation, it doesn't treat single-panel cartoons as just one comic art form among many that produce environmental representations. Indeed, with the exception of Barrow's brief appraisal of *Peanuts*, virtually all scholarship devoted to EJ readings of comics misses what happens in the sequential comic arts. Despite the fact that newspaper strips, comic books, graphic memoir, and webcomics develop critical environmental investments that easily match those of explicitly political cartoons, an EJ ecocritical study of these comic art forms has not yet been done.

This dissertation seeks to activate such scholarship by beginning to re-frame the environmental humanities through the perspective of comic studies and by re-framing comic studies from the perspective of EJ ecocriticism. EJ ecocriticism argues that the environmental sensibility of any text is generated through unequal distribution of social and political power. It asks how a text represents access to environmental goods as well

as access to legal instruments of environmental regulation; it asks who benefits from a text's framing of nature and whose environmental rights are ignored, forgotten, or outright denied by this framing; and it asks if a text constructs nature as a romantic and/or utilitarian object for human use or as the complex place where people live, work, and play. In short, an EJ reading of a comic is alive to the legacies of racism, classism, sexism, homophobia, ableism, and colonialism that encode that comic's environmental imagination. It aims not to dishearten mainstream environmentalism, but to transform its imaginative possibilities and to engage it in meaningful coalition with EJ aims. My contribution to an EJ ecocriticism of comics asks how comic art forms produce an aesthetics of environmental equity.

Reading for an aesthetics of environmental equity takes up a set of critical perspectives that examines a text for its depictions of access to clean air, water, and food, the zoning of industrial poisons and production, as well as access to environmental beauty and recreation. Dr. Mindy Thompson Fullilove (2005) defines an aesthetics of equity as a set of architectural principles to guide the development of urban communities. In response to the community devastation of misguided mid-century revitalization projects, Fullilove proposes principles that would honor the residents of vulnerable neighborhoods by incorporating their knowledges into community design, ensuring the resiliency of neighborhood habitats, providing legal support for future development, and providing superb accessibility for people of all abilities. Katie Hogan (2012) adapts Fullilove's equity aesthetics in her reading of LGBT environmental justice in Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* (1993). Hogan argues that dialogue and characterization constitute aesthetics of equity as queer environmentalism in Kushner's play.

In comics, an aesthetics of equity comprises a set of formal moves related to Fullilove's architectural principles and Hogan's analysis of scene and dialogue, and yet specific to the unique capacity of the medium. The iconicity of the drawn body—its lines, shape, movement, and expression—records how communities grapple with complex legacies of environmental harm and exclusion. Maps of environmental risk perception generated through game board motifs, collages, and icon repetition rely on the capacity of sequential art to engage readers in analyzing postwar risk. Such an aesthetics registers community access to environmental health in the everyday world, not in sites of alleged wilderness or romantic escape. In formal moves and themes, an aesthetics of equity in comics registers environmental knowledges subordinated and sharpened by interlocking social inequities.

To demonstrate how reading for aesthetics of equity in comics opens up postwar American environmental imaginations, this introduction will examine two mainstream American newspaper strips: Ed Dodd and Tom Hill's *Mark Trail* (1946-present) and Charles Schulz's *Peanuts* (1950-2000). These strips take up the popular discourses of conservationism, anti-toxics discourse, and an ethic of reciprocal care for the natural world. At the same time, these strips are notable for the knowledges they circumvent: minority responses to legacies of disproportionate environmental harm, and the desperate need for minority representation in legal instruments of environmental regulation. While *Mark Trail* and *Peanuts* register meaningful mainstream environmental discourses, including an ethical orientation that prioritizes ecological resilience over human industry and profit, their environmental imaginations fortify one environmentalism at the expense of others. Their environmental imaginations tend to privilege the views of able-bodied,

heterosexual, White men rather than recognizing multiply minoritized ways of knowing the natural world.

Any study of a comic's aesthetic representation of the natural world must consider its form as well as its content. Formal analysis thinks through the tensions introduced by the comic page, including the use of panel, gutter, and sequence (Hatfield 132). Generally, the environmental imagination of a comic art form emerges in two distinctive ways. First, a comic may knowingly endorse a particular environmental paradigm through its narrative content and formal structure. Alternatively, and perhaps most compellingly, a comic's environmental imagination might emerge in latent environmental concerns and foci. In this dissertation, I consider the iconicity of the body, performances of emotional affect, and verbal-visual maps of environmental risk as aesthetics of environmental equity. Whether through deliberate examination of an environmental issue or in latent, unconscious environmental investments, these aesthetics mobilize distinct and often competing environmental ideologies.

Mark Trail (1946-present) is often cited as the representative environmental comic of the postwar American period, despite the fact that the strip is representative of a very specific vein of mainstream American environmentalism. For more than 60 years, this strip has enjoyed wide syndication as it stridently campaigns for wilderness conservation. *Mark Trail* pursues the adventures of its eponymous leading man. Like many other adventure strip heroes, Mark Trail embodies the environmental paradigm of White, heterosexual, and able-bodied men. As a photojournalist for an outdoor magazine, Mark Trail protects the fictional national park of Lost Forest with "a crushing right cross" (Fruhlinger). In addition to fighting off poachers and rural drug-dealers, our square-jawed

wildlife reporter has advocated for many conservationist issues, "including preservation of Alaskan wilderness lands, urging boat speed limits to protect the manatee in Florida, and countering the maligned reputations of coyotes, wolves, mountain lions, and alligators" (Hill 2003). The strip's artwork codes its hero's storied investment in conserving wildlife and wilderness. For example, the center panel of a typical daily strip regularly features extreme close-ups of various animals in mid-flight or mid-leap in the foreground (fig 1; see Appendices A-D for all figures). In the same frame, tiny human figures meander in the background or vanish to nothing but their speech balloons, perfectly unconcerned with the frame's sudden focus on, for example, the panel's close-up on a dancing trout or startled deer. This dynamic focalization disorients the reader; it can sometimes be difficult to tell if the animals themselves are speaking or if an off-panel human character is talking. The sudden size of the featured animal is further disorienting: diminutive forest creatures can appear astonishingly colossal in the focus on the strip. The panel sequence of *Mark Trail* thus sets up a formal tension between the size of animal icons and the size of humans; the first and final panels of the three typically focalize on humans in dialogue. In its use of focalization as well as its narrative content, *Mark Trail* imagines a conservationist paradigm that emphasizes human reverence for and submission to the active interests of the more-than-human world. Its lyrical investment in honoring wildlife interrupts and disorients any anthropocentric narrative flow. Thus, the form of the strip supports its decidedly ecocentric vantage point.

Yet iconicity in *Mark Trail* reiterates several key problems in mainstream American conservationism. As is the case in many mainstream midcentury newspaper strips, all characters in *Mark Trail* are White: the strip effectively erases minority

perspectives and relationships to the natural world. While the stark absence of minority characters may be conventional in mainstream comics of the time, this absence defines wilderness in *Mark Trail* as a sanctuary exclusively for White people; people of color simply don't exist in its universe. This historical absence generates a curious environmental racism that not only ignores the environmental interests of peoples of color but their very existence. Compounding the erasure of a multiethnic perception of nature, the strip limits female roles to Mark's White girlfriend Cherry, and Cherry's rival, Kelly Welly. These women concentrate chiefly on Mark Trail's hard-lined physique and his readiness to box his wilderness-abusing opponents. In keeping with adventure strip convention, female characters in the strip function as romantic distractions rather than complex people. Their environmental engagement is limited to vying for male affection and rewarding the hero with expressions of love. Thus women in *Mark Trail* don't challenge the heteronormative conservationism Mark advocates. As Mei Mei Evans argues, dominant narratives of the American wilderness are marked by latent racism and heterosexism, which problematically define nature as "the province of white heterosexual masculinity" (Evans 183). While the adventure strip constructs ecocentric ideals about the relationship between animals and humans, it also privileges one specific frame of reference, a White heterosexual man, as the authority of this imagination. This authority shores up troubling ideals of mainstream environmentalism. *Mark Trail* proves that while a comic can consciously endorse an environmental politics like conservationism, it also risks reiterating the conceptual limits associated with this politics.

Congruent to *Mark Trail*, a great range of mainstream and independent genres of comics purposely encourage readers to take up diverging environmental concerns. One of

the benefits that EJ ecocriticsm brings to comic studies is a deeper appreciation for the diversity of comic genres that participate in competing environmental discourses. These comics projects adopt potent definitions of what counts as an environment and what counts as a problem. Conversely, looking at comic projects from an environmental perspective challenges the definition of what counts as a comic. Perhaps unsurprisingly, comic art forms that explicitly address environmental issues tend to be independent or creator-owned rather than syndicated. Comics of the Underground Comix movement for example directly support mainstream environmental causes. The underground series *Slow Death Funnies* (1970) was first released to correspond with the first Earth Day by the independent press Last Gasp in San Francisco. Among its many environmental investments, this series is decisively anti-nuclear energy. *Slow Death* revises the comic book propaganda of GE-sponsored pro-atomic energy comic books in the postwar period (Rilfas 255). These often gruesome and satirical comic books feature personified icons of atomic power and teams of strong, silent scientists vowing to protect the bright future of the United States.

The clashing nuclear imaginations of these comic books each further differ from with Laurence Hyde's *Southern Cross* (1951), a silent comic that details the United States invasion and bombing of the Bikini Atoll following WWII. Hyde's astonishing wordless novel features meticulous black and white wood engravings that chronicle the fallout of military testing on island and marine wildlife as well as its Indigenous people. *Southern Cross* is an example of what would modern graphic story telling in comics, according to Will Eisner (1). In its haunting, kinetic wood engravings, *Southern Cross* explicitly addresses the destruction of not only indigenous lands but indigenous knowledges as an

issue of environmental justice. Still other contemporary independent projects explicitly concern environmental justice, including *Mayah's Lot* (2011). In 2011, artist Charlie La Greca and Dr. Rebecca Bratspies, a law professor at CUNY, published a superhero comic about Mayah, a teenage African American girl and guerilla gardener in New York fighting illegal dumping in her neighborhood. The comic book collaboration was guided by the participation of a class of students in the local New York school system. La Greca and Bratspies posted the subsequent comic online and designed corresponding elementary school curriculum to help students create comics, participate in community advocacy, and learn about environmental regulation. *Mayah's Lot* is still available for free online download today.

Yet comics often develop environmental imaginations that aren't conspicuously environmental at first glance. For example, the post-*Silent Spring* environmentalism of Charles Schulz's *Peanuts* (1950-present) generates an environmental imagination that is more incidental than central to the strip. For this reason, though *Peanuts* isn't widely analyzed for its environmental imagination, this legendary mid-century newspaper strip constitutes the central frame of my close-readings in the balance of this introduction.

Even when comics don't endorse an environmental orientation on purpose they nonetheless inscribe into their form and content the environmental character of their era. For example, in the decade following *Silent Spring* (1962), *Peanuts*, along with many other mainstream strips from *Pogo* to *Hi and Lois*, responded to the concerns of the new mainstream environmental era. This era realized the problem of unprecedented postwar environmental harm and actively sought to mobilize legal instruments to mitigate the damage. According to Dorceta Taylor, this new environmental era "articulated a bold

new vision that critiqued the development of large, complex, and energy-intensive issues such as nuclear power, population control, pollution prevention, risk reduction, energy, recycling, and environmental cleanups" (Taylor 10). It sought to develop technologies of regulation that would address national environmental issues. Yet this era didn't recognize how environmental issues differ according to race and class; although it accepted experiences of shared risk, it didn't take up the reality of unequal risk. That this movement addressed the fact of shared environmental risk is indeed momentous, but readers should also note the limits of its momentum: by failing to take up more comprehensive and just ways of responding to environmental risk, this era responds to the concerns of the most privileged rather than the concerns of the comprehensive environmental community. The comprehensive environmental community includes "poor people, women, communities of color, Indigenous peoples, and minorities, and citizens of developing nations" (Dotson and Whyte 55). These concerns generally don't find traction in comics that take up a mainstream environmental imagination.

Comics can develop problems in their mainstream environmental imaginations that may seem unauthorized or unconscious. For instance, the recent Charles M. Schulz Museum exhibition "Peanuts…Naturally" (2012) provides a retrospective look at icons of nature in Schulz's famous comic strip. Schulz imagines a lively environment of bouncy flowers, thick blankets of falling snow, and kite-eating trees, all drawn in his sophisticated economy of line and syncopated page layout. The exhibit also celebrates Schulz's playful incorporation of mainstream environmental figures and institutions, including the strip's homage to Rachel Carson in several strips and its farcical story arc in which the Environmental Protection Agency as a sometime antagonist to Charlie Brown.

Yet while *Peanuts* introduced Franklin, its first African American character, with sensitivity and grace in 1968, the strip was slow to take up the concerns of environmental racism that might have preoccupied Franklin's family. As an African American outsider to Charlie Brown's neighborhood, Franklin could realistically expect to breathe, drink, and play in poisons that his White friends never had to worry about. As Robert Bullard argues, Black Americans bear disproportionate environmental burdens based not only on class but on race (5). Like many post-*Silent Spring* newspaper strips, *Peanuts* doesn't take on Franklin's particular knowledge and experience as shaped by his environmental vantage point.

In addition to eliding concerns of environmental racism, the environmental imagination of *Peanuts* doesn't cover environmental sexism. For example, in the wake of *Silent Spring* (1962), *Peanuts* references Rachel Carson by name in several daily strips. These strips configure the quiet and controversial ecologist as an incongruous hero for Lucy, the strip's boisterous and often graceless know-it-all. Mark Barrow, Jr. argues that Carson, "an articulate, educated female who was not afraid to speak her mind in public," probably served as a promising role model for Lucy at the start of the women's movement (163). Yet Lucy's clumsy and furious self-promotion renders her preoccupation with Carson as ridiculous as it is earnest. In emphasizing the crush the ever-egotistical Lucy has on Carson, Schulz valorizes the ecologist's genuine altruism in publishing her seminal project and honors her lyrical representation of the natural world. Although Lucy might celebrate her hero by carrying a baseball bat emblazoned with Carson's name (12 Nov. 1962), Lucy has little patience for studying "stupid butterflies" for a school project in a memorable Sunday strip (fig. 2). Lucy exhausts herself by

shouting in bolded lettering and wildly chasing the hovering specimens with her net. She runs to and fro, from foreground to background, across the thin hatching of the grass, surrounded by the dotted spiral of the butterflies' flight in the air, as though she herself were entangled in the net of their dizzying movement. Her brother Linus stands silently by, his striped shirt and timid air reminiscent of A.A. Milne's Piglet, watching from the periphery of Lucy's action. At the peak of the frenzy, as the butterflies have steadily increased from one to two to three in a cloud of trailing dots, Lucy admits to Linus that she needs the stupid butterflies for school. Hereafter, the action in the strip clears and quiets. In the first two panels of the final row of the strip, Linus is suddenly alone with the butterflies. He quietly tilts his open palm up and out, first right, and then left, as though consciously summoning the flying insects. Like clockwork, they float easily to his palm. When Linus hands them like a still-life bouquet to the wild-eyed Lucy, his tender words of protection ("Promise you'll let them go after you've studied them, will you?") are a marked departure from Lucy's frenetic and domineering commands that the butterflies "**HOLD STILL, I SAY**!"

This Sunday strip shows two different ethical orientations to the natural world between brother and sister: that of romanticized participation and that of abject domination. When Lucy throws her net over Linus's head in frustration, he implies that his perception of the natural world is more like Rachel Carson's than Lucy's: "I can't believe that Rachel Carson would ever let herself get so upset!" Linus here loosens the narrative of perceived human dominance into a reciprocal and respectful participation with the natural world. However, Linus' status as a White, heterosexual male who knows nature better than his belligerent sister unconsciously reprises the role of Mark Trail in

the Lost Forest. The environmental imagination of this strip is lyrically pastoral, but problematic in its fortification of nature as a space of White, heterosexual transcendence and finesse. However, unlike Mark Trail, whose earnest tone compromises its capacity to sustain irony, the humor in *Peanuts* disorients a straight-faced reading of its problems. Linus *and* Lucy are the butt of the joke here; Linus for his butterfly-catching pretentiousness, and Lucy for her impatience and short-temper. Neither emerges as a clear winner in this contest of environmental ethics.

Reading the environmental aesthetics of *Peanuts* must also take into account the cross-pollination of its iconic characters in government-sponsored environmental literature. After the first Earth Day in 1970 and the surge of new American environmental regulation, including the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the character icons of Snoopy and Woodstock feature prominently in government-sponsored 'Johnny Horizon' promotional materials. This campaign includes poster art and pamphlets designed to encourage school children to adopt mainstream environmentalist behaviors (Pilgrim). The U.S. Department of the Interior "recruited" the *Peanuts* animal icons for the environmental campaign and local Bureau of Land Management (BLM) offices distributed the materials ("Snoopy Joins Battle Against Pollution"). America's iconic beagle and his faithful bird-friend thus took to Day Glo-colored placards to encourage young civilians to "Bend a Little, Pick Up a Lot" and to "Pounce on Pollution!" (fig 3).

Schulz's striking page design is critical to the argument of these promotional posters. Each poster generally features a single enlarged character icon rendered in Schulz's trembling, buoyant black lineart. The interior space of each icon is paper-white

against the neon wash of the background. The colorful punch of these posters conveys the optimism and urgency of the youthful movement they advertise. By directly addressing its audience through placards or speech balloons, each poster essentially functions as a large, single-panel cartoon. This national poster campaign compellingly connects familiar *Peanuts* animal icons with an ethos of public service and consumer-citizen initiative. As government-sponsored mascots, Snoopy and Woodstock continue a legacy of cartoon animals pressed into national service for lofty conservationist aims ("Only you can prevent forest fires!" as Smoky Bear reminds us). These educational poster arts exhort youth to identify themselves with an ethic of personal accountability as espoused by a beloved cartoon icon and implicitly sanctioned by the Mark-Trail lookalike Johnny Horizon.

The "Johnny Horizon" *Peanuts* posters convey a growing anti-toxics discourse in the decade following *Silent Spring*. *Peanuts* recognizes that environmental health is a critical factor in the evolving anti-toxics movement of the postwar nation. Concurrent to the poster campaign, Schulz began to reference the newly created Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in daily strips. Of course, Charlie Brown is not a very good environmentalist; he is only really good at getting things wrong. Thus, in a March 1977 story arc, when Charlie Brown takes a big bite out of the kite-eating tree in revenge for yet another lost kite, he receives a threatening letter from the EPA. The EPA interrupts the tranquil domestic scene of the Brown household: Charlie Brown is neatly seated on a tiny stool in front of the TV when Sally hands him the letter. The arrival of the letter riffs on the poor kid's predictably bad luck. But this sequence also sustains a critique of the EPA's preoccupation with individual rather than systemic environmental change: the

EPA appears to waste resources on solitary citizens biting trees. As Michael Maniates argues, such individualization "diverts attention from political arenas that matter" (44). An intense focus on saving a single tree or picking up a handful of litter displaces a collective focus on the elite powers and corporations that generate environmental harm in the first place.

The individualization that Schulz lampoons is symptomatic of a mainstream environmentalism that fails to counter environmental racism. Despite its roots in the Civil Rights Movement, mainstream environmentalism tends to elide social disparities that produce critically distinct environmental realities. Though *Peanuts* doesn't develop an active aesthetics of environmental justice, the strip's attention to anti-toxics discourse and its subtle troubling of the legal failures of mainstream environmental law does suggest a readiness for meaningful coalitional engagement. An analysis of Franklin's character arc over its quarter-century run in the strip would perhaps reveal more of the tension between the practice of mainstream environmentalism and its lofty aims.

This dissertation seeks to reorient postwar environmental discourse by examining multiple sites of marginalized comics production and marginalized environmental themes in mainstream comics. The second chapter concerns the evolving environmental imagination of Alison Bechdel's *Dykes to Watch Out For* (1982-2008). Bechdel is renowned for her memoir *Fun Home* (2006), the award-winning graphic narrative about her relationship to her closeted father. Yet Bechdel's first major cartooning project, an endeavor that exactly coincides with the beginning of the contemporary EJ movement, has received little critical attention. I track three characters arcs that develop divergent sensibilities of environmental community across the run of the strip. I argue that

Bechdel's supple, charming lineart in drawing lesbian bodies contributes to the strip's aesthetics of environmental equity. In examining three character arcs across a quarter of a century, I track the emergence of a 1990s pull toward environmental justice discourse in Bechdel's distinctly lesbian environmental imagination.

The third chapter of this dissertation concerns a two-year story arc in Jackie Ormes' midcentury romance comic strip *Torchy in Heartbeats* (1953-4). Jackie Ormes was the first African American woman cartoonist and published prolifically in the Black press during her career, yet her work has received shockingly little scholarly attention. In 1953, her romance newspaper strip *Torchy in Heartbeats* takes up the concerns of environmental racism in the small Southern town of Southville. Though the strip is extraordinary for its treatment of environmental justice three full decades before the contemporary movement, *Torchy in Heartbeats* demonstrates a compelling preoccupation with the limits and liberties of heteronormativity. Compulsory heterosexuality and midcentury gender norms limn Torchy's role as community advocate and medical assistant to her boyfriend, Doctor Paul Hammond. The strip's aesthetics of environmental equity is compromised by its compliance with traditional conventions of the romance comic even as it resists them. Yet Torchy also revises any straightforward obedience to these norms: she troubles any convention that demands her capitulation. In performances of concentrated emotional affect, Torchy refutes any happy ending in which environmental oppression is not entirely transformed.

The fourth chapter of the dissertation asks how four contemporary graphic cancer narratives participate in an early-21st century aesthetic of environmental equity. Unlike the previous chapters that focus on newspaper strips in the independent press, this chapter

asks what this comic genre (predominantly released through established literary publishing houses) communicates about transcorporeal awareness and disproportionate environmental carcinogenicy. In distinctive verbal-visual moves, these memoirs track chemicals that traffic across bodies and environments in unpredictable exchanges. This chapter examines the extent to which graphic cancer narratives make such invisible exchanges visible, and in doing so, "move out," to use Diane Herndl's phrase, to form coalitions among disparate groups affected by environmental harm.

As aesthetics of equity necessarily comprise a broad range of environmental justice concerns and investments, this dissertation has by no means exhausted the potential of this critical approach in comic studies. The comic art forms examined here develop only a few of the many directions future projects may take up in pursuit of understanding competing environmental discourses. The ecocritical facility of comic art forms promise new entry points for innovative cultural analysis of the United States postwar period.

CHAPTER II

AFFECTING OUTRAGE: ENVIRONMENTAL EQUITY IN ALISON BECHDEL'S *DYKES TO WATCH OUT FOR*

Affecting Outrage: Environmental Equity in Alison Bechdel's *Dykes to Watch Out For*

When it comes to titling individual collections of her long-running comic strip, *Dykes to Watch Out For* (1982-2008), Alison Bechdel does not disappoint. Collection titles showcase outrageous and misguided notions of same-sex desire, deploying excessive joviality to expose homophobic inanity. *Unnatural Dykes to Watch Out For* (1995) is no exception. *Unnatural*, the sixth collection of the strip, comes just after *Spawn of Dykes to Watch Out For* (1993) and just before *Hot Throbbing Dykes to Watch Out For* (1997); later titles include *Dykes and Other Sundry Carbon-Based Life-Forms to Watch Out For* (2003) and *Invasion of the Dykes to Watch Out For* (2005). It is against the absurd excess of these titles that Bechdel's lesbians define themselves. By evoking stereotypes of lesbianism as monstrous, hyper-sexualized, or clinically fascinating, Bechdel exposes the laughable illogic of homophobia. *Unnatural* is notable among Bechdel's collection titles because it explicitly addresses and deconstructs the concept of lesbianism as against nature. The title and cover art of *Unnatural* typify Bechdel's challenge to an ideology in which straight desire is the only "natural" sexuality. Bechdel's humorous newspaper strip chronicles competing environmental paradigms in the late 20th century. In the irony and excess of emotional affect, *DTWOF* generates an aesthetics of environmental equity that critiques a mainstream lesbian environmentalism for failing to take up the concerns of environmental justice.

As they undress at night, shelve new releases at Madwimmin Books, or eat together at Café Topaz, the lesbians of *DTWOF* examine their own complicity in environmental degradation. Environmental outrage irrevocably inflects the form of the strip. Access to clean air, water, and food in areas where people work and play are formal concerns that register in dialogue and physical gesture. Bechdel's lesbian community is attuned to questions of justice in dynamic relationship to the lives of its members. The excessive emotional affect of the group revises the racism and ableism of 90s mainstream environmentalisms and affectionately chides a lesbian environmentalism that reiterates these problems. Excessive affect in *DTWOF* critiques a mainstream environmental focus on individual consumerism and universal risk rather than collective environmental justice in local neighborhoods. It puts pressure on heteronormative responses to environmental oppression and insists on a lesbian alternative.

Bechdel's hand-painted cover for *Unnatural* uses midcentury lesbian pulp fiction motifs to satirize the title's heteronormativity (fig. 1). In typical pulp paperback italics, a bright red promotional blurb advertizes that this collection is "a candid look at the tormented urgings and forbidden passions of women who have strayed far beyond the bounds of decent society. Enter the twisted, twilight world of…*Unnatural Dykes to Watch Out For*." According to this promo, lesbians are perverse, dangerous, and absolutely titillating for it. The blurb mocks popular culture's obsession with an alarming and wholly invented lesbianism. The term "unnatural" appears in the notched brushstroke font of mid-century B-movie posters, replicating the freshly painted lettering common to cheap horror flicks. This association between lesbianism and campy horror is emblematic of Bechdel's signature style. She revises outrageous stereotypes about lesbian identity by

directly spoofing them. Beneath the visual hook of the title, the four central characters of *Dykes To Watch Out For* (hereafter *DTWOF*) appear in poses germane to cheap paperback cover art: thick strokes of paint offset glowing cleavage and naked curves. The familiar faces of Mo, Lois, Clarice, and Toni gaze sideways at each other through curls of cigarette smoke. Their customary 1990s hairdos—long-clipped hair, soft short afros, and shaggy mullets—contrast sharply with their midcentury outfits of pointy lingerie and tight trousers. In place of sultry stares exchanged between morally depraved lovers, they offer droll looks, mouths set and eyebrows arched. Their meaningful gazes show that the lesbians of *DTWOF* are sardonically aware of the "unnatural" discourse that costumes their bodies in revealing negligees and unrolled stockings. Their eyes defeat notions of lesbianism that would call them "unnatural" and instead assert a resistant reading to the traditional cover art that Bechdel carefully constructs around them. Through their ironic looks, these self-aware characters unsettle constructions of lesbianism as somehow against decent society and against nature.

Taken together, the title and cover art of *Unnatural* typify Bechdel's humor in the lesbian environmental imaginary in *DTWOF*. Over a quarter of a century, the cartoon cohort of *DTWOF* has scoffed and sometimes outright bellowed at heteronormativity in all its forms. As a result, *DTWOF* generates an environmental imagination that is as attentive to homophobia as it is to environmental degradation. In an unnamed city in the Northeastern United States, *DTWOF* coalesces around the rise and fall of an iconic lesbian feminist bookstore, Madwimmin Books, and around the daily lives and loves of its characters. Amidst the births, deaths, and steamy affairs that determine the overlapping character arcs of *DTWOF*, Bechdel draws lesbian bodies beautifully,

generously, and fluidly. The outlines of *DTWOF* lesbians are rounded, soft, and touchable. They articulate a natural, unforced easiness that distinct from the taunt muscular aesthetic conventional to the superhero or the corseted conformity of midcentury romance. Characters in *DTWOF* are realistically rather than fantastically drawn. This realistic style makes the strip's intensified emotional affect more believable: seemingly ordinary bodies can enact extraordinary critiques of oppressive systems.

Performing outrage through articulate ranting and impassioned gesticulating is a significant trope of Bechdel's project. Characters routinely emphasize their complex environmental convictions in verbal diatribes, and in turn humorously undercut each other with smart quips and witty retorts. The humor shapes the environmental imagination of the strip: absurd excess easily doubles as earnest critique of climate change and environmental injustice. It's often difficult to tell when Mo's rants knowingly mock a distinctly lesbian performance of outrage at ozone depletion or the "zillion year" shelf life of Styrofoam and when her rants actually replicate the lesbian political fervor contemporary to Bechdel's era; often, Bechdel ends up doing both at once. The elegance of her supple line work shows that Bechdel never sets out to be mean to her lesbian community; her critique aims to reflect a sincere admiration for the community's political fervor as well as a good-natured teasing of its foibles.

Performances of excessive affect in *DTWOF* define lesbians and lesbian-allied characters not as *unnatural* but as endearing ecological overachievers. The strip's veneration for lesbianism as an inherently political way of life is both teasing and profoundly sincere. Bechdel's fondness for her characters glows on the page; though she makes fun of their bizarre vegetarian recipes and often-irrational identity policing, she

believes in the innate goodness of the *DTWOF* world. In the introduction sequence to the *Essential Dykes to Watch Out For*, Bechdel's handpicked compilation of 390 of the 527 episodes, Bechdel draws herself as a mad scientist examining the origin story of her *DTWOF* project. With a clip-on magnifying lens popping out from her head, clenching her fist in earnestness, Alison-the-mad-scientist excitedly explains that she began *DTWOF* because she wanted to show lesbians as both ordinary as anybody else, as well as "essentially…well…more *highly evolved*" (*Essential* xv). Bechdel's self-conscious exultation of lesbianism as evolution exemplifies the excessive affect of the strip. Further, this excessive affect is critical to the strip's environmental imagination. In ironically framing lesbianism as a higher evolutionary category, Bechdel lampoons scientific discourse that historically constructs same-sex female desire as "warped, sick, humorless, and undesirable" (*Essential* xv). In redirecting this trajectory to favor same-sex desire, Bechdel's posits lesbianism as a condition of increased capacity for ethical thought and sensitivity to all life.

In other words, *DTWOF* develops from the insouciant hypothesis that lesbians occupy a more ecologically responsible and versatile stance than non-lesbians. Dramatically, Alison-the-scientist cops to this folly, pointing out that the logic commits "a grave error in reasoning, of course. As any logician will tell you, inducing the general from the particular doesn't really hold water. Let alone millions of lesbians" (xvi). The idea of millions of lesbians spilling out of Bechdel's neat theory is indicative of the strip's patented and playful absurdity. The magnifying lens clipped over Alison's glasses radically expands her left eye as she peers at an insect stuck to a pin. Her intense focus on one specimen represents her vision in *DWTOF* as a whole: it necessarily focuses on the

particular experiences available to Bechdel's lens. Bechdel cleverly critiques the aims of her project in this introduction. By characterizing herself as a crazed entomologist fervently pinning insects to a wall, Bechdel problematizes her early essentializing of lesbian identity in the *DTWOF* project. Yet in reality, *DTOWF* is not the bug collection of a self-aggrandizing scientist, but a vibrant archive of a highly sensitive lesbian cartoonist responding to lesbian life and environmental thought in the late-20th century.

Indeed, *DTWOF* does more than pin extraordinary representations of lesbianism to paper. *DTWOF* interrogates prevailing theories of late 20th century environmental discourse. Though their bodies possess an ordinary, effortless beauty, *DTWOF* characters develop an environmental politics that is deliciously extraordinary. Surviving the structural reality of homophobia makes the lesbians of *DTWOF* alive to multiple forms of oppression; these women define their sexuality as a political position that affiliates them with struggles against racism, ableism, and environmental degradation. Bechdel reports that her lesbian community taught her "sex was merely the tip of the lesbian iceberg" (*Dykes and Other Sundry* 2). Beneath the joy of sex lay "an entire logical system in which homophobia was inextricably linked to sexism and racism and militarism and classism and imperialism. And a few other things" (ibid). Certainly, a lively sexuality is a crucial force in *DTWOF*: lesbians of all shapes and sizes enjoy vivid sex across the pages and panels of the project. Bechdel tenderly generates a playful, dynamic lesbian eroticism with meticulous attention to the penmanship of every areole and every grin. Yet in Bechdel's sexual politics, sexuality is but one factor intersecting with many others.

In her work to show lesbians as more highly evolved than other people, Bechdel generates an environmentalism that is sensitive to human oppression in all its forms.

Though not all lesbians in *DTOWF* are environmental justice lawyers, car-free eco-activists, or, by the strip's end, even vegetarians (much to Mo's chagrin), *DTOWF* configures environmentalism as inextricable from its lesbianism. Perhaps most intriguingly, *DTWOF* exposes the limits of White lesbian environmentalism that is marginally aware of disproportionate environmental harms in the poorest of its community's neighborhoods. Clarice, one of the strip's central characters, devotes her career to fighting and sometimes defeating environmental racism in the courts. In the 1990s, Clarice's new role as staff attorney for the local Environmental Justice Fund puts environmental racism on the *DTWOF* map; the South End neighborhood has apparently been fighting environmental harm for years unbeknownst to the *DTWOF* characters. Clarice's career pushes the strip to admit environmental racism in its diversifying lesbian imagination. Yet even the indefatigable Clarice struggles against the White lesbian environmentalism of her friends. Across a quarter of a century, the strip probes the divide between mainstream environmentalism and environmental justice in its evolving lesbian imagination. Alison-the-mad-scientist concludes her *Essential* introduction by imploring readers to decide for themselves if lesbians are "essentially the same or essentially different" from other people. Rather than fortify any essential lesbian identity, *DTWOF* eagerly tests its own limits and asks readers to determine for themselves what makes lesbian identity politically significant.

DTWOF is a concentrated reflection of the lesbian world beyond its pages. Bechdel notes that "the quality of the drawing and writing [in the first strips] was wildly uneven—more often than not the cartoons weren't even funny—but lesbians were so desperate to see a reflection of their lives that it didn't seem to matter much" (*Indelible*

27). When she began circulating her cartoons in independent newspapers, Bechdel offered a representation of lesbians not available anywhere else. As she entertained lesbian readers by poking fun at the recognizable triumphs and struggles of lesbian life, Bechdel also used *DTWOF* to critique lesbian politics in the late 20th century. Bechdel's early jokes about lesbian community are tender but deliberate as she invites lesbian readers to both recognize and laugh at themselves.

DTWOF provides unmatched access to a distinctly lesbian environmental imaginary during a significant period in American environmental discourse. As Dorceta Taylor argues, the 1980s saw an important and long-delayed revision in the dominant American environmental paradigm. The post-*Silent Spring* era could no longer ignore the concerns of environmental justice movements mobilized by the post-Three Mile Island/Love Canal era (3). The renewed mobilization of environmental justice movements compelled mainstream environmentalism to think through race, class, and gender as implicated in environmental risk. This shift finds unique traction in the fictional world of *DTWOF* from 1982 through 2008. As Taylor notes, the publication of *Silent Spring* in 1962 catalyzed a bold new vision of environmentalism that lasted for the next twenty years. This mainstream paradigm critiqued "the development of large, complex, and energy-intensive issues such as nuclear power, population control, pollution prevention, risk reduction, energy, recycling, and environmental cleanups" (10). Post-*Silent Spring* environmentalism addressed complex industrial concerns that were conspicuously absent in earlier environmental eras. These previous eras reduced nature to an economic resource and an instrument of White, male leisure. In contrast, the post-*Silent Spring* era defined nature as a delicate spiral of ecosystems intimately tied to the

outcome of human industry. Like proponents of earlier environmentalisms, post-*Silent Spring* mainstream environmentalists were largely White and middle-class. For example, one of the earliest environmentalist organizations, the Sierra Club, maintains a predominantly White membership to this day. Unlike their predecessors, mainstream environmentalists recognized urgent and profound implications of postwar environmental risk. The new mainstream environmentalism, however, largely ignored the fact that race and class determine environmental harm. After *Silent Spring*, mainstream environmentalism tended to universalize narratives of environmental risk.

In its earliest episodes, *DTOWF* adhered to the post-*Silent Spring* mainstream environmental movement by assuming environmental risk to be universal. One early episode in particular cleverly parodies mainstream environmentalism even as it embraces it. In "The Seven Ages of Lesbians," the first "stage" of lesbian life is characterized by attending anti-nuclear protests. This "baby dyke" stage codes the newly out lesbian as proudly vegetarian in her anti-militarism, as indicated by protest zucchinis stuck into the chainlink fence of the military compound. The banner "Zukes not Nukes" advocates for healthy food as well as the end to military conflict, a particularly Bechdelian combination of lesbian causes. This stage of lesbian life is also harmoniously multiethnic, as demonstrated by a circle of shorthaired women of different races meditating together; these protests are not racially homogenous in the *DTWOF* world. This early stage is also unabashedly and farcically lesbian feminist: "Goddess! All this womon-energy [sic] is so…so *healing*!" cries one wide-eyed "baby dyke," congratulating herself for being part of such a wonderful protest. By coding effusive affect as the "baby dyke" stage, Bechdel implies that lesbians lose such embarrassing buoyancy as they mature. Indeed, this panel

pokes fun at a self-centered earnest lesbianism that is wholly concerned with individual satisfaction and individual healing. The subsequent panels feature older lesbians with families, careers, and tamer coalition initiatives. However, the final stage of lesbian life returns to this beginning scene of absurd excess at a nuclear site. In the last stage, "the Tireless Activist," a wizened and wiry lesbian scales the military compound's barbed wire fence, calling to the younger activists, "Over the top, wimmin!" In this romantic final vision, lesbians mobilize an increasingly radical activism as they age. At the peak of their power, after a lifetime of experience, this radical lesbian leads others across militaristic borders with wild courage. This is a romantic lesbian vision of mainstream environmental success.

As the strip itself ages, *DTWOF* moves beyond the universalizing narrative of environmental risk toward a distinctly lesbian engagement with environmental justice. The strip itself is born at a critical juncture in environmental discourse in the early 1980s. When Bechdel started drawing *DTWOF*, communities of color were not simply the path of least resistance but literal expressways for toxic industry, as White middle and working class communities have established zoning laws and legal challenges to control and maintain the integrity of their own communities (Taylor 36). When Bechdel first doodled a coffee-brewing nude named Marianne on a letter to a friend in 1982, creating the very first character of *Dykes to Watch Out For*, people of color were already organizing with an ever-accelerating urgency to remove highly toxic threats from their neighborhoods. In 1982, citizens of Warrenton, North Carolina teamed up with the local United Church of Christ to protest a polychlorinated biphenyl dump in their neighborhood (Cole and Foster 20). Though their protest failed to prevent the dump, their

action led to the landmark 1987 study *Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States*, "perhaps the single best-known work documenting the disproportionate impact of environmental hazards on people of color" (Cole and Foster 21). The 1980s saw an amplified demand for the inclusion of people of color in environmental leadership and environmental policymaking. In its early years, the concerns of communities of color aren't on the map of *DTWOF*. Yet the strip becomes increasingly invested in environmental justice as *DTWOF* lesbians examine their own complicity in ignoring or perpetuating unequal environmental harm.

In various performances of environmental outrage over the run of the strip, *DTWOF* lesbians expose a critical intersection between the gay and lesbian rights movement and divergent environmentalisms. Dorceta Taylor's extraordinary analysis of how race, class, and gender shape divergent American environmentalisms does not consider how these mobilizations intersect. Yet in the late 1980s and early 1990s, lesbians in *DTWOF* debate the logic of separatist lesbian farming, the effectiveness of city recycling initiatives, and the politics of climate change over meals at Café Topaz, the local lesbian eatery, and the lesbian communal house rented by Ginger, Sparrow, and Lois. In the mid 1990s, Clarice Clifford becomes staff attorney at the local Environmental Justice Fund. With Clarice's new job, *DTWOF* uses the excessive affect of environmental justice outrage to comment on different critical responses to environmental oppression.

Bechdel's late-20th century lesbian environmental imaginary intersects with a broad range of social justice issues. The cartoonist excitedly recalls the early lesbian feminist politics that inspired her to start the strip: "Lesbians were so awesome! Free

thinkers! Vegetarians! Pacifists! At the forefront of every social justice movement!" (*Essential* xv). In Bechdel's earliest understanding of lesbian identity, lesbianism meant eschewing animal products while vigilantly working for non-violent solutions to military conflict. In the introduction to *Dykes and Other Sundry Carbon-Based Life Forms,* Bechdel uses hyperbole to illuminate the intersection between lesbianism, environmental thinking, and anti-imperialism. Here, Bechdel explains that the lesbians who first inspired her to draw *DTWOF* were "women who were always throwing blood on the Pentagon, or blockading Wall Street, or going off to Nicaragua to help the Sandinistas with the coffee harvest" (2). By exaggerating lesbian politics as entirely radical, Bechdel develops an absurd, though approving, caricature of late 20th century lesbian political life. Surely not every lesbian Bechdel knew routinely threw blood on the Pentagon. Surely not every lesbian on the block used her own body as a shield against capitalist commerce, nor did every lesbian partner alongside dispossessed Nicaraguan peoples in environmentally devastating circumstances. Bechdel's lofty characterization of lesbian political action is as uproarious as it is earnest. Her respect for the radical political actions of her early community inspires her humor and enables her critique of intersecting modes of oppression in late 20th century lesbian life.

Ultimately, a preoccupation with environmental equity in *DTWOF*, conveyed through excessive affect, substantiates Bechdel's puckish claim that *DTWOF* lesbians are more ecological than non-lesbians. As recent reviews have observed, the 1980s *DTWOF* cohort was well ahead of the savvy green trends that characterize the mainstream environmental movement. Dwight Garner notes that Bechdel had her characters debating compost heaps and the threat posed by nonbiodegradable plastic trash bags 20 years

before it was fashionable to do so. But *DTWOF* characters do so much more than worry over the fate of plastic trash bags. Bechdel describes *DTWOF* "as half op-ed column and half endless, serialized Victorian novel" (*Indelible* 62). In this hybrid space of incisive political commentary and sexual intrigue, Bechdel develops a lesbian environmental imaginary that rigorously pursues intersectionality. To examine intersectionality in the lesbian environmental imagination of *DTWOF*, I concentrate on three characters in particular as they age over the 25 years of the strip: Mo Testa, Clarice Clifford, and Stuart Goodman.

Mo, whom Bechdel names as the nucleus of the strip, is a White lesbian feminist who eventually earns a graduate degree in library science. In comical performances of overblown emotion and general "nebbishness," Mo bemoans climate change, processed foods, and the biopolitics of Monsanto. Mo's performances of environmental outrage are motivated by her anti-militarism and anti-capitalist convictions. But she also remains critically self-aware, as we see in her interactions with Milkweed Moongarden, an eminently obnoxious houseguest who walks on in three episodes in 1989. Milkweed provides a corollary to Mo's strident environmentalist convictions: she embodies a separatist lesbian ideology that fails to do any coalitional work toward environmental change. Although Mo is often more concerned with the impact of her own ecological footprint than the health of low-income kids in her neighborhood, she remains committed to living in the city and refuses to move to the suburbs, unlike Milkweed, who wholly separates herself from the life of the urban lesbian community.

The second principal character to propel the strip's aesthetic of environmental outrage is Clarice, Mo's first lover, first ex, and oldest friend. Clarice is a stunning

African American butch lesbian who earns a law degree and goes to work as an environmental lawyer for the local Environmental Justice Fund. The significance of Clarice's legal advocacy, however, is largely ignored by her community: her friends are more worried that her long work hours will fracture her relationship with her partner Toni than they are about local cancer clusters. Clarice's outrage at environmental racism maps the changing values of mainstream environmental politics in the mid-90s; her legal advocacy anticipates a national movement toward incorporating environmental justice into the nation's environmental paradigm.

Finally, this chapter argues that Stuart, a straight man and partner to self-described bi-dyke Sparrow, suggests the fragmented White male environmentalism of the late 20th century, when global and local concerns compete for activist attention. Stuart leaves his job as executive director of a local homeless shelter to stay at home and raise his and Sparrow's infant daughter, Jiao Raizel. His concentration on ethical consumerism and local food politics demonstrates mainstream environmentalism's desperate need to intersect with Clarice's environmental justice advocacy. In these three characters, the *DTWOF* lesbian community tests out its ecological convictions and examines its own countercultural power. These character arcs show that environmental imagination in *DTWOF* is inseparable from a sexual politics that recognizes the need for ever-increasing intersectionality and a humbling appreciation of its many failures to realize it.

Lesbian foodways in *DTWOF* develop the strip's aesthetics of equity through ironic excess. Foodways in the strip register the dynamism and absurdity of a lesbian environmentalism as it develops over time. Over 25 years, Bechdel amasses a complex cookbook of vegetarian and vegan foods that demonstrate her characters' creative

resistance to the industrial food system. Mo exchanges juicy gossip while stocking "dried, unsulphured, organic burdock chips" during her co-op shift (#149: "The Sighting" *Spawn* 54). In one another's homes, friends openly chide one another for eating processed foods and animal products. In preparing and sharing meals, characters enjoy sophisticated vegetarian cuisine. This cuisine includes, among many other tantalizing specialties, the seaweed-avocado pâté Lois serves to new lovers (#1: "One Enchanted Evening" *More* 32) and the creamed burdock with turnip loaf she prepares for communal house dinners (#28: "The Cure" *New! Improved!* 18). Café Topaz serves wheat-free, dairy-free pizza with no tomatoes (#64: "The Option" *New! Improved!* 90) and braised kohlrabi and okra gumbo (#153: "Say the Right Thing" *Spawn* 62). Clarice and Toni prepare tofu pups and five gallons of baba ganoush as refreshments for their commitment ceremony (#87: "Altered States" *The Sequel* 27). Mo seduces her girlfriends with curried spinach surprise (#138: "Stunned" *Spawn* 33) and curried artichoke and mung bean gumbo (#266: "Two Degrees of Separation" *Split-Level* 14). Desserts include pomegranate-yam tart (#216: "Their Brilliant Careers" *Unnatural* 98) and carob-millet clusters served at Clarice and Toni's baby shower (#164: "And Baby Makes Three" *Spawn* 85). These dishes parody the late-century vegetarian cuisine of lesbian feminists refusing to participate in oppressive food systems.

However, foodways inevitably evolve in the strip. It's important to note that by 1994, Clarice is barbequing chicken for her son Raffi alongside the tofu kabobs for her guests (#195: "No Picnic" *Unnatural* 56). Even when Sydney brings a bucket of fast food fried chicken to a potluck in 1996, Mo still wants to date her (#238: "Wing Ding" *Hot Throbbing* 42). In "Serial Monogamy," the epilogue from *DTWOF: The Sequel*,

Bechdel recounts her own two-faced impulse to chastise her non-vegetarian lovers ("If you wanna eat flesh it's **your** business! Just don't expect to kiss **me** ever again!") while wearing a "100% Cowhide" jacket herself (128). In the strip's final episodes in the mid-2000s, the co-op house commits to a "localvore" diet for the winter (#516: "Failed State" *Essential* 379), eschewing all coffee, soy sauce, and salt. In the last strip to date, Stuart is planting a backyard garden that he hopes will keep the co-op house self-sufficient through the winter (#527: "Sing Cuccu" *Essential* 390). Diversifying foodways signal shifting paradigms. In 2000, Mo sarcastically reminds everyone that she's "the only vegetarian in this lot" at an ill-fated Thanksgiving when the frozen turkey is still thawing in an upstairs bathtub (#353: "Dearth in the Balance" *Dykes and Other Sundry*). Mo's huffy reminder shows that environmental engagements in *DTWOF* diversify over time; the community is not static, but critically mindful of the ethical valence of its choices. Bechdel's keen eye for detail distills these changes in the diets her characters adopt and enthusiastically revise.

Ironic excess also appears in the dense text in the strip. The page is dominated by the heavy ink of dialogue, the rubbery, bubbled letters of narrative exposition and sound effects, and the flotsam and jetsam of media snippets. Newspaper headlines, radio broadcasts, menus, book jackets, bulletin board flyers, t-shirt slogans, and posters appear crowd the more conventional page features of speech balloons and expository captions. These labels and logos often shift as radically as *Krazy Kat*'s infamous surrealist landscapes, usually between the panels of a single episode. Characters never comment on or seem to notice abrupt disruptions in the visual field of their world. Objects operate as extra-diegetic commentary in the strip, enlarging the dimension of each episode with

political insight and satirical detail. A series of new headlines on a single newspaper page delivers complex interpretations of current events as no single headline ever could. Such polyvocal headlines point out the injustice of celebrating military heroes while ignoring violence perpetrated against women, and the unethical use of cartoon mascots to sell cigarettes to children (#113: "Support Group" *DTWOF: The Sequel* 78; #133: "Spring Fever" *Spawn* 22). Satirical versions of mainstream headlines translate media coverage of real world events into the language and vision of *DTWOF*. Polyvocal objects thus produce a new level of self-conscious commentary on the values of the strip itself. Characters wear t-shirt slogans that advertise multiple activist affiliations within a single episode: Lois and Miriam the midwife sport t-shirts that promote a wide array of lesbian sports teams and athletic events, while Stuart advertises a number of anti-W political protest groups through his wardrobe. Restaurant menus also switch the same daily special between panels in the same scene, generating a list of hilariously bland vegetarian dishes. Bechdel creates a strip within a strip by pressing objects into polyvocal service: they provide multiple surfaces upon which she can expand the strip's dynamic lesbian imagination.

Mo Testa represents the most critical transition from a 1980s lesbian mainstream environmentalism to a 1990s lesbian environmental justice advocate in the strip. With her finely drawn nose and dark shock of messily coiffed hair in the style of k.d. lang, Mo not only corresponds visually to Bechdel herself but functions as Bechdel's "guilt-ridden, liberal superego" (*Indelible* 62). Mo is outspoken about her fury at lesbian complicity in oppressive systems. Over the strip's development, she volubly references her commitment to anti-racism and anti-globalization efforts, and stridently criticizes the

failures of the Gay Rights movement. Bechdel uses Mo's frequent exclamations of outrage to critique the problems of American individualism, consumerism, and militarism. While poor Mo is often insufferable, self-doubting, and obsessive, she is also uncompromisingly self-aware, winningly affectionate, and resolutely loyal. Over time, Bechdel innovates the form of the strip to avoid "relying on Mo to deliver the information in a rant" (*Indelible* 187). "I *do* love to lecture," Bechdel explains. "But I've gradually learned that the most effective propaganda is the subtlest." While Bechdel might favor the strip's more recent turn to sardonic wit over the bright political sputtering of its early days, performances of environmental outrage are central to understanding shifts in the strip's lesbian environmental imagination.

Outrage constitutes a critical political aesthetic in Bechdel's environmental imagination; it engages the lesbian body in protesting ethical effacement and makes a clear argument against intersecting injustices. Bechdel relies on Mo's performances of outrage to expose latent and unexamined instances of discrimination within the lesbian community, most compellingly against people with disabilities, transgender people, and pansexual lesbians. Mo's lengthy monologues show that the strip's preoccupation with environmental equity is never separate from its work against homophobia and linked systems of oppression. When Mo rants and raves about collective yet differentiated kinds of environmental risk, the strip typically ends with physical humor at her own expense: Harriet "recycles" a take-out Styrofoam container into a hat on Mo's head (#39), the gang buries Mo's body in the sand when Mo refuses to go in the water or sunbathe (July 1990 *DTWOF* Calendar *Indelible* 106), and Clarice rolls her eyes at Mo's dividing her spare change in donations to a hundred charities so as not to show preference to one cause over

another (December 1990 *DTWOF* Calendar *Indelible* 109). Mo's frustrations are excessive and yet limited. Her emotional anxieties stall any real actual change; she is so overwhelmed by the scope of the world's environmental problems, and so horrified by her own complicity, that she burns up her energy with worry rather than supporting Clarice's legal work or pressuring her representatives for better legislation.

Yet in Mo's performances of outage, she articulates the lesbian politics central to the strip. These political positions include anger at gay and lesbian right-wing conservatives who come out ("What kind of a message does that send the youth of America?", Mo demands with her hands in the air); nationwide anti-gay and anti-lesbian violence; and the recycling of radioactive waste into consumer products. She "vents her spleen," as her friend Lois calls it, naming the national crises that trigger her anger. In her rants about lesbian political life, Mo rarely forgets to voice environmental anxiety. The practical outcome of her environmental outage is negligible; she rarely advocates concrete environmental action and rarely changes anyone's mind. In fact, Mo's attempts to police the behavior of those around her often result in her becoming the butt of the joke. Yet Mo's ire effectively condenses the fears and worries of her community into a series of succinct speech balloons. Mo's rants are so central to the purpose of the strip that in 2007 Bechdel ran a "Great Mo-Ments" contest on her website, inviting online readers to match eleven excerpts of Mo's rants to the appropriate cultural event that compelled it (fig. 2).

Mo's aesthetic of outrage often backfires to comic effect, softening the stridency of her lectures with humility and commonality. Perhaps this is why her growth as a character is remarkably unhurried over 25 years. Bechdel explains that she writes Mo

through small, glacially paced transitions, "enough to keep her from being too tiresome, but not enough to change her winsome, irritating essence" (*Indelible* 63). Mo's essence derives in part from her determination to elevate and sharpen lesbian political engagement, but Bechdel does not shield us from Mo's pretentious posturing, unexamined prejudices, or her tendency to affix absolute blame in situations that require more complex treatment. When Mo exhibits flaws, inconsistencies, and missteps in her political thinking, she appears more recognizable than alienating. Her outlandish earnestness makes her environmental fury more palatable, and the mild ribbing she endures from her friends takes the edge off her lectures. Mo is often at her most comical when she tries to be at her most serious. In college, Clarice left Mo because Mo's anxiety about her white privilege required Clarice to placate her ad nauseam (Epilogue *Unnatural*). Luckily, Mo's friends and lovers tease her in response to her outrage, ultimately nudging Mo toward a more meaningful consciousness. In early strips, Mo's lover Harriet often intervenes in Mo's rants with especially affectionate irony.

Harriet helps Mo to see when she's unaware of her own privilege, a move that signals strip's intersectional lesbian perspective. In episode #46: "Civic Duty," first published in 1988, Harriet cajoles a reluctant Mo out of bed by satirizing Mo's status as a privileged White citizen (fig. 3). This episode is significant in that it models how excessive affect generates a renewed consciousness in Bechdel's project. Harriet, already fully dressed for work in a tweed skirt and vest, stands over her lover's bed and gently shakes Mo from sleep. The linework in this early strip is especially thin and wispy, indicative of Bechdel's early style. Bechdel shakily replicates Mo and Harriet's faces panel by panel, granting them an unfinished and endearing quality. Bechdel's lines

eventually become thicker and surer only after collaborating with Howard Cruse in the *Village Voice* in 1991: "after seeing how my art practically disappeared next to Howard's, I started drawing thicker lines" (*Indelible* 202). The clumsier, tentative aesthetic reinforces the earnestness of Bechdel's early style; the sketchy linework of Mo's bedroom tempers the absurd gravity of the lovers' debate. The bolded font of their words communicates a strong fervor against the delicacy of the strip's line. Scowling in bed, Mo self-righteously complains that she can't get up because she's too overwhelmed by the problems of the world: "Get up? What **for**? I'm not getting up until the **electoral college** is **abolished** and George **Bush** is **impeached!**" Though just waking up, Mo is superbly articulate. She declares that snuggling deeper into her poofy polka-dotted comforter is an act of political resistance. Objects on Mo's bedside table reiterate the short-sightedness of her aggravated claim: her glasses and bottle of eye glasses cleaner stand untouched, and her clunky push-button phone is silent. Though she might speak eloquently, Mo can't see or hear herself clearly. The posture of retribution Mo affects by not getting out of bed and "refusing to be a productive member of society," is, of course, absurdly self-serving. Harriet first responds benevolently by taking Mo's claims literally: "But, sweetie, you'll get **bed sores** [if you stay in bed]", and "Maybe a **hunger strike** would attract more **media attention.**" By the third row of panels, Mo has doubled-down on her protest, donning her glasses, sitting up, and crossing her arms, but Harriet's response is just warming up. At this halfway point in the strip, the strip reverses the women's positions in the panel: Harriet assumes the left and Mo assumes the right. This switch delivers the rhetorical upper hand to Harriet, who hereafter exaggerates Mo's self-

absorbed earnestness in order to convey its foolishness. She satirizes Mo as excessively egalitarian in order to tease her lazy bones out of bed.

By affecting admiration for Mo's protest, Harriet resolutely reminds her lover of their obligation to use their privileged citizenship to act on behalf of the disenfranchised. When Mo rejects her own power to "dissent and educate," as Harriet puts it, Mo's "symbolic form of protest" is actually complicit in the very injustices that strain her conscience and prompt her declaration of defeat. Harriet's spoof asserts that Mo's status a privileged citizen in a privileged country ensures her a power denied to those in refugee camps, impoverished areas, and prisons. By refusing to go to work, Mo assumes a very privileged version of apathy. Harriet's last line is devastating: "Can I get you another blanket before I leave?" Looking sideways out of the corner of her eye, a smile on her lips, Harriet knows she's won. By responding to Mo's harebrained self-interest with smiling wit, Harriet deploys a central device of Bechdel's aesthetics of equity: characters use excessive affect to goad one another into recognizing the privileged limits of their politics.

The final panel's unexpected flash of nudity invigorates the humor of the strip as a distinctly lesbian critique of privilege and power. The sight of Mo's bare bottom is unexpected, especially as she is modestly hidden by her striped nightshirt and poofy coverlet for most of the strip. This instance of mild nudity does several things at once. It suggests a sexual undertone to Mo's desire to keep snoozing: perhaps she wants to sleep in because she found Harriet more appealing than sleep last night. The nudity also tempers the didactic nature of the debate that preoccupies the strip; it's a delightful dose of body humor amidst troubling study of oppression. Finally, Mo's nudity assures the

audience that she and Harriet are not just critically minded citizens debating the requirements of privilege, but embodied, warm-blooded people who love each other. By asking, "Whatever happened to bribing your lover out of bed with hot **blueberry muffins**?", Mo concedes that Harriet's love for her is more politically engaged than it is fawning. Harriet's playful "smak" and her self-satisfied squint seals her affectionate intervention in Mo's privileged cycle of anxiety. Harriet's ploy of getting her lover out of bed is an extension of her political position as a lesbian who pursues intersections of oppression; she is able to call Mo to action by reminding her that privilege gets in the way of recognizing meaningful cultural work. Their final exchange shows that the intimacy and sexual trust between these women extends into their politics and vice versa.

Mo's interactions with a more obnoxious lesbian environmentalist than herself also help the strip to critique early lesbian environmentalism. Mo's clash with Milkweed Moongarden clarifies Mo's mainstream lesbian environmentalism as critically self-aware (fig. 4). Milkweed's three-episode visit to Ginger, Lois, and Sparrow's communal home isn't included in Bechdel's 2008 compendium *Essential Dykes to Watch Out For*. Perhaps Bechdel found the premise too formulaic: Milkweed, an old friend of Sparrow's who lives on a lesbian farm, plays the role of a nefariously unwelcome houseguest. Indeed, Milkweed's character is preposterously two-dimensional: Bechdel gives the young woman a smug personality to match her noxious name. Yet Milkweed's visit sets up a meaningful critique of privilege in late-century lesbian environmental discourse. Milkweed's affiliation with a lesbian farm makes her character representative of a distinctly privileged lesbian community. Her encounters with Lois, Sparrow, and Ginger do more than merely entertain: Milkweed caricatures a self-important and short-sighted

environmentalism in popular lesbian communes of the 1960s. Her first appearance in episode #59: "The Visitation" in 1989 characterizes her lesbian feminism as selfish rather than coalitional (fig. 4). She carelessly burns the housemate's phone messages to light incense, unscrews light bulbs from the house fixtures because she finds the brand unethical, and later insults Lois's casserole because it isn't organic. Milkweed embodies an exasperating environmental arrogance that literally wags its finger at fellow lesbians who fail to live up to her principles, all the while outrageously neglecting her ethical obligation to those immediately around her.

Milkweed's body language also advances a critique of a White lesbian separatist environmentalism. Her characterization reflects a distinct departure from Bechdel's usual stylization of female bodies in the strip. Most characters are drawn sympathetically: their bodies flatter their personalities. Lois is charming in her fastidious crew cut and riveted leather jacket, Toni wears a feminine mullet of delicate curls, and Harriet's cuneate eyes are warm and smiling in her round face. In contrast, Milkweed's unkempt rattail and shapeless plaid shift suggest that she is unpleasant and careless. Bechdel does Milkweed no favors. Her glasses are large and heavy on her face, giving her a particularly austere look. Milkweed's most remarkable physical feature is the collection of charms strung her neck. These include a hexagonal crystal pendant, a tiny Labrys (the double-bladed ax symbolic of ancient Western matriarchy), and a small urn-shaped satchel that appears embroidered. Milkweed adorns herself with recognizable tokens of lesbian iconography; though she is clearly preoccupied with representing a mainstream lesbian identity, she is damnably careless in how she enacts it.

Milkweed's brief character arc critiques a lesbian environmentalism that mobilized rural lesbian communes in the 1960s. Lesbian communes were traditionally comprised of White middle-class women, despite their efforts to include lesbians of color and lesbians of working class backgrounds. Nancy Unger notes that lesbian communities in Oregon in particular struggled to attract non-White peoples and accommodate people with disabilities ("From Jook Joints to Sisterspace" 182). When Milkweed appears on the scene in 1989, lesbian communes are already in steep decline. By 1993, when the white-haired midwife Miriam tells Toni that she ended her heterosexual marriage by joining a lesbian commune, the option for renewal seems outdated and inaccessible to Toni: "I don't think they have lesbian communes anymore" (#166: "The Fairies' Midwife" *Spawn of DTWOF* 89). Only five years after Milkweed's visit, Toni lives in a cultural moment when lesbian communes have broken apart. Milkweed might be living in one of the few that remain in the world of the strip.

Milkweed bases her environmentalism on specific disciplines of the body that seem comically excessive even to the most radical in the *DTWOF* crowd. Milkweed consumes no animal flesh or dairy or wheat, demands expensive organic foods, and meditates in a lotus position on the floor while important phone calls go unanswered. Mo effectively summarizes Milkweed's smug environmentalism by accusing Milkweed of finding herself "so much more evolved than everyone else" (#61: "You Are What You Eat" *New, Improved!* 10). Through Mo's censure of Milkweed, Bechdel directly critiques her own contention that lesbians are inherently superior to all others. Milkweed proves the danger of assuming one is "so much more evolved": alienating rather than allying community. Mo loudly rejects such an attitude: this is the only moment in the run of the

strip when characters directly address Bechdel's claim that lesbians are ecological overachievers. Milkweed's environmentalism concerns a variety of issues, including resisting the military-industrial complex as well as dismantling the industrial food system, but for her, everything hinges on individual responses rather than collective action: her meditation sessions and purchasing power substitute for working for collective change. Milkweed is eager to correct and discipline those around her without accounting for her own hypocrisy and failings, and in fact accuses others of over-indulging in their own self-care even as she prioritizes her own.

Compared to Clarice's emotional affect, Milkweed's showcases a clear disconnect from the broader environmental concerns of the lesbian community. Sparrow initially excuses Milkweed's behavior because the houseguest is "used to living on a lesbian farm" (#59: "The Visitation" *New, Improved!* 81), as though rural residency necessarily alienates Milkweed from the paradigm of the urban community. Milkweed approaches environmental thinking from an alternate position from Clarice: Clarice infiltrates, rather than retreats from, the current power system in order to transform it. The environmental justice lawyer's contribution to the lesbian imaginary of the strip is often inconspicuous alongside Mo's more overt declarations of climate change fervor. By contrast, Clarice's environmentalism is professional: as a legal advocate for marginalized environmental communities, she differs significantly from Mo, who represents herself as a principled crusader for abstract ideals as a lesbian feminist bookstore clerk and later as a librarian. Clarice's politics are pragmatic rather than abstract and lofty, a difference emphasized in the earliest one-on-one conversation featured between Mo and Clarice in 1987. In episode #4: "The Hoax," while hanging out at Café Topaz, Mo lavishly praises Clarice

for attending law school and "patiently playing the **boy's games** by the **boy's rules**, working for change **inside** the **system**…slowly gaining the **power** to really **shake** things up! **Attack** from **within**...the ole **Trojan horse** ploy." Mo holds Clarice's hand while shaking her own free fist in the air, exaggerating the grandeur and romanticism of Clarice's feat. Clarice herself looks askance. In this look, Clarice signals a competing environmentalism in the lesbian imaginary of the strip: *DTWOF* lesbians adopt differing political viewpoints that critique and test one another.

While Mo's praise might flatter Clarice's decision to go to law school, her approval is patronizing: by setting Clarice up as an ideal activist, Mo reduces Clarice a caricature rather than a critically-minded law student. Mo's admiration for Clarice indulges Mo's own guilt for not enacting her own political principles. Clarice's subsequent teasing of Mo refuses to enable her friend's smug reduction of her work. To interrupt Mo's fantasy of how a "radical lesbian feminist terrorist" should live, Clarice pretends to "knuckle under" and turn corporate. One of the great pleasures in the strip is watching friends knowingly rile Mo. Clarice exposes Mo's tendency to turn her friends into icons rather than address her own feelings of activist inadequacy. In this episode, Bechdel shows us that lesbian thinking in *DTWOF* actively and entertainingly critiques itself. By teasing Mo, Clarice clarifies that the environmental imagination of the strip is self-reflexive and in process. All absolutist or self-important positions are tempered with humility through Bechdel's gentle humor.

Clarice's contribution to the environmental imagination of the strip is not a signal of lesbian pride, as it is with Mo, or a sign of showing off, as it is with Milkweed. As a character, Clarice is less invested in affecting a mainstream lesbian environmentalism and

more concerned with ending environmental oppression. Clarice's environmental law practice begins as a clear extension of her professional aspirations. She doesn't specialize in environmental law while Toni puts her through school, but after briefly clerking for a district judge, she enthusiastically accepts a position as an environmental lawyer. As she tells a now pregnant Toni, it's a job with the "Environmental Justice Fund! Remember, the organization that's fighting the way poor neighborhoods end up with all the industrial pollution and waste dumps? I'm the **staff attorney**!" (fig. 5). When Toni uneasily asks, "Um…what happened to the job with that firm, the one that pays twice as much?" Clarice excitedly tells her, "This work is **much** more important! Plus I'll have way more responsibility. Let's go celebrate!" It's clear that Clarice had a range of options on the job market, but chose an environmental justice position because she is motivated by a desire to lead in the field.

Clarice likes to work hard and she likes to win, and as a staff attorney for the Environmental Justice Fund, she occupies a unique position: she can win on behalf of the poor and marginalized neighborhoods while creating concrete pieces of environmental action. Yet Clarice's work isn't simply egalitarian: her offhand comment that she'll "have way more responsibility" shows that she wants the chance to contribute her own skills to the project. Clarice maintains a punishing work ethic; she often skips Toni's midwife appointments and birthing classes in order to stay late at the office, and ultimately, her devotion to her job takes priority over their marriage. The two separate after twenty years together (#502: "Love and Other Calamities" *Essential* 365). Clarice's decision to prioritize her work emerges as a major conflict in nearly every strip after she takes up environmental justice advocacy. Thus, while Clarice's work as an environmental lawyer

is representative of a vital and distinct environmental justice paradigm in the strip, it is also central to critical tension in the strip as a whole.

DTWOF frames Clarice's work primarily as an infraction against lesbian family life, and this framing shows the marginalization of environmental justice in White lesbian discourse of the 1990s. Clarice's long hours to support her family leave her emotionally unavailable. In episode #167: "One Sultry Summer Evening," Toni complains to Clarice, "I just wish you were as concerned about the baby as you are about your job." Clarice replies, "I **am** concerned about the baby! If I don't win this injunction against the garbage incinerator, the kid will have lung cancer by the time it's five!" (*Spawn* 90). Clarice's professional advocacy intersects with her personal concerns about environmental harm in her family's neighborhood. She uses the existing legal system to fight the environmental inequities that threaten her family life. Through Clarice, Bechdel constructs an environmental justice imagination that represents the values of marginalized urban families. When Toni suggests that they move to the suburbs to avoid what she sees as escalating urban violence, Clarice sarcastically suggests that they also spray pesticides on their new lawn (#244: "This Is Not My Beautiful Wife" *Hot Throbbing* 55). Clarice equates Toni's fear of urban crime to suburban anti-toxics discourse; she sees Toni's push to leave the city as an extension of mainstream environmentalism. Toni's failure to understand Clarice's investment in environmental justice is symbolic of the failure of mainstream lesbian environmentalism to take up the concerns of the EJ movement as a whole. In the epilogue in *Hot Throbbing Dykes to Watch Out For*, "Sense and Sensuality," Toni and Clarice again argue about the place of Clarice's environmental justice advocacy in their relationship. Toni demands that Clarice do more housework, but

Clarice insists that meeting with Environmental Protection Agency should excuse her from chores: “What do you want me to do? Cancel a meeting with the E.P.A to come home and do laundry?” (*Hot Throbbing* 104). Clarice’s protracted case preparations and wearisome court hearings cause her personal relationships to suffer, in large part because Toni doesn’t value the collective efficacy of the work Clarice performs.

Yet while Clarice’s rigorous work ethic alienates Toni, it also ensures Clarice’s survival in a cutthroat and marginalized legal field. Environmental justice legal advocacy is notoriously underfunded and underreported, in part because environmental justice lacks the explicit sentimental pull of wilderness preservation and wildlife conservation aesthetics. In place of charismatic images of polar bears floating on melting icebergs, environmental justice offers cancer cluster maps. Environmental justice relies on shocking correlations between industrial waste and community disease to compel righteous moral outrage. Bechdel constructs a complicated aesthetics of outrage in Clarice. Our valiant EJ lawyer is alternatively casual, crass, and sarcastic when expressing her environmental outrage to friends, and highly scripted, aggressive, and coolly deferential in court. In episode #206: “The Nightly Grind,” Clarice models an aesthetic of environmental justice outrage against Toni’s preoccupation with the survival of Madwimmin Books (fig. 6). Clarice’s outrage finds no place in Toni’s lesbian feminism; their dialogue replicates the uneasy exclusion of environmental justice issues from lesbian discourse of the 1990s.

In *DTWOF*, an aesthetic of environmental justice outrage is almost always communicated through embodied gesture as well as crowded speech balloons. In episode #206, Clarice’s fury at chemical and oil company execs manifests in the furrow of her

eyebrows, the curve of her lips, and the stance of her torso as well as in her expressive verbal rant. Clarice's removal of her work clothes, from her shoulder-padded blazer to her fluffy cravat, is eloquent in its rhetorical communication. Clarice has come home early despite leaving "a ton of work" on an impending suit because she hasn't seen her infant son in two days. Her absence during her son's waking hours echoes the underlying history of self-sacrifice associated with environmental justice advocacy. As Dorceta Taylor points out, "effective community resistance is costly" and communities of color often must work incredibly hard to prevent toxic dumping (37). Environmental justice advocacy thus demands that activists devote themselves to community organizing in order to secure the collective greater good. Clarice's late nights indicate the sacrifice she makes on behalf of those most marginalized in her city. After reluctantly putting Raffi down for bed, Clarice is in the process of taking off her court clothes in the bedroom when Toni shares news of Jezanna's mother's recent lymphatic cancer diagnosis. Clarice commences an aesthetic of righteous outrage on behalf of women diagnosed with cancer in the panel immediately following Toni's news.

Hearing that Jezanna's mother will require aggressive chemo, Clarice's speech balloons and body language register her outcry against the injustice of environmental carcinogenicy. She assumes a powerful physical pose. She faces the audience and pries her striped cravat from her neck. As Lily Tomlin argues, such a cravat "looks sort of like a scarf and sort of like a tie and sort of like a ruffle" and is absurd "because you don't look good in it" (Dale). By removing the fluffy cravat, Clarice rejects the courtroom expectation that she would mask her strength with ruffles. With her collar hiked, limp cravat clenched in her left fist, Clarice appears revolutionary.

The revolutionary pose Clarice assumes in this strip conveys superheroic body language and images of political resistance. The "fwip" of Clarice's loose cravat suggests the sashay of a tiny cape. Her clenched fist is a universal political sign of solidarity. Glaring directly at the audience, Clarice swears in simultaneous epitaph and prayer, "**Jesus!** It makes me so angry!" She explains that she's spent all week reading through medical histories of a low-income neighborhood nearby: "They're getting the highest cancer rate in the city and…". The ominous ellipsis matches the break between rows of panels. The break in panels compounds the distance forced between the reality of disease and its probable cause. Overcoming this distance and proving the logical link constitutes the central problem of Clarice's advocacy.

Toni's failure to respond to her wife's fury signals a wider disconnection between lesbian politics and environmental justice. Toni fails to acknowledge or respond to Clarice's increasingly spacious anger. Clarice's speech balloon occupies the full top half of the panel while Toni reaches for a ringing phone, her expression neutral rather than engaged in Clarice's rant. The background is heavily crosshatched, shadows hovering close to their bodies, oppressive and immediate as Clarice unbuttons her shirt. In the midst of this darkness, Clarice continues to fume, insensible of the moody shadows and Toni's clear distraction: "**Oddly enough,** they've also got the most chemical plants and waste dumps! Meanwhile, instead of looking for ways to **prevent** cancer, like, oh, I dunno! Ceasing to pump the environment full of **carcinogens**, maybe, we spend **zillions** on cancer 'management'!" Clarice's straightforward unbuttoning of her shirt matches her sarcastic line of reasoning. She neatly undoes the logic of 'cancer management' as smoothly as she unfolds each button. In the quiet of her bedroom, Clarice swiftly asserts

the causal links that require hours of her time and family sacrifice to substantiate in court. Clarice's outrage is shorthand for the complex deferment of cause and effect that stagnates much environmental justice legal action.

Unfortunately, the lesbian community that should support Clarice in her advocacy is also suffering a real threat to its stability. Madwimmin Books, the center of lesbian life and engagement in the community, faces imminent closure as larger corporations cut into its territory and online markets price cut its products. The very next panel represents the competing forces of Clarice's righteous anger at environmental injustice against Toni's pressing anxiety about keeping Madwimmin Books solvent. Clarice finishes her outburst in a compelling bodily pose while Toni, on the phone, nervously fingers the phone cord as Mo tells her that the rent check for Madwimmin Books bounced. The camera has pulled back, shrinking the women from a medium close-up to a medium shot. The women are split by the edges of the speech balloons as well as the closet doorframe. This split effectively locks each woman into her own inset panel: they are divided and alone. Their speech balloons and bodies occupy space in equal measure, which makes their bodies appear fragile and small, despite their contrasting postures. The medium shot allows the audience to see Clarice's full torso as she pulls her shirt down from her shoulders. Her face is contorted with anger, the lines of her biceps distinct as she grips the shirt's front plackets. She wears a modest bra; her naked abdomen is defined by slight curves. The seams of her bra cups are visible. These details represent a dramatic twist on the familiar visual icon of Superman pulling open his button-down to reveal the S of his costume. In Bechdel's universe, a middle-aged African

American woman baring her bra, missing her son from working so much, and furious at the environmental oppression that poisons women's bodies, is a superhero.

Clarice uses her powers to interrogate the logic of 'cancer management' in place of cancer prevention. She cries, "**Why?** Because all the chemical and drug and oil company execs on the boards of all the cancer organizations can't see the environmental **link!**" Corporate execs on cancer organization boards benefit from the status quo of cancer management; they have no incentive to admit an environmental link or organize cancer prevention because doing so would betray their own role in the crisis. Clarice indicts these powerful actors for denying their own complicity in environmental carcinogenicity. The soft roundedness of Clarice's exposed skin communicates her vulnerability in the midst of the spectacular force of her anger. Her fury speaks on behalf of the health of millions of disenfranchised women, both those reading the comic and those for whom the comic is written. Clarice becomes a mouthpiece for collective anger, inciting others to participate in her emotional protest in the intimacy of her bedroom. Whereas Bechdel often relies on partial nudity for comic relief, Clarice's state of undress in episode #206 is grim-faced. Her supple body communicates tenderness as well as indignation as she asserts the denied link between cancer and the environment; her vulnerability shows that women's bodies are at stake in the fight.

When Clarice's superheroic stance goes unnoticed by Toni, it suggests a wider problem of environmental discourse in the 1990s. While environmental leaders of color are actively organizing and President Clinton orders his government to integrate environmental justice concerns, the actual up-take of these concerns has yet to be realized even to this day. When Toni places concern over the sustainability of the bookstore over

and above concern for the health of people in low-income neighborhoods, she enacts a nation-wide prioritization of non-EJ issues. Toni sits dejected on the bed and stares past Clarice. In response, Clarice's belly plumps slightly and her head and shoulders relax. Her eyes are half-closed, indicating resignation. Clarice tosses her shirt casually over her shoulder, her anger spent. Clarice's fervor for environmental justice doesn't intersect with Toni's devotion to Madwimmin Books, although the two causes could productively converge. Toni evades any affirmation or even recognition of Clarice's anger, although Clarice immediately understands why Toni is upset: she loves the bookstore too.

In part, their failed communication is representative of the struggle for mainstream environmentalism to intersect with environmental justice in 1995. A popular environmentalist poster from the early 1990s is frequently featured in Madwimmin Books. This poster features a photographic image of planet Earth captioned with the phrase: "Love Your Mother" (#124: "A Rolling Donut" *Essential* 81). This poster design appeared on bumper stickers and T-shirts in anticipation of the First Earth Summit in Rio in 1992. In a 1991 issue from *Hypatia*, Catherina Roach analyzes the maternal metaphor inherent in the poster, as it idealizes a mainstream environmentalist problem. Roach notes that the shrouded and swirled clouds of earth denote a mysterious and exotic aesthetic, which reinforces the concept that mothers are illogical, unpredictable, and beyond human. Had Madwimmin Books survived to this day, it would certainly be a resource center for environmental justice advocacy. Yet in 1995, environmental justice mobilizations remained largely outside the public eye; Clarice misses time with her son because she herself is compiling primary research as court evidence. Though environmental justice activism has been part of American history since colonial invasion,

environmental justice issues didn't gain national recognition until the 1990s. Even then, personal medical histories like those that Clarice studies were not widely circulated. Toni's apparent indifference to environmental justice despite her commitment to Madwimmin Books seems contradictory. But at this cultural moment, Madwimmin Books does not actively support Clarice's advocacy. The two causes, lesbian mainstream environmentalism and lesbian environmental justice, miss one another in this moment.

Toni's response to Clarice's outrage conveys its perceived remoteness from more central lesbian issues. Toni is often unsympathetic to Clarice's advocacy in part because of the all-consuming nature of the work. Clarice survives in the legal system by extensive case preparation: she often works 18-hour days and sixty-hour weeks (#167: "One Sultry Summer Evening" *Essential* 110; #195: "No Picnic" *Essential* 127). Curiously, Bechdel rarely draws Clarice representing a plaintiff in court or leading her frequent meetings with housing department officials and community organizers (Epilogue: "Sentimental Education" *Unnatural*, #212: Business as Usual" *Essential* 141). Instead, Bechdel shows Clarice coming home exhausted and frayed or rushing off to breakfast meetings while Toni wearily picks up after her. Readers witness the toll of Clarice's work in the lines on her face, the slump of her shoulders, and in the joylessness of her marriage. We seldom see the positive outcome in the nearby communities that Clarice defends. The plaintiffs themselves do not appear in the strip. Toni never acknowledges the value of Clarice's environmental work despite the fact that the low-income neighborhoods Clarice champions were once their own.

Clarice's environmental justice advocacy is thus marginalized by the lesbian community's mainstream environmentalism. Activism is an unquestionable value in this

group; indeed, advocacy would seem integral to its definition. Lois organizes a sex positive fundraiser to help keep Madwimmin Books solvent (Epilogue: "Sense & Sensuality" *Hot Throbbing* 97) and Mo organizes regular lesbian feminist readings at the bookstore (#194: "Lime Light" *Essential* 126). Sparrow and Stuart hold large meditation groups in their living room following terrorist attacks as a means of expressing solidarity with the suffering world. Ginger attends the National Black Gay and Lesbian Conference and organizes the Accessibility Committee for the local Gay and Lesbian Studies conference. As a whole, the group attends Gay Pride events, though their attendance is increasingly spotty as years go by. Nearly all members espouse a mainstream environmentalism in their individual consumer habits, but not once does anyone stage an environmental justice action. Stuart individually protests environmental oppression by selling his car and putting his house on a locavore diet. Yet his environmentalism remains individual rather than collective. In contrast, Clarice prosecutes oil corporations for excessive emissions of CO2, defends residents of federal housing forced to live on top of waste dumps, and works to improve legal instruments in favor of cancer cluster cases. Clarice's advocacy signals that Bechdel's environmental imagination is not insensitive to the whitewashing of mainstream environmental values. Yet the marginalization of Clarice's advocacy within her lesbian community shows that *DTWOF*'s concentration on environmental justice remains in process.

Clarice's contribution to the environmental imagination of *DTWOF* is a telling chronicle of competing paradigms of post-*Silent Spring* environmentalism and a new, developing environmentalism in the 1990s. In the early days of her Environmental Justice Fund practice, Clarice exudes bravado despite the social barriers she faces as a lesbian

woman of color practicing law. She grits her teeth and wears the fluffy cravat when clerking for a district judge so that she can continue to advance in her practice. She masters environmental legalese so strikingly that a judge rubs his eyes in meek confusion when she speaks in court (#290: "Love and Work Part I" *Essential* 202). Clarice even endures the self-assured homophobia of Bill, her sometime courtroom opponent and suburban neighbor. Bill questions the integrity of her suit against a developer who allowed the city to build low-income housing on a petrochemical dump (#313: "Dustup" *Essential* 313). In a later episode, Bill makes snide comments about same-sex marriage, showing that his hostility to environmental justice parallels his hostility to gay and lesbian rights (#332: "Tag Team" *Essential* 238). Clarice and Bill exchange barbs on the sidewalk outside her home and on the nearby sledding hill. Thus, Clarice adroitly defends herself not only in the courtroom but in her own suburban neighborhood.

Only one other legal advocate at the Environmental Justice Fund, a fellow African American, stands with Clarice against large teams of corporate lawyers in one of the strip's few courtroom scenes (Epilogue: "Flesh and Blood" *Spawn* 106). While he applauds her success and cautions her not to work too hard, he relies on Clarice to work late while he leaves on time (#356: "The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari" *Essential* 255). Clarice clearly earns his respect through small, hard-fought court victories. But his respect does not translate to mitigating the workload. Thus *DTWOF* features an intersectional problem in environmental justice advocacy itself: the sexism in its work place compromises the justice the Fund seeks to achieve.

As the strip matures, Clarice registers the impact of frustrated environmental justice action in her body language. When Bush is re-elected president in 2001, Clarice

spirals into a depression (for which she ultimately decides to take medication). Clarice loses focus in her environmental justice advocacy. The legal system she's dedicated her life to understanding has failed her utterly. In the aftermath of the election, Toni reminds a bed-ridden Clarice that it is in fact her job to intervene in environmental injustice (#362: "Not So Quiet Desperation" *Dykes and Other Sundry*). This heartbreaking bedroom scene contrasts significantly from Mo and Harriet's endearing morning bedroom banter in the late 1980s. Whereas Harriet cajoled Mo out of bed by satirizing Mo's privileged status as a citizen, Toni has no patient humor for her wife's depression. When Clarice laments that life under Bush goes on "with a little more global warming, carbon dioxide, and arsenic," Toni yanks the sheets out from underneath Clarice and relentlessly lists Bush's agenda: "They're dismantling abortion rights, slashing energy efficiency, reheating the cold war! And you can't even rouse yourself to go to the **mall**." It is Raffi, not Toni, who finally teases Clarice out of bed. Raffi fakes illness, groaning that "the president irradiated the lunch meat at school." He motivates his mother out of bed, not, however, to fight for environmental justice, but to go to the mall to buy new sneakers. The environmental imagination of this episode shows that the strip has become more complex in its later years. The effort to safe-guard the nation from conservative ideals and to support a lesbian nuclear family drains Clarice of her earlier idealist fervor.

While Clarice struggles to advance environmental justice in a world that is increasingly unsafe for lesbians and lesbian political concerns, Stuart Goodman embodies the late-20th century environmental paradigm of a privileged White male. He asserts that an ethical consumerism is paramount to systemic environmental recuperation, and assumes that all consumers contribute equally to environmental devastation. In turn, he

believes that all consumers are responsible for their own environmental oppression. His strident ethical consumerism is evident in his food politics and in his impulsive decision to sell the family station wagon he shares with Sparrow. In his enthusiastic consumer advocacy, Stuart often mistakes his desire for individual transcendence with actual collective environmental action. Though his individual attempts at achieving a global ecological balance are surely admirable, his outrage nonetheless represents a disconnection between his lesbian-identified feminism and the goals of his environmentalism.

Stuart's shortsighted environmental principles enable *DTWOF* to critique an environmentalism closely allied with a lesbian ethos. Indeed, Bechdel claims Stuart as most representative of her own political beliefs among the *DTWOF* cast. Stuart proves that the strip's non-lesbian characters can nonetheless mobilize its lesbian environmental imagination. At the same time, Stuart's environmentalism exhibits many problems associated with mainstream environmentalism that other lesbians in the strip critique. Thus his environmentalism is both a departure from as well as a reinforcement of lesbian environmental ethics. As a self-identified straight man with a gay clan, Stuart demonstrates a nuanced and receptive heterosexuality. He is the first straight male character to ever appear in *DTWOF*; he shocks Ginger and Lois as Sparrow's new non-lesbian love interest (#278: "Disclosure" *Essential* 192). As Sparrow explains to her skeptical housemates, "He seems to have a pattern of getting involved with women who turn out to be lesbians" (#283: "The Iceman Cometh" *Essential* 197). Stuart's devotion to lesbians eases his acceptance into the group and signals his paradoxical straight yet queer status. Indeed, Lois jokes that the "groovy p.c. credit card, co-op membership, [and]

therapist's business card" in his wallet suggest that Stuart is, in fact, a lesbian himself (#284: "Collateral Damage" *Essential* 198). Though Lois and Ginger find Stuart's lesbian-identified heterosexuality perplexing, Stuart is unfazed by his attraction to women who love women. He fondly tells his housemates that he had a crush on his lesbian car mechanic Geraldine before Geraldine became Jerry (#323: "I.D. Fixe?" *Essential* 230). The running gag of Stuart's preference for lesbians hits its peak when he bumps into two of his ex-girlfriends marrying one another at the courthouse (#436: "Get Me to the Clerk On Time" *Essential* 307). Their ironic encounter is joyful rather than embarrassed; Stuart's exes, decked out in wedding dresses, are pleased to meet his new partner Sparrow, who smiles back at them with equal warmth. Stuart's ease with his own sexual history marks his heterosexuality as refreshingly fluid and open rather than normative.

When Stuart moves into Ginger, Lois, and Sparrow's communal house, he literally becomes a member of the lesbian community. His soft-spoken, sensitive personality contradicts Ginger's characterization of straight men as bombastic, unkempt, and domineering (#280: "A Guy Thing" *Essential* 184). Discussing the terrible school shooting in Littleton, CO at the breakfast table, Stuart critiques the prevailing assumption that boys are innately more violent than girls, while Sparrow reinforces a normative view of gender, declaring that boys should "evolve a little" (#314: "Boy Trouble" *Essential* 314). Stuart is often able to move beyond essential notions of masculinity that his housemates still find convenient. When Mo's ex-girlfriend Harriet worries that learning the gender of Sparrow's fetus will set damaging expectations for the child, Stuart assures her: "Believe me, in this house we have very few preconceived notions about what a girl

is" (#403: "Swept Away" *Essential* 286). Stuart feels most at home in a community that troubles heterosexual norms.

Stuart's lack of sexual confidence also characterizes his masculinity as malleable and responsive rather than dominating or controlling. Bechdel develops Stuart's sexual vulnerability in empathetically rendered sex scenes. When he occasionally struggles with erectile dysfunction and low libido, Stuart turns his head from the focalizing view of the panel, his muscled back slumped and his hands tucked in his lap (#291: "Love and Work Part II" *Essential* 203). The shot of Stuart's dejected shoulders and naked back humanize his straight masculinity. His dismayed posture is both deeply intimate and culturally transgressive; rarely are straight men depicted so empathetically in a moment of sexual shame. Bechdel treats Stuart's sexual struggles with the same tenderness she deploys in every sex scene in *DTWOF*. When Sparrow requests more missionary after Stuart's performance of cunnilingus isn't satisfying, Stuart turns away, sure that Sparrow would in fact prefer a woman. His performances of insecurity break down prevailing notions about straight men as invariably self-assured, convinced of their own sex appeal, or sexually insatiable. Stuart proves to be a straight man who longs for the sexual proficiency and skill he attributes to lesbian lovers.

Thus, when he becomes a stay-at-home father, Stuart's performance of early 21st century domesticity is decidedly anti-normative. While Sparrow advances to an executive position in the local NARAL chapter, Stuart happily resigns as executive director of the local homeless shelter, cheerfully ditching the requisite suit and tie for a new signature outfit (given to him by his housemates): a Utilikilt that showcases his large, strong calves, a slew of political protest t-shirts, and plenty of long-sleeved plaid button-downs (#435:

"Milk Man" *Essential* 306). Stuart's countercultural stay-at-home uniform marks his domesticity as a new political project. He maintains a blog appropriately titled "Subversive Parenting," which chronicles his daughter's growth, his food preservation and canning projects, and his anti-war activism. Stuart's blog shows that he views his domesticity as a critical contribution to broader political change. It also showcases his focus on individual action as the primary means of social transformation.

Stuart is by no means an idealized lesbian-identified heterosexual man. Though he is untroubled by Jerry's transition from Geraldine, he is uncomfortable with Lois's habitual first place showing in competitive drag shows. He disapproves of teenage Jonas's transition to Janice, declaring that "[Jonas] needs to learn to adjust" to assigned gender roles, a comment Lois finds especially ironic given Stuart's preference for wearing a skirt (#435: "Milk Man" *Essential* 306). Stuart patronizes Sparrow for taking work calls at home because he's "worried that the stress is decreasing [her] milk production" (#419: "The Candidate" *Essential* 297). Stuart is quick to discipline other people's bodies when he finds them inappropriate or insufficient. Thus, even as Bechdel develops Stuart's fluid gender and sexual identity, she doesn't deprive him of believable flaws. When he tries to relieve his anxieties by requiring that other people adopt his increasingly extreme ethical standards, he comes across as a tragically shortsighted mainstream environmentalist.

Though he is a refreshingly countercultural straight White man, Stuart's performance of privileged environmental outrage nonetheless aligns him with problematic assumptions of mainstream environmentalism. He frequently demonstrates anxiety about being implicated in systemic environmental oppression but fails to consider

intersectional, collective action in place of individualized solutions. Stuart's mainstream environmental outrage differs significantly from Clarice's aesthetic of environmental justice outrage. While Clarice's outrage responds directly to the environmental oppression of specific people groups, Stuart is so preoccupied with his own collusion in environmental problems that he fails to recognize how any viable solutions will necessarily differ according to social privilege. Stuart tends to flatten out and equalize disproportionate consumer and corporate contributions to pollution, for example, condemning anyone who drives a car for personally perpetuating the peak oil crisis, or restricting his household to a locavore diet to offset the industrial food system. Stuart operates from the premise that individual consumers are equally responsible for generating environmental harm. This premise leads Stuart to assume absolutist positions in response to environmental problems that require more nuanced understanding of cause and effect. Stuart's concentration on implementing consumer solutions to corporate problems obscures more robust coalitions with local environmental justice groups, including those Clarice represents in court.

When Stuart tries to express outrage on behalf of the collective, his emotional responses actually deny the reality of environmental justice. His most overt performances of mainstream environmental outrage occurs in episodes #468: "Divorced from Reality" and #516: "Failed State" (*Essential* 331; *Essential* 379). In these episodes, Stuart stresses the power of the individual to catalyze collective change while denying the individual's own poignant complicity in undermining community initiatives. Stuart refuses to admit the separation between his idealized goals and his lived actions and does so in a particularly stereotypical way.

In #468: “Divorced from Reality,” Stuart grapples with his outrage at peak oil while sitting in smoggy traffic in the family station wagon. Meanwhile, at a backyard barbeque in the suburbs, Toni and Gloria defend their failed campaign to stop a statewide marriage amendment even as they conceal their recent affair from their partners. Each character argues that individual action can positively impact the community, but each character carefully overlooks how individual also fail to support community progress. Stuart tries to absolve himself of consumer guilt in the peak oil crisis by spontaneously selling the car he shares with Sparrow. Gloria and Toni deny their affair in the hope of preserving their marriages and keeping their campaign free of scandal. Ultimately, the episode reveals the strategies of outrage and denial that individuals must negotiate as they strive for greater social change.

Ana’s discovery of Gloria’s panties at Toni and Clarice’s house and Stuart’s impromptu sale of the family car emphasize the divide between idealized virtue and the gritty reality of social action. When Ana confirms Gloria’s unfaithfulness, she dismisses the value of Gloria’s political advocacy, while Stuart’s sale of his and Sparrow’s car reveals his self-righteous refusal to consider alternative responses to the problem of peak oil. In splitting the plot between Stuart’s environmental outrage and Toni and Gloria’s troubled Freedom to Marry campaign, Bechdel implicates the peak oil crisis as imminently relevant to lesbian-led social action. Homophobia and the peak oil crisis together require collective attention, or widespread social and environmental devastation will continue to wreak havoc on local and global communities. Yet the challenge of building coalitions is dire; it requires a vulnerability that Stuart finds difficult to locate in his proud performances of countercultural domesticity.

In the strip's opening panel, JR innocently sings an overlooked solution to the peak oil crisis. She sits in her infant car seat and recites, "Weez on Bus go wownd an' wownd." As the first line from a character in the strip, this adorable lyric sets the tone. It subtly hints that multiple responses to the problem of peak oil do exist: JR's happy smile contrasts with Stuart's bug-eyed fervor. Advocating for public transportation would in fact enable more people to travel by more ecological means. In response to a radio broadcast linking President George W. Bush's war in Iraq to US control of oil, Stuart vows "stop the madness **right now**." By the final panel, Stuart pushes Jiao Raizel in a stroller along the shoulder of the road, a used car lot advertising "Fast Cash for Cars" in the background. Stuart's pupils are hidden as he declares, "There! No more denial for us!" This episode wryly comments on trying to make a difference while failing to see where individual actions fall short. JR gets it right: using the local bus route would be more advantageous than trekking along the shoulder of the highway.

Stuart's mainstream environmental fervor is heightened by the strip's polyvocal juxtaposition of character dialogue and news media. The zigzagged speech balloons of the radio compete with Stuart's own smooth-edged exclamations of shock at the complex global market for oil. The conversation between Stuart and the radio frame the images in the first three panels. In keeping with Bechdel's style, the dialogue is larger than life; text fills up half the panel. Character and radio speech balloons occupy the same space above and below the panel's visual action, containing the visual space. The image of a series of cars regulates and contains the bodies of anonymous drivers. Stuart's car radio reports that President Bush demands public support for a war in Iraq because oil tops $60 a

barrel. Stuart responds to the radio, "What are we **doing?**" as wide-eyed as a 21st century Lorax.

Stuart's use of the pronoun "we" signals his assumption that he represents a common voice. His accompanying aesthetic of privileged environmental outrage originates in his anxiety about his own complicity in environmental oppression. He implicates all drivers, everywhere, in his outrage at petroculture. In the second panel, his body is blacked out, his glasses are ominous orbs hovering in the dark silhouette of his body. He declares, "Here we all sit in our **air-conditioned sarcophagi**!" His excessive metaphor comically emphasizes the intensity of his outrage: he views car travel as the mortal end of human life. All drivers are to blame for petroculture, according to Stuart, regardless of those driving to work or those driving for pleasure, those doing errands or just out for a ride, those carpooling or those driving alone. Driving is a luxurious death wish rather than a necessary tool for survival, in Stuart's calculation. His calculations don't include the difficulty of deviating from a system designed for car travel, or the need to create collective alternatives, like robust bus routes, so air-conditioned sarcophagi are no longer necessary.

Stuart privileges an ethical consumerism as the means of intervening in environmental oppression rather than collective action. In #393: "Cyborg Nation," he claims that environmental racism and global inequity motivate his consumerism. Yet acknowledging environmental racism is incidental rather than central to Stuart's outrage. As a result, his efforts at collective political action are often diffusive and unconvincing. For example, his one-man campaign to impeach George W. Bush contrasts significantly from Toni's focused and unambiguous community organizing in support of the state's

Freedom to Marry Act. While Toni's efforts ultimately restore the denied rights of so many, Stuart's campaign merely soothes his own sense of personal injury.

Though Stuart's outrage is ostensibly aimed at resolving collective environmental problems, he fails to understand that his personal disciplines offer no solutions for the entire community. Stuart's environmentalism is ultimately self-serving: his projects assuage his own guilt at being complicit in global systems that disenfranchise and exploit unseen populations and environments, but do nothing to transform the systems themselves. In Sparrow's words, he makes "impulsive, one-sided, self-righteous decisions" (#470: "Zoo Story"). Unsurprisingly, Stuart's community coolly evades his strict rationing of gas, food, and backyard garden space. Without the family station wagon, Sparrow borrows Ginger's car and carpools with Mo to commute to work (#471: "In the Good Old Summertime"). Lois eats at Jasmine's house so she can buy junk food and forfeit Stuart's dodgy rhubarb wine (#522: "Decisions, Decisions"). Young JR tirelessly demands Frosted Fruit Bat cereal, and when Stuart explains it "comes from thousands of miles away," she sardonically quips, "I wish I was fousands of miles away" (fig. 7). While he might conclude that his efforts at collective action are stymied by the apathy of his friends, in reality it is Stuart who is indifferent to their perspectives. His environmental actions are oppositional rather than transformational.

Clarice's environmental justice work is worlds away from Stuart's food politics. Though he once ran the homeless shelter in the low-income neighborhood known as South End, he does not engage Clarice in any discussion of her work in the same neighborhood. Instead, Stuart tells Clarice what to eat, how to vote, and how to manage her recent break-up with Toni. He assumes an attitude of control over her presence in the

community home. In turn, Clarice is diminished, alone, and desperate. By the final panel, she is shrunken and dejected on the phone with Toni. Her body and her concerns seem inconsequential. Though their politics might align them, Stuart's inability to see beyond his own understanding of what it means to be an environmentalist limits the potential intersection between his mainstream environmentalism and Clarice's environmental justice advocacy. If Clarice's critical environmentalism is marginalized within *DTWOF* as a whole, it is absolutely erased in Stuart's home. His domesticity is absolute; his local food habits reveal his privilege. Local organic foods are expensive, and the time it takes to prepare dishes with alternative ingredients is significant. The dinner between Clarice and Stuart is fraught. From the outside, they would seem to comprise a happy heterosexual family: a father, a daughter, and a mother share a home-cooked meal. But Stuart wears a skirt, Clarice misses her ex-wife, and JR wishes herself a thousand miles away, where her sugared cereal comes from. The meal is bland and inedible given the diet of the household. Stuart's polyvocal t-shirt confirms his status as sanctimonious: his shirt shifts between a logo for Kucinich's campaign and the misspelled label of "localvore" on his shirt. As Lois repeats this misspelling in later strips, it appears to be an unintentional error on Bechdel's part. Perhaps the environmental trend that Stuart embraces is unfamiliar to the cartoonist. The argument in this strip is that Stuart is enthusiastic about environmental action but doesn't really know how to go about it in a coalitional way. Clarice, wiped out by eating bland foods and living in a low-heat home, is subsumed in Stuart's noisy personal consumerism. The strip itself comes to a close without unpacking Clarice's remote response to Stuart's mainstream environmentalism.

In the slow shifting of environmental paradigms in late 20th century America, *DTWOF* offers a constellation of lesbian vantage points. Lesbian identity is not absolute or fixed, but self-revising, open, and responsive. As Beirne notes, "the strip has shifted with the subcultures it reflects" (Beirne 174). The ever-expanding *DTWOF* cast generates incongruous yet compelling environmental mobilizations. Yet intriguingly, the *DTWOF* community doesn't discuss the larger purpose of Clarice's work, even as they arrange their lives to support Clarice and Toni. Though Clarice's advocacy intimately affects them, Clarice's friends don't take on EJ issues as their own. When Toni and Clarice move to the suburbs in 1998, their change of residence cements a "demographic rift" into the community (*Split Level* 79). Their removal from the strip's urban center weakens its aesthetic of environmental equity; Clarice's new 45-minute commute distances her work life from her home life. In addition to teleconferencing with the Natural Resources Defense Council, Clarice now argues with her neighbor Bill about treating his suburban lawn with pesticides (#322: "Chemistry" *Post DTWOF*). Clarice supports Toni and Raffi, wins court cases, and defends her principles on the neighborhood streets of her hostile suburb. Yet with George W. Bush's election in 2000, she enters a period of depression that only partially responds to medication (#377: "C'est La Guerre" *Essential* 270). Her performances of environmental justice outrage, long-neglected by her lover and her community, disappear beneath the heavy labor of simply existing.

In its final years, Bechdel's strip begins to explore an international environmental justice consciousness. While Raffi's birth in coincides with Clarice's push against a local garbage incinerator in 1993, Sparrow wears Stuart's Anti-Monsanto t-shirt during her unexpected home birth in 2003 (#411: "This Brief Transit" *Essential* 291). Just as

Clarice's EJ advocacy codes her son's birth, Stuart's global corporate resistance codes Sparrow's unmedicated labor. By delivering JR in her communal house bedroom, Sparrow implicitly protests global food insecurity and Monsanto's stranglehold on impoverished subsistence farmers through Stuart's political investments. Bechdel explains that labeling the shirt was "a spasm of horror vacuii" given the details already crowding the panel, but the anti-Monsanto icon marks JR's birth as a deeply political act ("Frivolous, Aimless Queries"). Characters now refer peripherally to global ecological injustice. Ironically Stuart becomes the strip's most outspoken lesbian environmentalist. The tenuous local environmental justice advocacy in the strip spins loose.

Yet simultaneous to this moment in history, the strip renews global environmental justice as a central concern to its lesbian environmental imagination. Days after JR's birth, the Shock and Awe campaign begins in Iraq. Ginger, Stuart, and Sparrow gaze in awe at the newborn Jiao Raizel (#412: "Metaphor as Illness"). Incessant radio broadcasts reminds the adults that thousands of Iraqi children developed leukemia "from exposure to depleted uranium shells used by the US in 1991." In unison, the three shout to Lois, "**Turn it off!**" only to sit in the subsequent silence with pained faces. The strip's environmental imagination in the new millennium holds terrible global inequalities up to the light. Bechdel's refusal to allow her characters to turn away from harsh realities, even in the midst of their own great joy, broadens the strip's aesthetics of environmental equity. This move anticipates cohesion between the lesbian environmental imagination of *DTWOF* and environmental justice mobilizations worldwide.

CHAPTER III

RETROACTIVE RISK: ENVIRONMENTAL RACISM IN JACKIE ORMES' *TORCHY IN HEARTBEATS*

Jackie Ormes was the first African American woman cartoonist and an unsung environmental pioneer. Although she has received little recognition for it, Ormes' comics portrayed the struggle for environmental justice in 1953, a decade before the start of mainstream environmentalism and three decades before environmental justice had a name. Ormes wrote the blueprint for an environmentalism responsive to the concerns of women of color. Her work also shows the promise of a disparaged form like the romance strip to the postwar environmental imagination of the United States.

With the exception of Nancy Goldstein, Ormes's groundbreaking biographer, no scholars have analyzed the environmental justice sequence in the romance strip *Torchy in Heartbeats* (1953-1954). Access to the strip is severely limited as only two libraries in the United States hold archives of the comic supplement in which it appeared, and even these holdings are incomplete (Goldstein 27). Although Nancy Goldstein's superb biography includes eighteen full-color reproductions of *Torchy in Heartbeats*, no edited collections or thorough archives of the strip yet exist. The shocking absence of scholarly attention to Jackie Ormes reveals the academy's systemic marginalization of African American history and the comic arts, especially by women. As scholars and editors are only just preparing to follow Ms. Goldstein's lead, she has generously shared her personal archive of *Torchy in Heartbeats*.

Reading across this digital archive of *Torchy in Heartbeats* requires close attention to subtle visual clues and gaps in the two-year sequence. Formal analysis is vital

to understanding the story arc, as missing content resurfaces in implicit references and visual gestures. Fortunately Ormes anticipated that weekly readers might miss a strip here and there; title panels recap the previous week's events with remarkable clarity. However, two sentence summaries cannot reproduce Ormes' elegant iconicity and expert pacing. Ormes deploys critical juxtapositions between narrative voice and visual movement. The clash of word and image produces a third space of meaning critical to Ormes' use of the form. Torchy doesn't always do what the comic says she does: her embodied rhetoric often covertly departs from the official narrative of the strip itself. Her resistance to dominant discourses of sexuality, environmental oppression, and romance cleverly register through body language and facial expression. Without access to the strips themselves, scholarship can only partially perceive Ormes' ingenuity as a cartoonist and cultural commenter. Formal analysis is absolutely critical to understanding the significance of Ormes' project.

Jackie Ormes didn't draw meek women. Between 1937 and 1954, she published four distinct titles in the Black press: *Torchy Brown in Dixie to Harlem* (1937-38), *Patty Jo 'n' Ginger* (1945-1956), *Candy* (1945), and *Torchy in Heartbeats* (1950-54). During this pivotal period in United States history, the Black press chronicled national and local events from critical vantage points that were denied and outright denigrated by mainstream media outlets. Newspapers owned and operated by African Americans facilitated significant political discourse under Jim Crow and sponsored concrete sociopolitical action. Ormes' comics appeared in well-established Black newspapers like the *Chicago Defender* and the *Pittsburgh Courier*, where her female protagonists critiqued intersecting systems of oppression in 20th century African American experience.

In coast-to-coast circulation, the Black press rallied African American communities around common concerns and cooperative struggles: Ormes' comics would have reached over a million readers through 14 big city editions of the *Courier* (Goldstein "Trouble" 24). In the pre-Civil Rights era of matronly Mammies and hypersexualized Jezebels, Ormes' cartoons made radical new icons of Black womanhood available to African American women nationwide.

Torchy Brown is exceptionally well-defined. Torchy appears in both Ormes' first and last titles as a passionate adventurer and social justice visionary with flawless fashion sense. Ormes reflects that "Torchy was no moonstruck crybaby, and that she wouldn't perish between heartbeats. I never liked dreamy little women who can't hold their own" (Jackson 25). In the final story arc of *Torchy in Heartbeats*, Torchy applies her considerable talents to fighting the environmental racism of Colonel Fuller, owner of the "huge Fuller Chemical Plant," which "is slowly poisoning the entire community" of the predominantly Black town of Southville (4 July 1953). Torchy's struggle against environmental racism converges with her struggle against the heteronormative conventions of mid-century romance comics. Even as Torchy and her beau Doctor Paul Hammond mount what is likely the first environmental justice struggle in comics history, sexism persists in *Torchy in Heartbeats*. True to form, Torchy doesn't simply accept Paul, her boyfriend and boss, as an incontestable authority. Her opposition to his relaxed condescension is subtly coded in her body language and emotional affect. This chapter argues that Torchy nimbly defies the latent sexism in the environmental imagination of the strip's final story arc. In Torchy's physical entanglements with intersecting

oppressions, the strip develops a meaningful aesthetic of environmental equity that critiques the overlap of sexism and environmental racism.

In its depiction of an independent and realistic Black heroine, *Torchy in Heartbeats* activates the possibilities of the romance comic genre to address issues that mainstream midcentury comics tend to avoid, including racism, industrial pollution, and sexual violence. *Torchy in Heartbeats* is thus significant for more than its development of a complex female protagonist: the strip is extraordinary because it features a heroine who flexes the framework of the romance comic to advance environmental justice. In episodes from 1953-4, *Torchy in Heartbeats* conveys a heterosexual love that strives to be overcome environmental racism. Ormes uses the architecture of the romance comic—scenes of heightened emotional affect and elaborate character introspection—to convey the stakes of environmental health. By bending and troubling the rules of heteronormative romance even as she maintains them, Ormes develops a romance that examines the intersection of compulsory heterosexuality and environmental racism.

Torchy's emotional affect generates a critical political vocabulary. Her emotions register resistance not only to environmental racism but to the heteronormative finale of the strip itself. The genre of the romance comic is uniquely suited to represent the politics of emotional affect because the genre valorizes embodied experience. Indeed, animated body language and heightened exchanges of emotion define this deeply paradoxical genre. The romance comic is the first comic genre to develop complicated and absorbing female protagonists, but was typically controlled by middle-aged men churning out storylines from their studios (with a few notable exceptions, including female cartoonist Dale Messick's ground-breaking *Brenda Starr*). By contrast, *Torchy* belonged entirely to

Ormes. After arguing with the male writer assigned to the strip about making Torchy "the kind of woman I wanted," the writer told her, "Here! You do it!" Ormes reports that "the dialogue, frames, and balloons became my responsibility" (Jackson 25). Though the problematic formula of young women urgently seeking to win the favor of handsome men fell out of favor in the late 1970s, the romance comic handily exceeded all superhero sales during the 1950s: 1 of every 4 comics sold was a romance in 1952 (Nolan 62). Thus the genre is at once progressive and yet conservative, historically disparaged and yet vital to comics history. It compels feminist critique because it reinforces devotion to heterosexual marriage as a means of female self-empowerment, and yet it complicates its own sexist formula by asserting the vitality and strength of its female protagonists, albeit within the confines of heterosexual relationship. Romance comics tend to fly under the radar of many comics histories, but as John Benson, Jacque Nodell, Michelle Nolan, Trina Robbins, Douglas Wolk, and others can attest, the genre develops critical cultural and artistic engagements that deepen our understanding of the work comics do.

Torchy in Heartbeats develops an aesthetic of environmental equity in which emotional affect constitutes political resistance to environmental oppression and compulsory heterosexuality. An aesthetic of environmental equity registers the emotional toll of being denied environmental health. It asserts the rights of marginalized communities not simply to survive but to thrive. *Torchy in Heartbeats* deploys a number of formal moves that generate an aesthetic of environmental equity. One of the most basic examples is the rhetoric of environmental justice. In the recap at the start of nearly every weekly episode in the two-year sequence, the strip never once refers to the effect of the chemical wastes flowing from the Fuller Chemical Plant as pollution. Rather, wastes

from the plant "slowly poison the entire community" (14 Nov. 1953). This phrase is repeated close to a hundred times in recaps of weekly episodes. By emphasizing the problem of waste as poisoning rather than pollution, the strip indicts the Fuller Chemical plant and its owner, Colonel James Fuller.

The distinction between the outcomes of pollution and poison is critical in environmental justice discourse. As communities of color "live cheek by jowl with waste dumps, incinerators, landfills, smelters, factories, chemical plants, and oil refineries whose operations make them sick and kill them young," 'poisoning' cuts to the heart of the problem better than the benign abstraction of "polluting" (Austin and Schill 69). This aggressive verb anticipates the rhetoric of Louisiana activist Pat Bryant, who finds the term 'pollution' insufficent to describe its impact on communities of color: "With state officals looking the other way and sometimes even aiding them, chemical companies are actually poisoning people. So we call it poisoning rather than polluting" (39). The sharp dipthong of the verb "poison" injects sinister connotation into the environmental imagination of *Torchy in Heartbeats*; rather than referring generally to the innocuous contamination of a pure or ideal environment, the term refers to a painful and targeted violence. By calling the crisis "poisoning" rather than "pollution," Ormes suggests that Fuller Chemical Industries calculatingly burdens the Black community of Southville with disproportionate environmental harm. This careful insinuation emphasizes the emotional cost of the chemical waste: its environmental impact on those living in its path. An aesthetic of environmental equity emerges through this verb because it registers the vulnerability of Southville without regulations that might safeguard its people and their environmental health.

An aesthetic of environmental equity in *Torchy in Heartbeats* further emerges through complex interactions of verbal and visual rhetoric. The strip features people of color enjoying the beauty of their natural world (1 Aug. 1953) as well as suffering environmental illness (6 Feb. 1954). Yet the strip's aesthetics of equity falters when it comes to Torchy and Paul's romance and the practical consequences of their victory over Fuller's bigotry. Torchy and Paul's love troubles and yet maintains heterosexual conventions of the romance comic. As Nancy Goldstein argues, "Paul embodies the inevitability and reality of male power that Torchy needs to ensure her survival in a cruel world, yet he is tender and gentle, loving her, protecting her, and putting concern for her above all else" ("Trouble" 40). Paul's position of dominance in the strip is as benevolent as it is heirarchical. Consequently, through the lens of their relationship, the strip struggles to realize Torchy and the people of Southville under Paul's care as dynamic agents of change instead of victims in need of rescue from Torchy's boyfriend.

Torchy and Paul's relationship is unusual in that it mobilizes the strip's call for environmental justice, an unparalleled feat in any comic genre of the time. Midcentury romance comics usually concentrate on the extensive introspection and ambiguous moral progress of individuals: White, straight heroines suffer for love and learn life lessons from the White men they pursue. The genre as a whole is less concerned with investigating social inequity or systems of oppression as it is with the perils and thrills of sentimental straight relationships. Torchy and Paul's love, however, is as socially engaged as it is heteronormative; by the start of the environmental justice story arc, they risk their lives not for each other but for their community. The central conflict of the environmental justice story arc is not taking their relationship to the next level but ending

Colonel Fuller's reign of environmental terror in Southville. According to Charles Hatfield, the "romance genre embodies a tension between the desire for intimacy and the fear of vulnerability that goes with it" (110). Yet Torchy's tenuous love for Paul radiates outward as well as inward; their romance is embedded in a collective narrative in which Torchy meditates on the town's vulnerability to environmental harm as much as her own emotional wellbeing.

Though their relationship sustains their effort to save the lives of the Black community of Southville, Torchy and Paul's romance also sustains problematic heteronormative logic. Torchy and Paul comply with strict heterosexual norms as they challenge Colonel Fuller's bigotry, research a cure for chemical poisoning, and administer treatment to the suffering citizens. As Paul's assistant, Torchy is absolutely obedient to his orders. Paul admires Torchy's various modes of emotional labor with Fuller's young nephew Jamie and with Southville patients, but doesn't stop himself from telling Torchy how to feel and act. Paul's central fault as a character is his benevolent condescension; he assumes that he knows best for Southville and for Torchy. Paul compromises the aesthetics of environmental equity in the strip by refusing to grant agency to Southville as a community and by assuming dominance over Torchy. Torchy's responses to Paul's authority are complex. Although she is loyal to his vision for saving the people of Southville from chemical poisoning, a tension exists in her dialogue and body language in panels that concern the fallout of environmental oppression. Her gestures, facial expression, and postures contradict her apparent deference to her boyfriend and boss. Though she rarely says so out loud, Torchy's body language communicates resistance to Paul's admonitions that she deny her fears for the

community's well-being. Torchy thus iconically complicates the sexist tropes that persist in this groundbreaking narrative of environmental justice. Though the narrative itself is thoroughly heteronormative—captions consistently refer to Torchy as "the girl" despite the fact that she is a grown woman and her generous curves easily exceed midcentury beauty ideals—Torchy's body language troubles the logic of sexism at work in the strip.

By troubling the sexism of the strip, Torchy also troubles the limits of its environmental imagination. The strip strives to recount a dramatic end of environmental oppression in Southville, but by the concluding strips of the story arc, Southville hasn't realized true justice and Torchy hasn't realized true love. In one of the final strips of the story, Torchy and Paul sit on a hilltop and watch the sun rise "a new day for Southville": the panel background shines a bright yellow over Fuller Chemical Industries, which is nestled in the folds of green vegetation below (fig. 1). Above this charming pastoral scene, Paul leans contentedly against the trunk of a tree with his arm around Torchy's waist, while Torchy leans forward at an awkward angle. The strip picks up just as Paul is in mid-sentence: "No, Darling…The new Southville will bring more people to work and live here, and new, big industries attracted by the happier, healthier atmosphere!" The previous week's strip is missing from the archive, but one can speculate that Torchy has expressed some doubt about her usefulness to Paul's medical practice now that the environmental crisis appears to be over. Taking her hands in his and turning to face her, Paul gazes into her troubled face and reassures Torchy that he'll "need her more than before…if that's possible!" In the next panel, he gently reproves her as pulls her to her feet: "Don't be a worry-wart!" Torchy allows Paul to hoist her up by the wrist and pledges, "All right, Darling—I promise! No more worrying!" Yet Paul's response

disregards several critical issues facing their shared future. The potential "new, big industries" drawn to the "healthier atmosphere" of Southville have no incentive for industrial regulation. Paul sees growing industry as a benefit despite the fact that these industries might easily introduce more unchecked waste into the very rivers that so recently poisoned the community. Though economic opportunity is vital to ending Fuller's monopoly on the town's industry, the town has no collective experience in protecting itself from future environmental poisoning; it has learned to trust Paul to save people from certain death only after poisoning occurs. Torchy appears apprehensive of their future despite Paul's assurances that her place by his side is secure. The yellow-toned caption intones,

> Even though she meant her promise, the words had a strange, hollow ring to the girl. All too often, in the past, seeming certain happiness had faded away in the strange cob web that fate spun. Who was to say it would not happen again! But, angry at herself, she cast the thought away, determined to cling to the full measure of happiness that was hers, now!

The third person omniscient narration gives voice to Torchy's inner turmoil: she can't shake her fears that this relationship is destined for failure, but directs frustration toward herself rather than at Paul. The "strange cob web that fate spun" suggests that Torchy's world is inherited from past forces that spun it together. The "strange, hollow ring" of her own words indicates that Torchy knows her relationship lacks a truth she yearns for but can't name. As Paul pulls her into an embrace in the next panel, Torchy closes her eyes and grips the fabric of his red turtleneck, burying her face in his neck as he kisses her forehead. Torchy clings to him and vows to "be wherever you need me, Darling…

Always!" despite her unspoken hesitations. Torchy's body language here suggests submission to Paul's words is avoidance of her own anxiety: because Torchy can't describe her apprehension she decides her confusion must be her own fault. While the strip critiques Colonel Fuller's bigotry at great length following Paul's cure of Fuller's nephew Jamie (1 May 1954, 8 May 1954, 15 May 1954), the strip only reinforces the compulsory sexual and gendered rules that characterize Torchy and Paul's relationship.

Several popular historians have noted that the pivotal 1953-4 sequence in *Torchy in Heartbeats* is significant for its forward-thinking environmental themes, including Stephen Loring Jones (1985), Susan Reib and Stuart Feil (1996), and Trina Robbins (2011). These writers unanimously laud *Torchy* for its concentration on environmental racism, a problem still overlooked today by mainstream environmentalism. While critics nod to the progressive themes of the strip that distinguish *Torchy* as a stand out comic, most haven't examined the strip for its formal achievements. Goldstein is the only scholar to date to examine the environmental justice story arc at any length in her seminal Ormes biography and her recent chapter in *Black Comics* (2013). While Goldstein's excellent study provides a meaningful overview of the EJ sequence, it does not analyze the sequence's formal construction, which is critical to the complexity of its romance. The strip concentrates on embodied affect as a means of resisting latent heteronormativity in the environmental racism in Southville. This chapter examines how formal elements of the romance comic support *Torchy's* call for a transformational response to environmental oppression: a response of true love.

It is important to recognize that in the comics of Ormes' era and even our own, *Torchy*'s attention to environmental racism remains unrivaled. *Torchy*'s environmental

justice story arc predates the publication of *Silent Spring* by nearly a decade and anticipates the heightened visibility of the contemporary environmental justice movement by a full thirty years. American comics don't see the rise of another African American woman advocate for environmental justice until 1993, when Clarice Clifford accepts a position as an environmental justice lawyer in Alison Bechdel's *Dykes to Watch Out For*. The only advocate in comics to follow Clarice is Mayah, the adolescent Black hero from the recent online comics project *Mayah's Lot* (2011). However, while *Torchy* is often summarized as a comic strip before its time, the strip is significant precisely because it *does* respond to its time. American comics have responded to environmental oppression long before 1953. Early American newspaper strips like the *Katzenjammer Kids* and *Hogan's Alley* focused on the gritty tenement life of White ethnic immigrants. Racial caricature at the turn of the 19th century reveals a compelling preoccupation with environmental distress and disease associated with densely populated urban life and institutional poverty. Yet even the radical focus on working class living conditions for immigrants elides the environmental concerns of people of color contemporary to this moment.

Though *Torchy in Heartbeats* is not the first American comic to feature themes of environmental oppression, it imagines what is perhaps the most resilient response to environmental racism of the 20th century. *Torchy* remains deeply relevant to contemporary environmental justice initiatives because it directly critiques oppressive structures in the world beyond the funny pages. As Nancy Goldstein argues, Ormes would have been aware of struggles against garbage incinerators and landfills happening in the 1950s in her own Chicago community: "Many parts of the South Side were low-

income neighborhoods whose residents were mostly people of color, and these neighborhoods were well known as dumping grounds for the waste from more affluent communities and industry" ("Trouble" 40). Goldstein perceptively reasons that Ormes was probably inspired by one community action in particular: "In 1953, citizens in South Side Chicago where [Ormes] lived united to protest a defective landfill that released untreated runoff into swamps and lakes" (40). Goldstein imagines *Torchy* as a direct response from Ormes to the environmental justice issues engaging the Black community of Chicago's South Side. Given the national circulation of the *Courier*, readers from not only Chicago but every major city from Houston to Memphis to New Orleans to Detroit might see their own local struggles against environmental racism reflected in Southville's chemical poisoning. Ormes taps into a collective experience of environmental oppression in midcentury African American life by innovating the form of a marginalized genre within a marginalized medium.

In translating issues of environmental justice into comic form, *Torchy* relies on visual shorthand to signal the moral stakes of environmental racism. One of the strip's most important moves is its use of a single, outrageous villain in place of a collection of faceless corporations. As Tseming Yang points out in his critique of contemporary environmental justice legislation, rarely is environmental justice "premised on the existence of a particular, identifiable bigoted actor" (Yang 156). Yet Colonel Fuller becomes a convenient and concrete symbol for the many racist institutions and processes that produce environmental racism in Southville. Colonel Fuller represents several intersecting oppressions at work: his title indicates that he is a former military authority, and thus represents the interests of nation-building in the Unities States; he owns the huge

mansion featured prominently on the main road into town, thus representing wealth and privilege of the old South (25 Apr. 1953); he refuses Doctor Paul Hammond an up-to-date medical facility because the doctor is Black, signaling a prejudice that overwhelms any compassion for the ill (23 May 1953); and finally he owns Fuller Chemical Industries, a factory that employs all of Southville and introduces chemical poisons into Southville's waterways, foodways, and soil (30 May 1953). As Paul explains to Torchy, "In more ways than one, the people of Southville live their lives in the great shadow of the plant and Mr. Big…Colonel Fuller! In short, Darling, the plant and all it means ***is*** Southville!" (ibid). In Colonel Fuller, Ormes distills the major power structures that dominate Southville. Yet when Fuller finally realizes his bigotry is immoral, the environmental threat to the town only ostensibly ends: there is no systemic overhaul or redistribution of power to the Black community other than Paul's advancement to the new medical clinic.

Torchy's emotional affect critiques the curious failure to transform power in Southville at the close of the strip. Our heroine's body language implies that Paul's promotion and Fuller's contrition are ultimately not sufficient justice for her or for Southville. Her accompanying guardedness with Paul is another symptom of the failure of transformative justice in Southville; Torchy's ultimate reluctance to "be happy" at Paul's side signals a discomfort with the unresolved sexism in their relationship and in the environmental status of Southville as a whole. In the final strips of the story arc, the town remains vulnerable to future industrial threats while Torchy struggles to trust Paul's love. Paul pledges to be patient with Torchy, even as he agrees with Fuller that time will make Southville a prosperous town: "Southville is only beginning to expand into the

community it someday will be!" (5 June 1954). Our heroine doubts the possibility of a secure happiness when power has been easily and clearly abused.

Against Colonel Fuller's garish bigotry, Torchy and Paul's love appears sensuous, reciprocal, and rewarding. As Goldstein points out, their relationship is especially vital in the midcentury era when images of mature African American romance were absent from mainstream cultural production ("Trouble" 23). The presence of a loving and complex Black couple in comics was extremely unusual for the time. This scarcity worsened with formation of the Comics Code Authority in 1954 which actively censored any and all perceived sexual content in mainstream comics. Yet *Torchy* continued to feature dozens upon dozens of sensuous exchanges between the lovers. In one particularly erotic interlude in a private room of his brand new clinic, Paul clasps Torchy's waist with one hand and holds her jaw with the other (19 June 1954). Eloquent gestures of passionate love—an embrace, an ardent kiss, their two bodies leaning together—punctuate the momentum of the environmental justice story arc. When Torchy and Paul express their love physically, they share encouragement, care, and celebration in their professional work. Yet signs of their affection also signal control: Paul grips a helpless Torchy to his broad chest on more than one occasion to silence her.

Though its steadfast preoccupation with love absolutely classifies the strip as a romance comic, Torchy and Paul's fight for environmental justice destabilizes many conventions of the genre. Paul consistently relies on and values Torchy's medical authority as a trained nurse: he sends Torchy in his stead to report evidence of community poisoning to Fuller (29 Aug. 1953), and later trains Torchy to gather more blood samples on house calls (5 Dec. 1953). Paul supports Torchy's friendship with

Fuller's nephew Jamie and affirms her labor in this relationship as more complex than his own medical research (15 Aug. 1953). Yet the environmental justice story arc is also hindered by their romance. Paul tells Torchy to control her emotions and to rely on his judgment (12 Dec. 1953, 10 Apr. 1954). Paul assumes that he has the authority to make critical decisions for his entire community, and presupposes that his promotion to the town's new medical clinic will determine Southville's success, a presupposition that the strip itself undermines in Torchy's lingering uncertainty about her happiness (fig. 2). Thus, though the strip develops a heterosexual romance that is more feminist than it is sexist, the romance also reinforces troubling heteronormative limits in environmental justice discourse.

Paul and Torchy's love may be true, but it stops short of being truly transformational in their fight against environmental oppression. *Torchy* doesn't manage to realize the people of Southville as more than a set of victims; relatedly, Torchy struggles to realize herself as more than the doctor's girlfriend and assistant. Community members are either subject to Colonel Fuller's neglect or rescued by Doctor Hammond's medical expertise; there is no public reckoning of Fuller's grievous transgressions nor of Paul's choice to withhold information about environmental harm from the community. While Torchy herself presents medical evidence proving chemical risk to Fuller, the final victory over Fuller is entirely Paul's. Torchy is reduced to glaring at a sheepish Fuller rather than seeing him stripped of power (17 Apr. 1954, 15 May 1954, 5 June 1954). Ormes deliberately maintains an image of Torchy and the Black community as compliant and respectful rather than assertively powerful. While the cartoonist draws Torchy and

members of the community with sensitivity and insight, Ormes ultimately allows them to obey the existing male leaders of the community and the illogic they represent.

However, small signs of resistance dance across her comics. Moments of resistance appear ingeniously in this weekly newspaper strip. Often they build on one another from week to week, but as no collected anthology of the strip exists, tracking the formal patterns of defiance to heteronormativity and environmental oppression requires a resourceful eye. *Torchy* differs significantly from the self-contained plot of a romance comic book: the seven-day delay between strips results in a curious elasticity in its timeline. The real-world run of the environmental justice story arc spans two years, while in the timeline of the story itself, time moves unevenly: a single day in the strip can take months to unfold in the real world, while months in the strip can fly by within a single real-world week. As a result, the narrative arc of the strip is unpredictable; it can linger in an intense moment between characters for three successive episodes only to suddenly leap forward months in time in a single strip. In its lingering and leaping through time, the comic invites a critical commentary on the concealed significance of events.

The first major sequence of the story arc covers the afternoon of Torchy's arrival in Southville. Her long walk to Paul's clinic, their reunion, and the house call to the Lemsons' place unfolds across nine episodes, or nine real-world weeks. Upon returning to the clinic, Paul finally reveals his suspicions that ailing citizens are being poisoned by waste products from the Fuller Chemical Plant. At this point in the sequence, several weeks have passed in the real world though it is still Torchy's first afternoon in Southville. Gesturing to glass jars bright red with the blood samples in his laboratory, Paul explains that he's trying to isolate the toxin flowing from the nearby factory into the

bloodstreams of his (all Black) patients (fig. 3). As a result of this delayed revelation, all episodes in the story arc, including Torchy's initial walk along the town's dusty roads, and Paul and Torchy's strolls in "the stillness of the cool woodland," are suddenly cast in toxic risk (4 June 1953). The environment of Southville is reframed as a riskscape through the blood of its people. Paul's revelation retroactively codes all strips and ignites red backgrounds with its introduction of poisoned blood.

All previous instances of the color red in the story arc suddenly connote the menace of poison. Following Paul's revelation, Torchy's earlier encounter with a passing White man driving a farm cart (11 Apr. 1953, 18 Apr. 1953, 25 Apr. 1953) is cast as a foreshadowing of the town's mortal disregard for the Black community. Each installment of her brief encounter with the farm cart driver includes at least one panel background saturated with red ink. The wan yellow coloring of the road and washed out greens of the vegetation behind them bespeak the concealed threat of Southville's natural environment. The blood-red backgrounds glow with the same urgency as the blood samples in Paul's clinic. The motif of deep red as a signal for poisoned blood is important to the strip: it represents the material trace of otherwise invisible harm. Framed by the color of blood, Torchy is shocked by the rudeness of the White farmer who calls her "girlie" and refuses to help her find Paul's new clinic. She clutches her throat and stares after him as he rides away, her smart purple dress and astonished expression a sharp contrast to the dehumanizing implications of his insults (18 Apr. 1953). Torchy continues on the road with dignity and energy, but is visibly disturbed by the malevolence generated in this encounter. Grimly, against the deep saturated red of the background, she tells herself, "I guess I'll find out what [the farmer] meant in time!" (fig. 4).

Throughout the strip, Torchy communicates clear dissent to dehumanizing events in her tense dialogue and body language. Her fight for environmental and gender justice is critically embodied: her compassion for Fuller's nephew Jamie, her guardedness with Paul, and her fury at Colonel Fuller all play out in her physical posture and facial expressions. Her engagement with exasperating power structures register in her occupation of panel space. Though Torchy and Paul's relationship remains problematically normative and the resolution to environmental racism is pat rather than transformational, the strip constructs emotional affect as Torchy's grammar of resistance in an integrated fight for environmental and gender justice.

Ormes' style in *Torchy in Heartbeats* is realistic and detailed, featuring her talents as an experienced fashion designer. Her linework emulates the detailed precision of early adventure strip cartoonists including Milton Caniff and Hal Foster: all figures and backgrounds are outlined in clear, firm brush strokes. Stephen Loring Jones argues that Ormes's "strong, clean, hardedge style" provided "a sharp visual contrast to the more delicately drawn strips usually associated with female artists like Nell Brinkley and Dale Messick" (Jones 26). David Jackson points out that while other romance comics owed their wispy femininity to Nell Brinkley, *Torchy in Heartbeats* "looks as if it were carved" and "derived from the male-drawn comics of the day" (24). The color in *Torchy* is urgent and solid in the usual way of midcentury Sunday strips, emphasizing the shape of background objects and landscapes, as flat newsprint ink tends to do (McCloud 188). Against the firm shapes and colors of Southville's forests and run-down interior spaces, human figures appear staged or posed, as though their bodies deliberately support important demands of the plot. Ormes' linework produces characters that by and large

hold still rather than run or jump or swing through the air. Unlike adventure strips, this romance strip develops action not in the activity of full-bodied motion but in the kinetic nuances of facial expressions, the angle of an embrace, or the physical orientation between two characters in the space of a panel. The intersecting problems of environmental racism and heteronormativity influence how characters make contact with one another across the regular grid of panels in this newspaper strip. When characters touch, speak, or gaze at one another, they negotiate rules of power and privilege that register the strip's aesthetics of equity.

It's important to note that art in *Torchy in Heartbeats* doesn't usually go off-script: the artwork in every panel closely illustrates the extensive content narrated in captions and speech balloons. By virtue of being a Sunday strip, each episode relies heavily on dense blocks of text to catch weekly readers up to speed. On average, each 12-panel episode can include anywhere from 400 to 750 words of exposition and dialogue. The strip often relies on neat captions to narrate the central action in a page. Captions signal a scene change, describe the interior experience of a character, and remind readers to come back for more next week. In keeping with the rhetoric of romance comics, Ormes's writing is often theatrical, but emphasizes the stakes of environmental justice as much as Torchy's love for Paul. When Paul first reveals his suspicions of chemical poisoning to Torchy, the strip's closing caption reads, "Then Paul's arms drew her close and the all-consuming, all-powerful oneness of being in love engulfed the girl's very being, blotting out all else as only love can do!" (4 July 1953). In the juxtaposed panel, as if on cue, Torchy and Paul smile in a close embrace. With her face pressed against Paul's chest, Torchy tells him, "Darling, darling---I'll be a help to you---just you wait and see!

Together…with love in our hearts---we can lick anything!" (ibid). It is physical touch that opens Torchy to "the all-consuming, all-powerful oneness of being in love," a love that apparently blots out everything but defeating collective injustice. Their relationship becomes stronger because Torchy knows they can work together toward such an important goal, and Paul's arms signal his desire for her in this work. In this example, the picture in the panel supports the content of the caption. *Torchy* is usually word-specific, that is, words lead and pictures follow. This is why it is especially significant when pictures depart from the strip's exposition.

Torchy's body language is the strip's primary method of registering the emotional cost of environmental oppression and heteronormative relationship. Her close-ups and full-body shots emphasize the significance of her emotional experience. As a genre, romance comics rely on close-ups more frequently than other comic forms to emphasize intimate and charged emotional responses. In *Torchy*, extreme close-ups generate a concentrated grammar of affect: our heroine's anger and innovation posit an argument about entangled systems of injustice. Extreme close-ups do not show up in every *Torchy* strip, but appear strategically when characters confront a particularly challenging or confusing problem. Close-ups register a range of critical responses: Torchy's incredulity when Jamie tells her he's not supposed to speak to anyone from the Black clinic (18 July 1953); her pleasure in understanding the logic of emotion better than Paul (8 Aug. 1953); her contempt for Fuller despite his sudden benevolent attitude (5 June 1954). These responses compel the story forward and signpost cohesive or corrosive relationships between Torchy and her community in the crisis of environmental justice. When Torchy's expression doesn't match the written narrative, the comic form creates a third

space of meaning: the clash of image and word makes a different argument than what word or image could offer alone.

Paul and Torchy are most often featured in extreme close-up in pivotal moments of their professional relationship rather than their personal life. Torchy's close-ups use precise, short brushstrokes to emphasize the kinetic lines of her eyes, eyebrows, and mouth (fig. 5). Torchy never has a hair out of place; her make-up is done up to perfection. The panels that focus on her face linger on her tasteful red lip-stick and elegant coiffed hair styled beneath a nurse's cap or chic hat. These details accentuate the delicacy of her features as well as the scope and depth of her internal landscape. Compared to Torchy's close-ups, Paul's close-ups use heavier lines and geometric puddles of ink that cast grave shadows across the warm brown of his skin. Paul's face most often expresses grim understanding and determined resolve. He is a broad-shouldered, striking man with a firm chin and gray eyes. He appears older than Torchy; while her face appears wrinkle-free, Paul's face is lined and folded with age. Together, Paul and Torchy's close-ups communicate acute sensitivity to one another in the midst of environmental danger.

In contrast to the commendable and good-looking qualities communicated in the faces of Torchy and Paul, Colonel Fuller suggests creepiness in hairy, sketchy brushstrokes. His bushy black brows unite across his forehead, his white skin is pale and pinkish, and his mouth is often lopsided with thick, wet lips (20 Feb. 1954). These formal moves make it seem as though there is something dead and decaying within him. Against Torchy's flawless close-ups and Paul's rugged handsomeness, Colonel Fuller borders on grotesque, even when he begins to doubt his bigotry. Fuller's characterization is consistent despite his moral transformation (1 May 1954). This consistency is intriguing

because it emphasizes an unresolved ugliness. At the strip's end, Fuller issues no compensation to poisoned families, to farm workers, or to the community at large for the terrible distress everyone endures. To his credit, Fuller does make some sincere gestures of recompense. He appoints Paul as the lead doctor of the new medical clinic and outfits the space with state-of-the art equipment. However, Paul is not compensated for the year he spent in an ill-equipped clinic nor is there any assurance that Fuller's good opinion of Paul will hold firm. While Fuller smiles more and appears generally more pleasant through a lightening of his eyes, Ormes does not transform him into an entirely appealing character following his ethical awakening. Just as Southville's food and waterways remain poisoned despite the forward-thinking changes introduced at the story arc's close, Fuller's face remains shadowy and heavily lined (15 May 1954). Though Fuller is not penalized for his crimes beyond the devastating threat of losing Jamie, Ormes does not erase the gloomy affect of Fuller's deeds as he tries to become a better person.

Midcentury beauty ideals code the environmental imagination of the strip as critically heteronormative. Torchy's radiant skin, wasp-waisted figure, and gorgeous wardrobe indicate that she is wholesome, pretty, and modern: these elements signal her respectability despite the dehumanizing structures of environmental racism and sexism. Colonel Fuller's excessive figure and snarling face makes his villainy seem inevitable. Yet Torchy's beauty and Fuller's frank ugliness also enables a troubling normative logic: Torchy reifies a standard available to very few women, and Fuller's perceived ugliness villainizes anyone who doesn't fit in. Though her good looks work against midcentury stereotypes that flatly refuse Black women characters any dignity, Torchy's prettiness forecloses other forms of embodiment as meaningful and beautiful. Strict beauty ideals

are conventional to the romance genre; readers expect gorgeous, pin-up perfect bodies to carry the heteronormative fantasy forward. Yet in the context of environmental justice, Torchy's beauty marks her as strangely superior to the people of Southville. As no other patient can compare to her looks, the ordinary Southville citizens seem less valuable according to logic of the comic. Like Marisa of *Cancer Vixen*, Torchy doesn't break down beauty stereotypes; rather, she relishes them.

Torchy's sterile white nurse's uniform during the environmental justice story arc must have seemed tedious to Ormes' well-trained eye for fashion. Ormes reports in a rare 1977 interview that "I would get tired of drawing Torchy in the same dress throughout a sequence" ("Cartoonist Jackie Ormes"). Indeed, a single afternoon in the world of the strip could last months when stretched between Sundays. Ormes was an active socialite and organized successful fashion shows as fundraisers for Chicago's most prominent social institutions (Goldstein "Trouble" 36). Her ennui with Torchy's long stretches in the same outfit from week to week likely contributed to her inspiration for the paper doll feature *Torchy Togs*. This side panel occasionally ran with the weekly episodes and broke from the drama of the strip with bright, friendly small talk about upcoming trips to Paris (22 Aug. 1953) and fashion tips about "what a little red can do with grey!" (23 Dec. 1953). As Nancy Goldstein reports, *Torchy Togs* was the only paper doll in history to directly speak to readers from the page (36). The vivacity of the paper doll's dialogue affirms that despite the demanding circumstances in the on-going world of the strip, Torchy herself remains ever buoyant and daringly dressed. By featuring our heroine in a good-humored side panel to the environmental justice story arc, Ormes offers readers supreme flights of imagination. She notes that *Torchy Togs* appealed to a diverse range of

audience members: “Little girls liked her as a paper doll, while older girls who sewed made the Torchy clothes. The guys, including men in the armed forces, found her an attractive brown pin-up girl” (“Cartoonist Jackie Ormes”). *Torchy Togs* extended the draw of the comic beyond its usual space in the *Courier* Comics Section. The feature offered a material connection between Torchy’s vivacious energy and the readers who came to love her.

Yet *Torchy Togs* also subtly comments on, rather than distracts from, the events in the weekly strip. For the episode featuring Torchy’s graduation from nurse’s aid training, *Torchy Togs* features Torchy merrily clutching a bunch of balloons as though the doll, too, celebrated her professional success (28 Mar. 1953). In the side panel accompanying Torchy’s long-anticipated reunion with Paul in Southville, *Torchy Togs* suggests “a little black basic costume”—a cocktail frock—for a “day-into-evening date” (fig. 6). The paper doll’s hand holds an invisible martini glass, pantomiming what her alter-ego might enjoy on her date with Paul. Alongside episodes explicitly regarding Fuller’s belated ethical awakening, *Torchy Togs* features a silent, glaring Torchy who looks askance while Fuller stumbles toward humility (6 Mar. 1954, 13 Mar. 1954). This figure is formidable and displeased; the curious absence of friendly chatter distinguishes these side panels from the teasing banter of the others. *Torchy Togs* thus underscores the life of the strip itself, providing an inter-textual response that widens the self-reflexive nature of the weekly strip. *Torchy Togs* expresses disapproval at Fuller’s ethical behavior and thus supports the strip’s aesthetics of equity.

An aesthetics of equity features the natural world as a space of pleasure and health for all people. Paul and Torchy continue to visit the poisoned woodland stream despite

Paul's apprehension that the water and soil are unsafe. The environment of Southville is truly where people live, play, and work; the community has little alternative than to drink the contaminated water, eat the food grown in the polluted soil, and walk though the poisoned forest. Perhaps this is why Paul and Torchy don't discuss raising public awareness or alerting families to potential harm. Southville isn't figured as a wasteland, but a verdant and thriving rural area. The invisible chemical poisoning makes the beauty of the landscape fragile. When she learns of the potential poisoning, Torchy urges Paul to approach Fuller himself, a task that Paul decides to delay until he can develop verifiable proof of danger (4 July 1954). As the chemical plant owner, Fuller is responsible for employing all of Paul's patients and funding Paul's medical practice. Fuller has already denied Paul the town's best medical facility when Fuller learned that Doctor Hammond is not White but Black (23 May 1953). Paul believes scientific proof alone might convince Fuller that the community is at serious risk from the Fuller Chemical Plant, so he waits until blood tests from his patients can confirm his fears. Though Fuller is openly bigoted, there is no other authority to whom Paul can appeal. This is a curious simplification of power relations in the strip: the strip later reveals that Fuller employs a team of expensive White doctors who ultimately support Paul's warning of environmental harm (20 Mar. 1954). Had Paul sent his findings to other medical authorities in the area, he might have gathered a coalition of support that could have acted together to prevent the epidemic that unfolds. However, this development would have moved the focus of the strip away from Southville; by not enlisting outside help, Paul and Torchy rely more closely on one another and provide more opportunities for romantic encounter.

Perhaps Paul doesn't contact other White medical authorities because he reasonably doubts that they will assist him. Certainly, midcentury mechanisms of legal redress, including Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the cascade of environmental regulations passed in the 1970s, do not exist in his world. Although the Federal government tried to discourage postwar water pollution with the 1948 Water Pollution Control Act (WPCA), it established no authority "for setting water quality standards, limiting discharges, or engaging in any form of enforcement" (Poe 4). Thus, the Federal government's first major legislation to address the problem of contaminated waterways provided no basis for legal action. Indeed, comprehensive federal legislation protecting communities from environmental harm didn't exist until the 1960s and 1970s following the publication of *Silent Spring*. Importantly, these new environmental statutes, including the National Environmental Policy Act (1970) and the Clean Air Act amendments (1970), didn't recognize race as a crucial factor in the distribution of environmental harm. It wasn't until the First National People of Color Environmental Summit in 1991 that racism began to receive national attention as an explicitly environmental problem. The Summit introduced unprecedented opportunities for alliance and networking among disparate environmental justice groups and raised the national profile of people of color environmental leaders and advocates (Cole and Foster 32). The Summit ultimately motivated President Bill Clinton to sign Executive Order 12898, which required federal agencies "to incorporate environmental justice concerns into their mandates" (Pellow 71). However, even Clinton's 1994 executive order was slow to produce any change for those communities unfairly burdened with environmental hazards (Pellow 78). Tseming Yang goes so far as to say that Clinton's unenforceable Executive Order and his creation of a

special new federal advisory committee to the EPA actually did nothing for environmental justice (144). Without enforcement, the government's engagement in environmental justice was superficial at best.

As legal protections against environmental racism are disparate and partial even today, Paul would be especially vulnerable to delegitimation as a doctor were he to raise public alarm at chemical poisons. One of the central challenges in environmental justice discourse is that evidence of environmental harm often fails to prove any absolute or definitive cause. Indeed, the kind of medical evidence necessary to prove environmental harm is frequently unavailable to those suffering from disproportionate risk. Such proof usually relies on medical models to legitimize evidence, including x-rays, blood tests, and medical reports. The expert authority to produce such proof is frequently unavailable to those most vulnerable to environmental harm. As Stacy Alaimo argues, "the oppressed, it seems, may be physically affected by economic and social systems and yet be unable to produce evidence for their biosocial conditions" (28). Personal testimonies of disease and harm put forward by communities of color are still routinely dismissed as incomplete or inconclusive; corporations and institutions responsible for introducing chemical waste into the environment are frequently safe from anecdotal and circumstantial evidence. Even today, chemical poisoning is difficult to prove not because harm doesn't exist but because the law is only attentive to specific kinds of authoritative evidence.

Paul's cautious collection of definitive proof makes Torchy's presentation of the poisoned blood tests to Colonel Fuller all the more audacious. When Paul finally develops proof of poisoning, an emergency delays him at the clinic, so Torchy decides to carry the report to Fuller herself: "I could take your findings to Colonel Fuller, Paul! I

know what's in them—what they mean! He'll listen to me as well as he will you---*if* he listens!" (29 Aug. 1953). In taking the results to Colonel Fuller, Torchy stands in for Paul and acts on his and Southville's behalf. She relies on her own authority to interpret the results and Paul trusts her to do so.

In the strip featuring her meeting with Fuller, their bodies dance across the page and between panel borders to convey a contest of power (12 Sept. 1953). The presence and absence of Torchy's body along panel borders communicates defensive and offensive positions. Torchy wears a smart black and white clamshell hat and a sequined black dress as she waits in the reception area of Fuller's office for their first meeting. Her dignified ensemble is more elegant than the plain white nurse's uniform she usually wears at the clinic; Torchy is unmistakably an on-trend and formidable presence in the reception area. Even so, Fuller's secretary refuses to allow her in to the private office: "Colonel Fuller will be ***out*** to see you!" Torchy holds her temper and ignores the implications of the rejection, vowing, "I've got to make him see! ***I've got to*!**" As Torchy makes her vow, Colonel Fuller's fleshy hand appears in the corner of the panel, pushing open the knob to his private office door. When the man himself first emerges, he occupies the entire panel. His chin is slightly raised, his jowls shaven and full. His suit is perfectly pressed and the fuzzy, tapioca-colored modern art behind him makes him seem both a man of expensive and poor taste. Atop the following panel, the first in which the two share panel space, the caption reads, "Colonel Fuller's piercing eyes seemed to look right through the girl's slender form. Finding her voice, Torchy suddenly knew there was no easy way to say what she must—no way but the blunt truth!" (ibid). The sudden blood-red background eliminates the details of the office. Fuller again occupies the center of this panel, his

hands forming fists at his belt, his balding forehead wrinkled in confusion at Torchy's presence. Torchy's face appears in thin profile at the right; action lines radiate from the folder of blood tests beneath her chin, suggesting that the woman is trembling. This impression is supported by the abrupt breaks in her speech as she stammers out her purpose for visiting: "I--I've come for Doctor Hammond at the clinic. I've brought his findings--here in this folder." The color and dialogue suggest that the blood of the Black community is under threat and it's up to Torchy to act boldly.

In the subsequent panel, Torchy, not Fuller, assumes the center of the page in a medium close-up. The shot emphasizes her erect shoulders and strong neck; her body is not bound by a new panel border but by the borders of the panels that surround it, encircling her with a generous measure of white space. This design emphasizes her dignified, proud posture as she asserts that Fuller is poisoning the community: "Doctor Hammond has suspected for some time that the waste products of your plant are poisoning the entire community through absorption in the water, the very land itself. These analysis [sic] of blood samples from the clinic patients prove he is right!" Her steady, strong gaze looking out from the page is piercing. Despite the indignity of meeting Fuller in his reception area, and despite his intimidating body language, Torchy holds firm.

In the next panel, Torchy resumes a defensive position, indicating that her resolve doesn't necessarily prevail. The caption entirely hides Torchy's body in the lower left-hand corner. Only her neat white hat and the back of her head are visible; her body is cut out of sight. The caption itself details the action as Torchy looks on: "The man said nothing for a long moment while his hard eyes continued to probe hers. Torchy was

beginning to wonder if he'd heard what she had said when suddenly his body relaxed. Throwing back his head he began to laugh---a laughter that grew till it filled the room!" Despite her forceful presentation of Paul's evidence and her clear reference to the poisoned blood of Fuller's Black employees and their families, Fuller rejects Torchy's authority to make an ethical claim on him. The page layout charts the rise and fall of Torchy's power in confronting Fuller; though she assumes a confidant pose and forceful rhetoric, Fuller's laughter effectively beheads her in the final panel. This critical sequence shows that Torchy's body conveys dignity under pressure, a meaningful aesthetic of environmental equity: she judiciously pushes back against the Colonel Fuller's apathy for Black lives through her elegant clothing, her assertive posture, and her earnest language.

In addition to an aesthetic of dignity, *Torchy* develops another aesthetic of equity by showing her great pleasure in the outdoors. Torchy's secret friendship with young Jamie Fuller, Colonel Fuller's ward, begins when Torchy enjoys a stroll in the woods by the clinic. Torchy befriends Jamie shortly after she arrives in Southville, prior to Paul's conclusive blood tests and her first confrontation with Fuller. At Paul's urging, Torchy takes a midday break from her work and finds Jamie sailing a toy boat in a secluded forest pond (fig. 8). The sequence is dominated by several shades of brilliant green; the sky quietly shifts from pale blue to a soft washed yellow as Torchy walks the forest path. At least six different kinds of trees and vegetation form "a cool canopy" that shades Torchy and gives the scene a tone of relaxation and tranquility. Torchy wears a white nurse's uniform and smart black heels as she walks, signaling her chic medical authority even when off-duty in the woodland. When she stumbles upon Jamie, who sports a childish outfit of bright red stripes and short pants, the boy takes immediately to Torchy

with “the open, simple enthusiasm of the very young.” It’s clear the child is both friendly and lonely; there are no other children with him. He peppers Torchy with questions and delightfully prattles on about his boats. However, upon learning that Torchy works with Doctor Hammond, his “simple warmth disappeared” and “almost in embarrassment [he] started to turn away….” The pleasant soft yellow of the sky turns a vivid pink. Simultaneously, a subtle rash blooms on the exposed skin of Jamie’s arms and legs. The racism that pervades the town and pollutes the very water that floats Jamie’s sailboat reacts on Jamie’s body as well as his social perceptions. With confusion and sadness written on his face, Jamie admits that he’s “not supposed to talk to [Torchy]. I’m not supposed to talk to anybody from….there!” Yet Torchy decides to pursue a friendship with the boy anyway. Several subsequent strips detailing their friendship are missing from the archive, but in the weeks ahead, Torchy and Jamie apparently meet each day at noon to sail boats and enjoy one another’s company.

Torchy’s choice to befriend Jamie is critically discerning. Torchy sees Jamie as a potential way to reach Fuller (1 Aug. 1953), who, despite being absent from the strip thus far, has already upset Torchy’s personal and professional life. Her free time is determined by Paul’s nightly blood tests for toxins from Fuller’s plant; her workday is consumed with extra tasks in order to allow Paul time to research. Building an alliance with Jamie might help Torchy to convince his guardian to clean up the waste from the chemical factory and to give Paul a better-equipped medicine practice. At the same time that Torchy angles for her own interest, she wants to give Jamie memories that contradict “all the talk of prejudice he hears at home!” (1 Aug. 1953). Jamie has “the simple honesty of a child”: he hasn’t yet accepted the racism that has literally polluted the water in which he

plays (18 July 1953). Tranquil scenes of Torchy and Jamie by the forest pond thus carry with them a resistance to bigotry amidst the invisible threat of chemical pollution. Jamie's favorite toy boat launch is not far from Fuller's chemical factory and the houses of Fuller's employees. The boy's reddened legs and arms are physical signs of the invisible toxins his guardian spills into the ground and waterways of the predominantly Black community. Though Jamie's rashes aren't commented on, months later, Jamie collapses by the water's edge, the first victim of chemical poisoning and the only White body to fall ill (14 Nov. 1953).

Torchy's relationship to Jamie is risky, and by the strip's end, downright astonishing. As a Black woman working for a doctor already despised by the most powerful man in town, Torchy would have little social or legal protection against anything the White child might say or do against her. When she finally reveals to Paul that she's befriended Jamie, she admits that "I was afraid perhaps you'd be angry—that by making friends with the boy I might jeopardize what you're trying to do!" (15 Aug. 1953). Rather than getting angry, Paul admires her effort to confront the poison of racism. He refers to his own effort to cure chemical poisoning as "the comparatively easy kind." Paul valorizes Torchy's emotional labor and recognizes that is more difficult than the science he pursues.

Torchy's relationship to Jamie is also historically situated within the discourse of the Black mammy, a figure that proliferated in mainstream comics of the day. Yet Torchy doesn't fit the visual or behavioral type of Aunt Jemima: her smart fashion sense, expressive face, striking figure, and gentle conversation break with the boisterous, jolly, and excessive mammy trope. At the same time, in befriending Jamie, Torchy nonetheless

fills the historical role of a healing, generous woman of color guiding and supporting a lonely White male child. Torchy thus deploys the trope of the mammy even as she revises it. She chooses a relationship to Jamie on her own terms and for her own purposes. When Jamie is near-death at the conclusion of the strip, she frankly encourages Paul to deny the boy treatment if it means securing Fuller's cooperation in protecting the health of the Black community. Torchy is initially kind to Jamie, but she is also opportunistic. She certainly doesn't idolize the child: she is ready to risk his life if it means that more Black children will have a chance to live free from oppression.

Torchy's relationship to Jamie takes on more explicit political dimensions when Colonel Fuller discovers them together by the pond (fig. 9). Colonel Fuller and Torchy again engage in a similar pattern of thrust and parry as their bodies move across panel borders. In this episode, Torchy's close-up centers the page: it is one of the most thrilling close-ups in the entire two-year story arc. Her chin is tilted up in defiance of Fuller's accusation that she coerced Jamie to the woods every day. Her eyes are wide and her eyelashes flare outwards in starbursts of anger beneath her arched brows. The force of her fury is palpable. Her speech, however, is less than blistering: "Now you know! But don't blame Jamie. He didn't disobey your instructions on who ***not*** to talk with. I talked to him and he had to be polite and reply!" Her words lack the vehemence her face connotes; in revealing her simple ploy to circument Fuller's rule that Jamie not talk to her, Torchy's rhetoric doesn't match her affect. Her words barely contain the fervor of her face.

Torchy's angry close-up compounds her spoken and unspoken resistance to Fuller. This moment recalls their first confrontation in Fuller's reception area. Once again, her face is juxtaposed with a panel in which Fuller's body dominates the space

while only Torchy's face appears in profile along the panel's right side. Her speech balloons stand in for her physical form and appear to shield her body from Fuller's menacing stance. By appearing in a cut-off profile, Torchy makes Fuller seem as though he were taking up too much room. When juxtaposed against her close-ups, the removal of Torchy's body signals a shift to a defensive position. She confronts Fuller's arrogance, but is only partially perceived by Fuller in doing so. In this dancing rhythm of the page design, Torchy's body codes a rhythmic exchange of asserting and resisting power.

When Fuller refuses to assent to Paul and Torchy's ability to prove the poisoning, Paul and Torchy can only address the fallout of Fuller's denial by helping Black families cope with escalating environmental illness. Paul's focus on developing treatment rather than prevention for is a fateful trope in environmental justice narratives: only after severe damage has already happened can the potential for harm ultimately be proven. Instead of issuing a warning to the community when Fuller rejects Torchy's evidence, Paul doubles his efforts at developing medical support for the epidemic to come. Thus, the strip sets up a contest between Fuller's absolute control over Southville's economic and social systems, and Paul's anticipation of a humanitarian crisis. There is no consideration of Southville itself as a community that could make decisions about its health. Thus, as Doctor Hammond engages in intensive research, Torchy assumes the role as primary caregiver to the townspeople.

In the months following Fuller's denial, Torchy shows an aesthetic of equity in supporting the emotional experiences of the community. While Paul works late into the night on a serum that will counter the effects of the poisoning, Torchy must tell families that there is no cure for their increasing illness. When Paul admonishes Torchy that they

must “face reality,” Torchy scorns his blunt view: “Face reality! That’s easy to say. But what can we tell all those people? Are you going to tell them their days are numbered? Can you explain to them that this is a combination of chemical poisons for which there is no known antidote?” In response, Paul says, “I’m going to do only one thing, darling. Lock myself in the laboratory till I find an antidote. I have a small start already!” (19 Dec. 1953). Whereas Torchy’s first response is to the management of his patients’ fears and feelings, Paul’s first response is to conceal himself in his lab. While his labors are absolutely critical, it’s strange that Paul never informed Southville citizens about the risks faced from Fuller’s plant. Paul isn’t concerned with addressing the emotional reality of these risks; he is chiefly concerned with neutralizing their physical threat.

Torchy’s attention to Paul’s patients is a specific labor that flexes the limits of her heterosexual gender identity. The strip features her interacting with patients more frequently then Paul; for example, it is Torchy, not Paul, who answers the clinic phone while Paul disappears to perform house calls as the epidemic begins (21 Nov. 1953). Torchy is the first source of support for those who telephone. Importantly, all of those who make the first calls are women. The women of Southville enjoy concentrated attention. Every named character in the Black community is a woman; women appear more frequently carrying children and interacting with Torchy and Paul. This is especially striking as present day women of color continue to hold positions of leadership in the majority of environmental justice organizations (Simpson “Who Hears Their Cry?” 83). As soon as Torchy hangs up after taking Mrs. Carr’s call regarding her husband that’s just collapsed, Mrs. Higgins calls with a description of her brother’s symptoms. Torchy then accepts another call from another woman worried for her husband and her

own health: “He’s awful sick and I don’t feel good myself.” Torchy becomes the first medical witness to the harm of the poisoning: Paul responds to the community through Torchy’s urgent direction, basing his next round of house calls on her reports. Paul subsequently trains Torchy so that she can complete house calls on her own and contribute to the data collection of the epidemic. Torchy proves that she is ultra-competent at this work, completing her tasks an hour ahead of schedule and managing her time carefully with each family (28 Nov. 1953). When Mrs. Jones and Mrs. Harrison visit the clinic, it is Torchy who offers them words of support and encouragement (6 Mar. 1954, 27 Mar. 1954). Torchy performs the heavy emotional labor of managing the anxiety and distress of the crisis.

As victims of Fuller’s crimes and patients in Paul and Torchy’s care, members of the Black community often read as straightforward stock characters. This phenomenon counters the strip’s development of an aesthetics of equity. Indeed, when Paul withholds information about chemical poisoning from the community until after people suffer severe illness, he renders the citizens of Southville utterly dependent on his expertise. Southville citizens aren’t granted the right to organize in response to their own oppression. Yet while the strip doesn’t feature patient stories beyond a medical diagnosis, every minor character is distinctively and compassionately drawn. Mrs. Glidden shoots Torchy a look of wide-eyed concern as Torchy hurries away with her doorstep with a blood sample (5 Dec. 1953); Mrs. Harrison, an elder woman, grimly allows Torchy to take her arm as she enters the clinic for treatment (27 Mar. 1954); Mrs. Jones wears an expression of exhausted relief as she bids Torchy farewell (6 Mar. 1954). Each woman is unique rather than interchangeable. The distinctive naming of these side characters also

shows that the community is active and multi-dimensional rather than blank. Importantly, every female character is married, as denoted by the consistent address of the *Mrs*. The women of Southville care for their own children and assume the role of caregiver for their wider family networks. Like Torchy, Southville women fulfill specific heteronormative ideals and bear the brunt of the labor of caring for their families.

In the first strip of the New Year (fig. 10), Torchy's anger at the environmental abuse of the Black community conflicts with her determination to obey Paul's earlier request on that she control her emotions (12 Dec. 1953). The verbal and visual codes of the sequence contradict one another as Torchy negotiates her loyalty to Paul and her own embodied response to injustice. The strip opens with a panel that concentrates on the unconscionable outcome of the citywide poisoning: its threat to families within the community. A shocking number of children stare at Torchy in this panel. The face of a swaddled baby occupies the panel's exact center, its expression unfocused, vulnerable, and intensely realistic. This infant's face is in sharp contrast to the reductive pickaninny caricatures of black children running in mainstream comics at this time. The child's mother stares off into stage right, her eyebrows raised, her mouth slightly open, anxiously looking at Torchy, whose small, white-clad figure is hemmed into the corner of the upper-left panel by the crowds. A sick woman sits behind her in the corner of the room, and thus the crowd surrounds Torchy on all sides. Torchy is in the process of taking their questions: "You mean there's nothin' I can do for my brother?" "And my little baby…?" Each question refers to the well-being of another person rather than the self; everyone is concerned for someone else rather than for themselves. Torchy's stammered response to the queries, "I—I'm afraid there isn't…not yet any way!", is featured above the questions

themselves, disrupting the conventional reading sequence of speech balloons. Ormes often uses this disorienting technique in opening panels. Usually the reading order of speech balloons begins with the highest and cascades downwards, but in this packed panel, the speech is read from bottom to top. This swerve disorients the reader and heightens the sense of confusion; it can be unclear who is speaking to whom. The body of the crowd is a collective force as questions rise up in the tight space, made even smaller by the requisite caption summarizing the strip so far. The opening panel emphasizes the collective impact of the poisoning through the tight framing of individual worries and fears.

As she stands before the worried crowd, Torchy's is torn between deference to Paul and the urge to voice her own reactions to injustice. Dutifully, she reminds the patients in the second panel that Paul is working on a serum, and that they should "go back to [their] homes and pray he'll be able to do it in time!" As she urges the crowd to leave, her expression is wearied and resolute, her eyes unfocused, her extended palm open. Torchy is visibly exhausted in telling the crowd that there is nothing she can do for them. The mis-registration of the page turns her throat chartreuse, making her seem physically ill by the act of telling the crowds to disperse. The caption above the next panel emphasizes the emotional cost of this encounter. As the "slow line of worried, frightened people file from the clinic," the caption tells us that Torchy "fights back tears" as "anger began to rise up inside her like a towering wave!" Torchy's body assumes a small slice of space to the right of the window of the clinic. The majority of the panel features the silhouettes of the backs of men, women, and children, their dresses and suit coats making it seem as though they were exiting church. Torchy regards them with a

cold fury, her face deadly still; her arched brows and eyelashes are sharply angled and her full lips are set. Her body language in the panel is rigid as she watches the crowds through the glass, her fist clenched against the red base of the windowsill. She issues no other demonstrations of her anger than this forceful motionlessness; she appears livid yet controlled, as though she were becoming a tower herself. Aloud, Torchy contemplates the cost of Fuller's crimes: "All this because a man wouldn't listen to Paul months ago! All this misery and suffering because prejudice and bigotry are left to rule!" Torchy's speech is a curious revision of recent history: Fuller didn't actually ignore Paul. It was Torchy who brought the news to Fuller herself. Fuller laughed not in Paul's face but in Torchy's, deliberately insulting her by refusing her entry to his office and only speaking to her in the waiting room (12 Sept. 1953). Torchy's measured words on reveal a tension between the actual events of the strip and what she allows herself to remember.

Torchy's self-control is both admirable and troubling. She is very good at maintaining the appearance of decorum, concealing from others as well as herself the significance of being insulted and ignored, even as she is engulfed in fury. The caption that follows this panel reveals that "the anger subsided as quickly as it had flared—" Apparently, Torchy hurriedly denies her emotion; this pink-toned caption describes an emotion that simmers down and censors any outward sign of her rage. Aloud in the accompanying panel, Torchy's appears to acquiesce to the caption's description in her thoughts, reminding herself, "What good will getting mad do now? When this is over there'll be a reckoning. If only the innocent didn't have to suffer so much in the meantime!" In her words, Torchy is obedient to Paul's dictum that she compose her fear and control her emotional response to injustice (12 Dec. 1953). Yet even as she speaks,

Torchy's face clashes with her ostensible abnegation. Her wry mouth and narrowed eyes suggest that she doubts what she repeats to herself. Her eyebrows remain arched, expressing skepticism at the use of being calm when facing what could have been preventable deaths. Though the caption and speech balloons interrupt her towering anger at Colonel Fuller, Torchy's face registers her on-going struggle to realize the emotional truth of injustice.

When Torchy consoles patients by name, she heightens the human tragedy of diagnosing and treating environmental illness. Even if patients themselves don't necessarily take on speaking or recurring roles in the strip, their names are valued when Torchy remembers them. By featuring patients as named characters, including the Lemsons, the Downeys, the Higginses, Mrs. Carr, Mrs. Gildden, Mrs. Jones, and Mrs. Harrison, Ormes gestures to a wide network of community personalities that are more than just medical cases at Paul's clinic. "These good, honest people," as Torchy calls them, represent networks of families with their own experiences and histories (12 Dec. 1953). Home visits occasionally give a window into the non-medical life of patients. At the Downey place, Torchy and Paul counsel Tina's parents in the modest, sparsely furnished living room, while in the background, little Tina lies in bed with her young brother playing at her bedside (6 Feb. 1954). The wall above Tina is cracked, the lath exposed, and a few framed pictures hang haphazardly. These details signal the family's compromised economic status, despite the fact that Colonel Fuller presumably employs them at his plant. This home visit recalls Paul's early description of Fuller's as an employer: the man is "hardly a liberal paymaster" (30 May 1953). Even in the midst of their modest home and suffering child, however, the Downeys are not portrayed

exclusively as objects of pity. Their faces are grave and tender, full of disbelief and pain; these expressions convey a sincere emotional reality and convey their dedication to their children. Stricken with fear and worry, these parents dare to trust Paul's administration of the experimental serum (6 Feb. 1953). They are as bold as they are distraught; they resist being entirely romanticized by appearing realistic rather than interchangeable with other Southville citizens.

The beginning of the epidemic is a visible spike in the slow violence perpetrated against the community: patients have been suffering for months from various effects of contamination (7 June 1953). At the start of the crisis, blood samples from ailing patients again confirm that chemical wastes are indeed the cause of the illness. With this confirmation, the weekly pace of the strip accelerates, juxtaposing Jamie's decline against the collective decline of the Black community. Paul re-doubles his efforts to develop an antidote (19 Dec. 1953) as Jamie slips into a semi-coma and fevers rise in Black children (16 Jan. 1953, 6 Feb. 1954). Jamie's nurse reports that Jamie is in a state of extreme pain (30 Jan. 1954), and Colonel Fuller's team of expensive White doctors confirm Jamie's chemical poisoning (8 Jan. 1954). As Fuller reels from this information, Torchy tells Paul that "extreme pain is setting in" in Black patients as well (23 Jan. 1954). Paul identifies the phenomenon as "the beginning of the final stages of the poisoning" and grimly tells Torchy that they've reached "the point of no return" (30 Jan. 1954). When his experimental serum is ready, he and Torchy rush to administer the medicine to several Black families (fig. 11). The cool blues and greens of the page denote a moody and dejected tone. The caption in the center of the page reports that Torchy and Paul leave a "bright star of hope" over "as many houses as the amount of serum will

permit." In the juxtaposed panel, tiny starbursts hover over only five houses of dozens in the community. The bird's eye view of the panel gives critical dimension to the tragedy of the poisoning: though thousands of lives depend on Paul's serum, his first experimental batch can only minister to a few. The stars themselves are also barely discernable; they are the same color as the twilight background, and are tiny against the brushed details of the city. Hope indeed is very faint by this rendering.

Paul's last minute serum follows a problematic trope in epidemic narratives and departs from the strips aesthetics of equity. While life-saving, the serum is also a device that distracts the community from addressing the systemic problems that caused an epidemic in the first place. Though Paul initially cautions families that his serum will prevent only the most lethal effects of the poison, the serum is effectively deployed as a miracle cure. Alternatively called an antidote and an inoculation, Paul's serum is extremely effective: it "saves" the town (29 May 1954). Yet the strip doesn't specify how long a person will be able to survive chemical poisoning after taking the serum. Paul never indicates that cleaning up the chemical waste should be a priority for families concerned about future poisoning. He enables members of the community to avoid certain death and alleviates the worst damage of their collective chemical body burden. Yet it's not clear what the long-term effects of either the poisoning or the antidote may be. Paul's serum seems to work on the poisoning as does an antidote to a snakebite: the venom of the chemical poisoning is apparently no longer a problem after two injections of the medicine. Yet the venom of chemical poisoning continues to flow from the Fuller Chemical Plant into the bloodstreams of Southville citizens.

When Colonel Fuller begins to encounter members of the Black community outside his chemical factory, his racism begins to break apart (27 Feb. 1954 - 6 Mar. 1954). Sudden and intimate encounters with people standing in a long line outside Paul's clinic begin to shake his worldview loose. Fuller stumbles upon the midnight line while wandering the woods in despair over Jamie's worsening condition, fulfilling Torchy's promise that his big mansion won't save him from the consequences of his crimes (12 Dec. 1953). The man's grief turns to bewilderment when he sees the crowd outside Paul's clinic: he struggles to make sense of the line's implications. People are suffering in mass because of his crimes, and all of them outside Paul's' clinic are people of color. As Jamie's illness worsens, Fuller begins to sense the Black community as a community of actual people, not simply workers in his plant. In this strip, his perception of the community and his relationship to it begins to evolve.

At first Fuller's new perception of the Black community is only partial; in the dark of the night, outlines of people are blurred (see fig. 7). When Fuller bumps into real people instead of his own confused perceptions of them, he begins to understand the consequences of his crimes. Shuffling closer to the clinic, Fuller overhears Torchy's "soft words of hope" to Mrs. Jones, a mother with an infant in arms. Fuller learns that though Mrs. Jones is in need of treatment herself, she chooses to treat her daughter first: Torchy requests that Mrs. Jones come back for herself tomorrow. Mrs. Jones is trying to protect her child before securing her own health, while Fuller has allowed Jamie to suffer at length for his own poisoning of the community.

Fuller's perception of Mrs. Jones and the crowd alters depending on the presence or absence of light from Paul's clinic. Fuller peers "in the darkness of the night" and this

darkness consumes bodies whole. Shadows frame human forms in the patient line: faces are abstract masks, and shoulders and limbs are only partially lit. When Fuller spots Mrs. Jones, she stands with Torchy in a circle of yellow light at the clinic doorway. While Torchy's face is clear, gentle, and youthful, illuminated by the glow of the clinic light behind her, Mrs. Jones is covered in dark shadows that make her face blend in with the furniture of the clinic behind her. Her face is heavily cross-hatched and indistinct. In the panels that follow, Mrs. Jones' face glows with the relief she feels at getting treatment for her child. Fuller sees Mrs. Jones most clearly when she faces the light from Paul's clinic: his perception of her hinges on her life-giving relationship to Paul's medical practice.

Mrs. Jones holds her sleeping child to her chest as a Madonna holding the Christ child. Such references to Christian iconography reinforce the spiritual orientation of the strip's aesthetics of equity. In Mrs. Jones' thanks to Torchy, her first instance of speech in the strip, she offers a benediction: "Bless Doctor Hammond!" Such spiritual references reinforce the paradigm of alternative justice in the strip and signal the libratory logic of faith in Southville's community. Other spiritual references include Paul's instructions to Torchy to "start praying!" (5 Dec. 1953) when he analyzes blood samples, and his hopeful Christmas message that "faith in the triumph of good is something which we must never forget!" (19 Dec. 1953), as well as Torchy's request that Paul "say a prayer! say a prayer!" when about to administer the first serum treatment to Tina Downey (6 Feb. 1954). By pronouncing a blessing upon Paul Mrs. Jones shows her belief in something bigger than Fuller's social power and economic control. When Fuller halts Mrs. Jones as she walks away from the clinic, she calls him "mister" rather than Colonel, showing that she either doesn't recognize or chooses not to recognize his military authority. Paul's

research and labor in developing the serum marks him as a rescuer and a champion of the sick: to Mrs. Jones, Paul is "a wonderful man," while Colonel Fuller is a "mister." Mrs. Jones defines Paul from a perspective that Fuller has never considered: that of a Black mother. Not only does she reinforce Paul's status as an experienced doctor, one capable of saving her child from certain death, she elevates Paul as a man of high character: he is wonderful for trying to save the Black community from the lethal consequences of poisoning, which Mrs. Jones may or may not also recognize as Fuller's wrongdoing.

Colonel Fuller's response to Mrs. Jones reinforces the strip's aesthetics of equity. As Mrs. Jones walks on to "disappear in darkness," Fuller must grapple with emotions located within his body: he struggles with "a strange pounding inside." He turns to look at the crowds outside the clinic and seems to see his own guilt reflected in the pain of their faces. The light from the clinic makes their faces mournful and carnivalesque, masked in bright orange tones of horror. Several face him with disappointed, malevolent expressions. Clinic patients appear threatening and ghostlike in the dim light. Yet the caption explains that "even as bigotry and prejudices rose up inside him with the same old, worn call to injustice, others come from the clinic before his very gaze, hurrying home with new hope in their eyes…." Fuller's vision is at first clouded by the bigotry housed in his body, but the light of the clinic cleanses his gaze. The final panel features a family exiting the clinic, the father wearing a suit and tie, a mother wearing a green scarf around her head, and their son in a plaid jacket. These patients are not haunting or projections of guilt; this family is warmly human, and clearly grateful for receiving Paul's serum. That the caption locates hope in their eyes is significant. The strip often signals a character's humanity through references to eyes; indeed, Fuller's own

inhumanity is first communicated in his "penetrating, unyielding eyes, the eyes of a man wore authority like a cloak on his soul" (12 Sept. 1953). In the light of the clinic, seeing the community's response to Paul's serum in the hope in their eyes, Fuller can no longer deny the truth of Paul's medical authority. Fuller confronts his own bigotry when he sees the devastation he's wrought and that Paul has helped to heal.

When Fuller returns to the clinic with Jamie in his arms the following morning, the line of patients again reveals the humanity of the Black community to Fuller (27 Mar. 1954). While no one lets Fuller head to the front of the line, no one tries to refuse him entry. This is the great equalizing effect outside Paul's clinic. A woman named Doris who "works upstairs" at the plant recognizes Fuller, causing a murmur to rise in the crowd, as reported by the caption, but there is neither riot nor reckoning in the body language of the crowd. In the moment of recognition, there is no reaction other than mild surprise that the chemical CEO has come to the Black doctor's door. The mildness of the reaction could be a result of community members being unaware of Fuller's role in nearly killing them. It could also be tactful: community members don't want to jeopardize their position with the plant by angering their boss. Doris's frowning expression tells us that she, at least, is not pleased to see Fuller behind her in line. She looks suspiciously over her shoulder at him for the remainder of the strip. Yet, as the following week shows, there is no release of animosity toward Fuller or Jamie from the line. The captions tell us that "many who worked for him, and looked in surprise to see him there. Yet now there was no line of distinction of any sort for the shadow of death knows no such line" (fig. 12).

It is significant that Fuller recognizes the community's shadow of death only when it hangs over Jamie. His guilt in Jamie's illness is enough to compel him to bring the child personally to the clinic. He could have sent his nurse or his doctors to the clinic with Jamie or requested the serum be brought to his house. By bringing the young boy directly to Paul, Fuller is humbling himself. He appears to be accepting responsibility for his crimes against his nephew and the community by acting as Mrs. Jones did, carrying his child in his arms. He is imitating the Black mother he spoke to in the light of Paul's clinic the night before. Fuller's earlier posturing that Paul has made a lucky guess in predicting the poisoning (30 Jan. 1954, 6 Feb. 1954) vaporizes as he stands in the line with his dying nephew in his arms.

Young Jamie is the only White person to suffer from chemical poisoning; so often environmental harm is only recognized when a White body is at stake. Through many months of the strip, Torchy comes to see Jamie not as an extension of Colonel Fuller but as a child who hasn't yet accepted the false logic of racism and bigotry: she identifies the systems themselves as the sources of injustice. Yet her relationship to Jamie is put to the test when Fuller brings Jamie to Paul for emergency treatment. When Fuller brings the nearly-dead child to Paul's clinic in desperation, Torchy and Paul disagree about what they should do (3 Apr. 1954, 10 Apr. 1954). The mis-registration of the magenta ink of the page halos Torchy's face with a brilliant pink as she urges Paul to refuse Jamie treatment until Fuller vows to improve the lives of the Black community (fig. 12). Her face becomes red-hot, radiating with conviction. She declares, "Now is the time to bargain with [Fuller]! You have the serum that can save Jamie. You can make him agree to do all the things which should have been done so long ago!" In this emotive flash of

understanding, Torchy thinks like an activist. She is ready to strategize and wield power on behalf of her community in this sudden turn of events.

Torchy is able and willing to jeopardize her young friend's life in order to compel Fuller's commitment to the Black community in Southville. This willingness shows that Torchy is shrewd about Fuller's character; she doesn't want to entrust the town's fate to his dubious and uncertain ethical transformation. She views Jamie's health as collateral for the town's health: "This is your chance to make Fuller agree to a new way of life here in Southville!" (fig. 12). Torchy recognizes Fuller's desperation to save Jamie as an opportunity to force him into supporting racial equity. Yet Paul disagrees. When Torchy questions his judgment, declaring, "It's your ***duty*** to help people!", Paul reproves her: "It's my ***first*** duty to use medicine to help the sick! I took an oath to do that when I became a doctor, Torchy!" (fig. 13). Paul argues that treating Jamie without stipulation will invite Fuller into a new relationship with the Black community: "I want to win the only longterm way—the one way to make [Colonel Fuller] and all those like him face the truth in their own hearts, so they can no longer look the other way and live with themselves" (ibid). Paul believes that a bold act of mercy might yet help Fuller how to redeem himself.

Torchy and Paul's different approaches to securing environmental equity reveal a troubling intersection between their roles as romantic partners and community advocates. Paul grabs Torchy by the shoulders and brings his face close to hers as he explains that "[Colonel Fuller] expects me to do as you say…bargain with him!" (fig. 13). Torchy gazes at Paul in defenseless awe, her arms locked to her sides, the plunging neckline of her white uniform pressing into Paul's broad chest. Paul references his medical authority

as the basis for his decision to treat Jamie, but his rough embrace clearly references his physical and emotional authority over Torchy's body as well. His fervent hold on Torchy's shoulders lasts only a single panel; after Paul releases her, Torchy immediately yields. She appears ashamed with her head bowed and eyes lowered. She admits, "Yes, Paul….You're right! But I..I'm still afraid! What if he has no conscience, Paul? What if he takes the serum and laughs at us?" Torchy submits to Paul's honorable plan to try and secure equity through mercy, but Torchy continues to mistrust Fuller. For the remainder of the story arc, Torchy sometimes manages to avoid an outright sneer when she sees Fuller (29 May 1954), but she often glares at the man whenever she sees him, keeping her arms back or hands folded as though protecting something from him (17 Apr. 2014, 15 May 1954, 5 June 1954). Paul effectively proves his authority over Fuller by refusing to abuse Fuller's desperation and by taking pity on young Jamie. Yet in order to compensate for refusing to force Fuller's hand, Torchy must surrender to Paul's wisdom and benevolence. Paul's physical power over his girlfriend assures them both of his authoritative role.

By refusing to coerce Fuller, Paul effectively alters the paradigm of environmental justice in the strip. Paul chooses to treat Jamie as Fuller should have treated the Black community and refuses to treat Fuller as Fuller has treated him. His insight into the potential for reconciliation is both perilous and audacious. He believes that he can work with Fuller more effectively by shocking him with unexpected generosity than by manipulating Fuller's fear for Jamie's life. By comparison, Torchy's pragmatic and calculating approach to Fuller seems cruel. Though she bows her head in obedience to Paul's choice and assures him that he's right, her anxiety about Fuller's

dubious conscience is both logical and insightful; Paul contemplates the same possibility after Jamie receives treatment, noting that "people being what they are, when Jamie is well again, will Fuller revert back to his old attitudes?...His old refuge in false superiority?" (24 Apr. 1954). Torchy's willingness to risk Jamie's recovery so that her community has protection from Fuller is a sign that she is willing to put the Black community above Jamie's needs. Paul's choice to risk Fuller's betrayal isn't necessarily pragmatic, but is nonetheless wise: it refuses to use the master's tools to dismantle the master's house.

Paul's decision to treat Jamie without bargaining with Fuller produces diverging arguments about overcoming injustice in the strip. Paul reinforces his medical authority and his role as a physician by refusing to coerce Fuller's cooperation; he earns Fuller's respect by setting aside personal and collective gain and compassionately caring for the child who's dying. The appearance of Paul's medical degree on the wall of the clinic in his subsequent exchanges with Fuller reinforces Fuller's acceptance of Paul's authority (1 May 1954). However, Torchy is right in pointing out that the chance to control Fuller might never come again; Jamie is the only connection that Fuller holds to the Black community through his need of Paul's serum. The community will suffer if Fuller gets what he wants without changing his industry and his outlook. Paul's risk is as foolish as it is optimistic, but it's potentially revolutionary.

By refusing to dehumanize Jamie, Paul rejects the logic that allowed Fuller to dehumanize the Black children and families that suffered from his neglect. Paul allows Fuller to circumvent the direct fallout for poisoning every single person standing in line at the clinic, and he refuses to condemn Jamie to punish Fuller. Yet Paul also refuses to

act in the immediate interests of those who are most severely punished for Fuller's racism. His choice to treat Jamie takes the place of holding Fuller morally accountable for his actions. Torchy isn't asking for revenge, but for justice. Paul, in turn, believes he can secure justice for the greater community by refusing to bargain with Fuller. He wants to build a new kind of future in which Fuller knows exactly how great a debt he owes to Paul.

The strip's closing focus on Fuller's renunciation of prejudice falls short of the resolution Torchy clearly desires. As a CEO who sees the error of his ways, Fuller is capable of making great changes in his community. Yet these changes only seem extravagant because his former outlook was so extremely unjust. Providing health care to his workers isn't actually generous; it's a moral obligation. Disposing of chemical waste in tanks instead of in the river isn't magnanimous; it's literally the least Fuller can do as a responsible business owner (5 June 1954). After hearing of Fuller's new medical equipment and the new holding tanks, Paul exclaims, "Tomorrow I'll have equipment to work with, a chance to really do a job here! It's what I've hoped for all the time!" Paul's personal desires are fulfilled, but Southville's healing and recovery are only signaled by Paul's confidence. The community will grow with a safer industry and good health care, but there is no public reconciliation or recognition that a serious collective injustice has happened.

Paul's rejection of Torchy's reasonable, if calculated, advice to bargain with Fuller is a refusal to perpetuate the systemic history of power in Southville. Paul is willing to bet the future of the Black community on Fuller's transformation. Fuller's ultimate turn away from racism isn't a secure outcome. It's also unclear that Fuller's

transformation is long lasting. He gives the community new and better resources because he's motivated from his own conscience not because the law protects the Black community from harm. He opens the new clinic not because he is legally bound to offer medical care to his employees, but because he is "making up for lost time" (29 May 1954). The emphasis on Fuller's contributions to the new way of life in Southville is troubling because it is entirely contingent upon his good will. It would be more assuring if Paul were to secure from Fuller's White doctors a contract in writing that Fuller will improve his plant's safety regulations and provide health care to all employees.

The strip ultimately keeps with romance convention by privileging individual transformation rather than transformation of society as a whole. *Torchy* repeatedly features Fuller as a victim of his own prejudice; when he becomes a better, more humane person, the strip presents his new outlook as a triumph over bigotry. Yet Southville's happy outcome hinges on a White man's generosity, and a Black woman's emotional labor with a little White boy, instead of a Black community's legal protection. The gains here are provisional rather than truly revolutionary; the logic of justice has only begun to alter. Fuller still owns the plant, still holds major influence over the town, and Paul is now a respected medical authority in Fuller's medical practice. Yet one might well ask how Fuller could possibly be permitted to own and operate Southville's chemical industry given his lethal business history. As long as Jamie lives, the Colonel has a reminder of Paul's undeniable humanity, but Fuller's personal transformation holds no collective transformation.

Importantly, Torchy does not accept Fuller's redemption. For the remainder of the environmental justice arc, Torchy appears wary of the man, even after Fuller outfits the

new medical clinic and appoints Paul as head physician, and even after Fuller installs new holding facilities for the chemical waste. Torchy's facial expressions indicate that Fuller's threats are not forgiven or forgotten. In the absence of legal protection or meaningful social transformation, Torchy can only wait and see if Fuller's new outlook will hold. Torchy's suspicious looks suggest that she hasn't found satisfaction in outcome of the strip, a move that upholds a critical convention of melodrama. Melodrama depends on unresolved endings and fresh intrigue in order to sustain its cycles of emotional denial and fulfillment. Thus, at the close of the environmental justice story arc, Ormes uses the conventions of romance to make a clear political statement. The lack of legal fallout from the poisoning is a stark problem. In the world of the strip, all of the named minor characters survive (indeed, there are no casualties from the poisoning), and Paul predicts that the community will grow because the atmosphere of the town has brightened (29 May 1954). Yet the absence of organized resistance and renewed community action destabilizes the community's future. Perhaps this is why Ormes calls into question the happiness Paul and Torchy share: "How happy can you ever really be when you remember how often happiness has turned to tears?" (see fig. 2). The pale pink caption reinforces Torchy's reluctance to share her lover's joy as both conventional and political. Though they now have everything Paul has ever wanted, the strip itself can't imagine a future where justice isn't dependent on a White person's favor. Paul has saved Jamie's life and earned Fuller's respect, which ends the superficial conflict of the environmental justice story arc. The strip allows a White man's contrition and a Black man's promotion to punctuate the close story arc; the final story arc is a tired rehearsal of romance convention as a rival emerges to challenge Paul's affections for Torchy. As the cyclical

nature of romance demands new discord, and it makes sense that the story moves on. But by refusing Torchy a permanent state of happiness at the finish of the environmental justice story arc, Ormes' romance reminds readers that the potential for environmental oppression has not been transformed.

CHAPTER IV

MAPPING CANCER: LOCATING ENVIRONMENTAL RISK IN GRAPHIC CANCER NARRATIVES

In her graphic memoir, *Cancer Made Me a Shallower Person*, Miriam Engelberg wonders when one becomes a cancer survivor. Entitled "Survivor," the brief vignette meditates on the word in six panels. The floating caption at the top of the page declares, "Members of my support group wondered—when can you call yourself a survivor?" (fig. 1). In the opening panel two women stand close together, stiffly sketched in the hasty, thin pen strokes that exemplify Engelberg's style. "I'm a breast cancer survivor," recites the woman with a small breast cancer ribbon emblazoned on her shirt. "Wow!" exclaims her companion in obligatory appreciation.

The women in Engelberg's breast cancer support group complicate cancer's linear timeframe. The subsequent panels test the limits of "survivor" in word and image: Is one still a survivor when diagnosed? How about post-surgery? Or in the seconds before death? Wide-eyed cancer patients at various stages of diagnosis, treatment, recovery, and decline trouble the up-beat affect of the be-ribboned breast cancer survivor. These women undermine absolute rhetoric with their own volatile bodies. "The tumor's out. For now I'm a survivor, right?" queries a long-haired post-op patient. A patient with metastatic cancer and a headscarf insists, "Well, I'm still here, aren't I?" At the close of the vignette, a bald woman on her hospital deathbed cries out, "Wait! I have a few seconds to go!" Engelberg's meditation on the slipperiness of "survivor" deflates the superficial positivity of the breast cancer movement. Her graphic cancer narrative insists that women dealing with cancer are both still alive, that is, surviving, and yet still with

cancer. Even those that undergo treatment and are deemed "cancer-free" are at risk of cancer reoccurring. Engelberg's deadpan critique of "survivor" complicates normative discourses of the able body. Her comic pulls up the edges of absolutist terms to expose the impossibility of fitting differently-abled women into neat categories. The "Survivor" vignette imagines bodies as flowing through time rather than chopping it up into finite periods.

Engelberg's memoir is in good company. In the last two decades, major literary publishing houses have begun to take up illness narratives in comics. While *Torchy in Heartbeats* explicitly addressed illness as the outcome of environmental racism in the midcentury Black press, and *Dykes to Watch Out For* critiqued cancer as an issue of environmental justice in late-century gay and lesbian newspapers, by the first decade of the new millennium, established literary publishing houses are just beginning to pay attention to cancer-causing agents in the environment. Harper-Collins, the Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group (owned by Randomhouse), and Norton & Company published Miriam Engelberg's *Cancer Made Me a Shallower Person* (2006), Marisa Acocella Marchetto's *Cancer Vixen* (2006), and David Small's *Stitches* (2009), respectively. Fantagraphics, a renowned publisher of alternative comics, followed in 2010 with Joyce Farmer's *Special Exits*. Capitalizing on the increasing visibility of illness narratives in prose publication, graphic cancer narratives became a mainstream genre of American comics in the early-21st century.

These first-person comics clearly respond to the anti-toxics discourse of post-*Silent Spring* mainstream environmentalism. Each narrative consistently spells out the need for a new, flexible consciousness about the body in medical discourse. These texts

mock the illogic of assuming bodies are stable and discrete objects; they play with timeframes and panel structures to realize bodies as porous, environmental beings. Yet it is important to contextualize these dynamic modes of self-representation alongside multiethnic illness narratives leading into this period. Women of color have long attended to bodies as flow and process in first-person arts about illness. In particular, prose autobiography about cancer, including *Cancer Journals* by Audre Lorde (1980) and *Body Toxic* by Susanne Antonetta (2001), configures the body as entangled in legacies of environmental oppression and government complicity, as Stacy Alaimo eloquently argues in *Bodily Natures* (2010). Self-referential works in the Chicana visual arts, including Ester Hernández's infamous *SunMad* protest poster (1982) and Juana Alicia's brilliantly colored mural *Les Lechugueras* (1983), signify on pop culture icons and precisely-situated Chicano iconography to argue that the health of Chicana farm workers is fundamentally determined by interlocking systems of domination. Through their own unique verbal-visual form, mainstream graphic cancer narratives complicate and celebrate the collective consciousness available to individual narratives of cancer. The genre demonstrates where privilege and power obscure critical awareness of disproportionate harm and coalitional consciousness.

Comics develop an exceptionally relevant grammar for articulating bodies as material and socially discursive beings embedded in time and place. Graphic cancer narratives use verbal-visual codes to entangle bodies in the limits of language and the health of their environments. This genre of illness narrative assembles an aesthetics of equity that resonates with the aesthetics of cancer narrative in other media. Yet graphic cancer narratives remain critically distinct in their pacing, staging, and reader response.

These techniques produce verbal-visual maps that construct cancer as an embodied relationship to the environment, and they resourcefully trouble any normative logic that would deny it.

Yet graphic cancer narratives also disclose a significant problem: detecting and responding to the disproportionate rates of cancer-causing agents in the environment, also known as environmental carcinogenicy. These texts show critical difficulties and differences in understanding environmental harm. Profound verbal-visual maps expose the limits of character awareness of how race, sexuality, and industry generate environmental health. Ursula Heise introduces the concept of character "risk horizons" in her analysis of contemporary prose novels. Heise notes that risk horizons reveal character struggles "to gain awareness of…riskscapes and find ways of living and dying within them" (773). Graphic cancer narratives present diverging awareness of chemicals trafficking across bodies and environments. Perception of environmental risk changes across time and between characters in these texts. In multiple and shifting horizons of risk perception, these narratives urgently resist a cancer discourse that holds patients responsible for curing for their own cancer, a discourse embodied by the incessant "Race for the cure!" slogan. These texts refuse to accept a post-cancer "cure" as a solution for environmental carcinogenicy. Instead, graphic cancer narratives indict the commercial and military industries responsible for poisoning people and environments: the "survivor" becomes a living witness not to a cure but to systemic, interlocking systems of oppression. However, these texts demonstrate uneven awareness of how privilege determines one's environmental health.

Graphic cancer narratives construct an ethical response that recognizes cancer's complex environmental factors. Perceiving environmental carcinogenicy is a political process that is never complete, but demands probability and reasonable guesswork. The problem of perceiving risk and proving subsequent harm generates a host of tropes in literature about illness and disability, or what Thomas Couser more broadly calls the literature of "autopathography." Because risks are multiple and aggregate, they often cannot be proven legally even after a crisis of illness is underway. The discourse of risk perception is "plainly a discourse of allegation rather than of proof" (Buell 659). Assigning liability for environmental harm is exceedingly difficult. Yet graphic cancer narratives question what counts as proof. The genre gathers multiple forms of evidence to substantiate and legitimize allegations of harm, including family histories, scientific data, and government documentation denying harm to the public. The genre uses unique verbal-visual forms of evidence to mobilize the space between absolute evidence and unfounded accusation. The process of reading these verbal-visual codes closely replicates the uneven perception and experience of environmental harm itself. The form of comics is imminently suited to tracking the difficulties of telling environmental carcinogenicy.

Environmental carcinogenicy refuses to sit still in neat categories of language. It insists on being elusive, woven tightly into genetic and behavioral factors. These factors make the representation of environmental carcinogenicy in comics an ingenious formal achievement. Graphic cancer narratives draw from a range of verbal-visual tropes, including flashbacks, image repetition, object collage, medical imaging, and game board motifs. These techniques chart the latent flow between bodies and birth control pills, nuclear power plants, Teflon-coated pans, pesticides, and 9/11 dust. Each map is different

in composition and sequence, yet stresses the inscrutability of environmental carcinogenicy. These maps answer Rob Nixon's call for scholars and writers to "plot and give figurative shape to formless threats whose fatal repercussions are dispersed across space and time" (Nixon 10). In other words, graphic cancer narratives show the chaotic and infuriating process by which cancer-causing environmental agents are or are not identified and are or are not traced to their sources.

In their challenge to cancer discourse to keep better track of environmental carcinogenicy, these graphic cancer narratives frequently bump up against their own privilege. The narratives elide the disproportionate burden of environmental harm in communities of color as they share their own White experiences of illness. Graphic cancer narratives pull readers into zones of conflict in which toxicity simultaneously and yet disproportionately harms people. Verbal-visual codes configure sliding perceptions of disproportionate environmental harm.

The slippage between the assumption of universal risk and the reality of environmental harms complicates the aesthetics of environmental equity these graphic narratives might mobilize. Like much autobiography about cancer, these graphic narratives chronicle middle-to-upper class White experiences of the disease. Each cartoonist had both the leisure and means to create comics in addition to the necessary contacts to publish professionally, not to mention the more urgent resources of high-quality medical treatment and a privileged network of supportive friends and family (Couser 38). These texts address the Whiteness of their cancers in complex ways.

Personal cancer narratives are incomplete when they don't move out to find alliance with fellow cancer survivors and victims. Speaking specifically of mainstream breast cancer narratives, Diane Herndl notes,

> [The genre] does not move out, as Ehrenreich argues, to people who take up an environmental protest. It does not move out very far to people who challenge the medical analysis of disease. And it certainly does not move out to embrace the disability movement and its challenge to the idea that there is only one form of healthy embodiment. (240)

In her critique of the failure of breast cancer narratives to "move out" and claim affiliation with different cancer groups, environmental protest, and movements of disability rights, Herndl laments the loss of what Chela Sandoval calls a differential consciousness. In the absence of awareness of affinity-in-difference, or a tribute to commonality despite experiences of social and environmental inequity, the political valence of true affinity is not possible. Herndl especially emphasizes the mainstream's missed opportunity to integrate cancer narratives into the broader aims of the disability movement, particularly in its productive troubling of normative medical discourses. In response to this failure, Hendl advocates that her fellow breast cancer survivors adopt a more inclusive orientation to disease: "We need a larger discussion. We need to rethink our attitudes toward illness, recovery, identity, and community. We need to become bigger, more multiple, selves. We need to expand our community" (242). These graphic cancer narratives differ in the extent to which they "move out" to consider the different realities of carcinogenic traffic across bodies and environments. As a genre, these comics help to shape a collective understanding of disease and disability that intersects with

environmental health. In their efforts to shape and share an experience of cancer, these texts expose commonality and divergence within cancer discourse according to privilege and power.

These texts deploy and complicate tropes of White privilege in their verbal-visual codes of trans-corporeal exchange. Richard Dyer asserts that the hegemony of whiteness hinges on its apparent invisibility. Though "[race] is never not a factor, never not in play" in any discourse (1), White people often equate "being white with being human," affecting a lack of self-awareness in cultural production:

> White people have power and believe that they think, feel and act like and for all people; white people, unable to see their particularity, cannot take account of other people's; white people create the dominant images of the world and don't quite see that they thus construct the world in their own image; white people set standards of humanity by which they are bound to succeed and others bound to fail. (9)

These comics interrogate the extent to which "white characters construct the world in their own image" and makes the experience of Whiteness visible and open to scrutiny. In formal maps of risk perception and environmental carcinogenicy, these graphic cancer narratives record responses to the slow violence of cancer as environmental oppression. While they rarely realize environmental justice in their aesthetics of environmental equity, they move in opposition to environmental disenfranchisement and set the stage for coalitional consciousness.

Mapping environmental carcinogenicy disrupts notions of safe, discrete bodies and environments. It also exhibits an ambivalent awareness of how race and sexuality

determine slow violence. *Cancer Made Me A Shallower Person* and *Cancer Vixen* show that environmental carcinogenicy is constructed not simply as a common experience among women with breast cancer, but as an equal one, in which race and sexuality bear no material consequence. *Stitches* and *Special Exits* develop a limited awareness of exposure to medical and industrial toxicity as a collective, rather than an individual, problem. In these texts, the cause of cancer is a specific, reiterated exposure to a principal source: medical x-rays in *Stitches* and uranium ore in *Special Exits*. Yet risk also lingers in an indeterminate miasma of urban pollution that skirts each narrative. Its resolution is also configured as a reification of White male heterosexuality. By plotting the traffic between bodies and carcinogens, these comics show that individual experiences of cancer orient cartoonists toward an awareness of the disease as systemic and shared, if not differentiated according to race and sexuality.

Maps of environmental carcinogenicy insinuate, allege, and imply potential harm through the imbrication of bodies and obscure chemical agents. They do not prove risk absolutely. Indeed, the achievement of a verbal-visual map of carcinogenicy is its defiance of the usual presumption of innocence afforded to military and chemical companies that release chemicals into the environment. Because maps are retroactive constructions of experience, they respond to environmental harm already underway: the outcome of the environmental crisis is already realized by the time of publication. Yet within the text, cancer narratives reconfigure horizons of risk perception and thus reconfigure the ethics of proving carcinogenicy. These texts show that in the case of environmental pollution, the conventional protection afforded to a defendant by the prosecutor's burden of proof is in fact backwards: rather than requiring cancer patients to

prove a specific environmental carcinogen to be a factor in their disease—an expenditure of time, money, and labor that cancer patients can hardly afford—the onus should fall to the military-industrial complexes and transnational chemical companies to disprove the carcinogenicy of their waste and pollution.

Disability studies and discourses of environmental health intersect in graphic cancer narratives. These texts trouble a key division often made in disability studies and the medical humanities between medical and social models of impairment. Defining the intersection of studies of illness and studies of disability is vitally important because each is poised to improve the other. While scholars exhibit some dissonance in defining the medical and social models of disability, Michael Davidson summarizes them thusly:

> The medical definition of disability locates impairment in the individual as someone who lacks the full complement of physical and cognitive elements of true personhood and who must be cured or rehabilitated. The social model locates disability not in the individual's impairment but in the environment—in social attitudes, institutional structures, and physical or communicational barriers that prevent full participation as citizen subject. (136)

The medical model of impairment further supposes that medical professionals are best equipped to cure or resolve the experience of embodied impairment. It tends to devalue the wisdom and knowledge of the person experiencing the impairment. The social model tends to elevate the voice and expertise of peoples with disabilities as important to legislation and activism aimed at improving the lives of peoples living with disabilities. These graphic cancer narratives show how the social model of disability might be improved by accepting the material agency of the body as it is realized, yet wrongly

labeled, in the medical model. Personal cancer narratives can be provisionally understood as narratives of illness, and so participate in a medical model in which a body suffers cancer as detriment to health. These cartoonists seek medical attention for healing or removal of disease. However, these narratives also admit environmental carcinogenicy as a potential factor in causing cancer, making disease spatial and collective rather than an absolutely individual crisis.

Chronic environmental illness narratives intersect with disability as they locate a problem not within an individual but within a society that neglects collective rights. By mapping awareness of environmental carcinogenicy into the text, these personal cancer narratives move in ways that medical models of disability don't traditionally recognize. Indeed, chronic illness when understood as disability merges the medical model with the collective ethic of the social. In this new model, a body experiences disability through the condition of its social position rather than exclusively through the nature of its impairment. This new model of chronic illness admits both social and material forces in its environmental imagination.

An environmental imagination of chronic illness aligns with Michael Davidson's development of a spatial understanding of disability. In his spatial understanding, "cancers among the agricultural workers in the California Central Valley must be linked to labor and migration in export processing zones following the passage of NAFTA" (135). Material experiences of disability cannot be understood outside of the political forces that compel them. Davidson calls on disability studies scholars to attend to an intersectional approach to disability studies, or an approach that defines disability not

simply as something that bodies "have" or display, but as a spatially determined experience:

> If we imagine that disability as defined within regimes of pharmaceutical exchange, labor migration, ethnic displacement, epidemiology, genomic research, and trade wars, then the question [what is disability?] must be asked differently: does disability exist in a cell, a body, a building, a race, a DNA molecule, a set of residential schools, a special education curriculum, a sweatshop, a rural clinic? The implications of seeing disability spatially force us to re-think the embodied character of impairment and disease. (Davidson 135)

Imagining disability spatially, that is, imagining disability through a cognitive map that accounts for process and flow between globalized economies, cultures, peoples, environments, and bodies, reconfigures the experience of disability not as self-evident or self-contained but as participatory in ecological conditions and political forces. Stacy Alaimo echoes the call for an understanding of disability as a social and material phenomenon determined by the "pharmaceuticals, xenobiotic chemicals, air pollution, etc….[that affect] human health and ability" (12). Disability studies must attend to the material and social forces that produce disability in order to account for the range of political needs among peoples with disability, a range that differs from and merges with a medical model in the invasion of pharmaceuticals, xenobiotic chemicals, and air pollution. When enacted in panels on a page, a spatial model of disability coalesces different sociopolitical forces that penetrate the body and determine its experience of embodiment.

Cancer as a result of slow violence articulates a model of socially discursive, material illness that radically redefines disability as globally produced as well as bounded by an individual's skin. A socially discursive material model of impairment reflects the pace at which environmental carcinogenicy interacts with bodies. Graphic cancer narratives mobilize what Rob Nixon calls the "long emergency" of slow violence, creating "stories dramatic enough to rouse public sentiment and warrant political intervention" despite their atypical temporal scale of aggression (Nixon 3). By accounting for cancer as the delayed but persistent outcome of military, industrial, and consumer toxic exposure, graphic cancer narratives theorize exposure to environmental risk as unethical, preventable, and yet systemic.

Disability as an outcome of environmental harm is a significant and undertheorized area of disability studies. Environmental health discourses transform the possibilities of defining disability and illness. Trans-corporeal exchange in graphic cancer narratives makes this work spectacular in its mapping of the human body in its environment. These graphic cancer narratives account for flexible and multiple experiences of reoccurring disease, rather an event of illness or disability with a definitive beginning and end point. Memoirs usually denote completed events rather than an ongoing experience of illness. These narratives, however, remain open, not solved or closed in the traditional convention of a memoir. Though their outcomes differ, the lifelong threat of cancer's reoccurrence moves these narratives beyond the event of a diagnosis and treatment regimen. An on-going relationship to cancer, even when cancer is illegible in the body, draws these narratives closer to experiences of disability than conventional illness narratives that end with a "cure."

Each protagonist grapples with the outcome of disease and treatment ever after diagnosis. *Stitches, Cancer Made Me A Shallower Person*, *Special Exits*, and *Cancer Vixen* thus engage a implicit perspective of disability. David becomes invisible in high school after his cancer surgery on his throat renders him virtually mute; in later years, he screams while alone in the car to strengthen his remaining vocal cord. As the introduction to this chapter has shown, Miriam anticipates the reoccurrence of her cancer and rejects the status of "survivor." Lars must negotiate institutions of dehumanizing elder care in *Special Exits* following his cancer diagnosis. Marisa remains vigilant about how she eats, exercises, and receives medical treatment following remediation. These texts show that post-diagnosis bodies are always working under the sign of their cancer.

At the same time as they track post-diagnosis life as disability, these texts also grapple with normative discourses that compel heterosexuality. David's mother lives a closeted life in her unhappy marriage; her pain saturates David's childhood. Miriam accepts her low libido following treatment despite the dominant discourse that hyper-sexualizes breast-cancer patients. Lars moves a female nude painting to his bedroom from the garage as he begins hospice care. Marisa confronts a Manhattan social scene that evaluates her post-diagnosis sex appeal. Thus these texts complicate a late 20th century preoccupation with a heteronormative environmental consciousness that intersects with discourses of disability.

In *Stitches*, teenage David becomes virtually mute after a long-delayed surgery to remove a cancerous tumor. His experience of vocal disability overlaps with his family's silence about the fact of his cancer, which overlaps with his mother's silence about her closeted sexuality, which further overlaps with Detroit's silence about the industrial

poisoning lingering in its air and water. *Stitches* reveals a heteronormative environmental imagination in which disability, stigma, and environmental oppression converge.

In *Cancer Made Me A Shallower Person*, our leading lady hilariously rejects the inspirational rhetoric usually assigned to breast cancer. Miriam discards the normative language that would mark her as a symbol of strength or transcendence. By confessing that she watches tons of trash TV, devours celebrity magazines, and relentlessly ignores allegedly deeper forms of cultural production, Miriam sets up an alternative patient-driven discourse that humanizes her post-diagnosis life. As she rejects the cultural elitism of cancer discourse that would turn her into a symbol, she also rejects a paradoxical hyper-heterosexuality assigned to women with cancer. Miriam accepts her low libido during treatment and frankly examines its affect on her marriage. Further, while the normative logic of popular cancer discourse encourages cancer patients to find a cure for their own cancers, Miriam activates a critical awareness of environmental carcinogenicy. She thinks through the possible sources of cancer-causing agents in her life and satirizes the idea that it is her job to avoid them. Thus as she rejects the compulsory heterosexual gender norms of cancer discourse, Miriam also blames her cancer on the actual industries that probably contributed to its genesis.

Special Exits examines the injustices of an elder care system that overlaps with legacies of government-sanctioned environmental carcinogenicy. When Lars begins hospice care, he asks his daughter to bring a racy pin-up stored in the garage to his bedroom. He, like Marisa of *Cancer Vixen*, reclaims a part of his agency by asserting his heterosexuality despite his physical decline. The poster represents a sweet and understated rejuvenation for Lars. His late wife had objected to it in their bedroom, and

its return signals a restoration of his youthful, virile self-perception. Yet the poster was stored in the garage, where Lars also kept bags of radioactive uranium ore for fifty years. Though the nude is relatively modest—indeed, Torchy Brown occasionally poses more scandalously—it carries with it an air, if not the very molecules, that generated his cancer. The normative discourse surrounding the pin-up girl matches the rise of postwar industry and carcinogenicy. Her presence in Lars's bedroom unites these discourses. Appropriating the female icon in a mildly erotic pose is distinct from, and yet congruent to, the accumulation of ore in Lars' garage. The ore is fascinating and appealing, and yet is representative of a fantasy of heterosexual male achievement and control that collapses on itself.

Marisa's experience of compulsory heterosexuality is the most pronounced of the four narratives in this chapter. As a Manhattan socialite, Marisa's body denotes a complicated currency of prestige and social-capital. However, unlike David's mother or Miriam, Marisa embraces this currency. Intensifying her sex appeal makes her feel stronger than her disease. From the flirtatious title of *Cancer Vixen* to her chronicle of which luxury heels she decides to wear to chemotherapy, Marisa heightens her performance of heterosexuality. The protagonist reifies her social standing by assenting to specific beauty standards and maintaining a specific dress size. Her self-presentation is a choice she clings to with both hands in the midst of her painful and lengthy treatments. In her deliberate performance of sex appeal, Marisa is both complicit in and resistant to a discourse that reifies sexual norms to compensate for the perceived embarrassment of breast cancer. Yet *Cancer Vixen* also moves out to realize the environmental factors that

contributed to her cancer in the first place. The narrative begins to generate a coalitional consciousness in Marisa's reflections on her disease and its aftermath.

In contrast, the environmental consciousness in *Stitches* remains trapped in David's self-pity. David suffers as the chronically ill son of a radiologist and a closeted mother in postwar Detroit. He endures emotional abuse from his mother, who slams cupboards and burns dinners with an unspoken rage, as well as the physical abuse posed by repeated medical experimentation in his father's radiology lab. These abuses take place against the larger cityscape of industrial Detroit's smoggy skies and toxic river waters. Such emotional and physical harm culminate in a life-altering crisis when David's doctors discover and belatedly remove a cancerous growth from his throat. The surgery renders him virtually mute, a disability that emphasizes his status as an author-artist as a response to being silenced. *Stitches* charts the flow between David's body and its environment in verbal-visual layers of environmental harm. The emotional and medical peril posed by his parents and Detroit's urban environment produce a disturbing account of David's childhood. The graphic narrative articulates a heteronormative environmental consciousness through wide-shots of the heavily polluted city, and in the postwar arrogance of a military-industrial medical discourse that produces the cancer in David's flesh.

Stitches communicates heteronormative codes in the smog of Detroit. In wide-angle, grim shots of darkened city neighborhoods, the cityscape maps an environmental consciousness consumed by urban blight. There is no fondness for industry developed in the introductory sequence of the memoir. From the first page Small's family history is entangled with a malevolent industrial cityscape of 1950s Detroit. The text opens with

two black, full-bleed pages inscribed with a line of white handwritten lettering: "I WAS SIX," the first page reads; "DETROIT," reads the second. These stark signposts locate the memoir in time and place before revealing the setting in a full splash page of the banks of the Detroit River's industrial sector (fig.). The angular edges of factories merge with softly sloping, featureless landforms and pools of murky water. Detroit in *Stitches* is more than a backdrop or a setting for human feeling: it possesses its own character, personality, and force. Small underscores the bleakness of Detroit's urban environment by situating skyscrapers parallel to factory smokestacks out from the mainland. The Detroit River brims with the dark chemical castings of factories. The overwhelming waste of human industry is clearly visible in the city skies. While the external landscape reflects the mental landscape of its characters, it also exists as its own archival and environmental record. In this first shot of Detroit, Small portrays the menace of poisons in the silent, belching industry. Had the sequence included any visible icons of life—birds, people, animals—it might temper its register of film noir. Yet the unpeopled, uninhabited landscape of towering industry instead denotes a futuristic dystopia.

The grimy, rigid structures of Detroit's industry characterize Small's place-based identity as shadowed and volatile. The tone of the cityscape shapes Small's sense of himself, which he confirms in contrasting his wife's Texan identity with his own: "She [Small's wife Sarah Stewart] came from Texas, and she has an optimistic view of life. I came from Detroit and have a very pessimistic view. Now you know my life" ("Powell'sbooks.com"). Small identifies his worldview through the setting of his childhood; the tone, texture, and life of the city inform his being. Detroit's "pessimism" emerges in these opening panels of contaminated urban space. The turn of a page

introduces a horizontal series of panels that pull back from the island factory toward land (fig. 2). The sequence ends with a small boy lying on his stomach on a living room carpet while his mother slams cupboards in the kitchen. The reader's eye roves along shoreline cliffs and wet banks to rows of streetlights and orderly ranks of trees. Through the trees' dark leafy masses, house lights glitter. Each successive panel closes in on the figure of the boy drawing rabbits on a large paper pad. His body is slight, White, and vulnerable. He lives on the edge of a river gloomy with waste, but the neat and ideal world of his suburban neighborhood denies its chaotic context. The orderly space of the domestic denies the pollution concealed at its edges.

The mother's denied sexuality is only belatedly revealed as the likely source of her unexplained rage. She lives in a White, middle-class Detroit suburb with cookie-cutter houses where neighborhood boys bully her daydreaming, artistic son, and call him "queer, fag, homo, sissy" (60). The visual and verbal rhetoric that situates David in a polluted environment also establishes the environment's homophobia. The words of the bullies are minimized in panel corners and are never directly addressed by the narration or by David's parents, but these taunts serve to reinforce the heteronormative structure of domestic life in the narrative. David's mother holds contempt for her family, and her boys especially. A pair of lost shoes could make her incensed for days. Small characterizes his mother's wrath by framing her stiff body against an image of Hokusai's woodblock print of a dark tsunami wave, its curling fingers of water heavy with white foam. The wave catches both David and his brother in suspended whirlpools: "Her silent fury was like a black tidal wave. Either you get out of the way, or…" (46). The mother's emotional affect is a stronger force than any other in the narrative. Her anger, what

David's therapist later identitfies as a lack of maternal love, consumes the narrative. Yet the mother is transfigured while hosting bridge parties, where Mrs. Dillon, a glamorous neighbor, is her special guest. It is Mrs. Dillon that first points out the odd bulge on the side of David's neck when leaving the party. David's mother ushers her friend out the door, a musical note caught in her speech balloon as she bids Irene goodnight. The mother smiles openly, her brow unfurrowed, and her body leans winsomely against the doorframe (119). As soon as the door closes, however, and David's mother turns toward the interior of her home and her now-anxious son, she scowls, her chin cocked aggressively at the boy (120). She walks to the kitchen, and accuses David of wasting family money by necessitating a trip to the doctor through the lump on his throat, despite their family's clear financial security. David's mother's anger at his illness is coded as a symptom of her own closeted sexuality. It's not until years later that the narrative confirms it when David walks into his mother's room and finds her in bed with Mrs. Dillon (272). This denouement is the rising action to the climax of David's realization that cancer was the reason for his surgery. David's relationship to the mother confirms the entanglement of heteronormativity and environmental harm undercutting the dominant discourse of cancer.

Throughout the graphic cancer narrative, the radiologist father experiments with cures for David's real and imagined illnesses with x-ray exposure in his medical lab. Through the character of the father, the text introduces a horizon of risk perception that compounds the toxic skies and waters of the city. The father experiments on David from infancy through adolescence. Small depicts disturbing scenes of x-ray exposure through close-ups of young David's face: the large, clear eyes of a small child peer out of white

space of the central panel of the page, a small mouth partially open in an expression of inquisitive wonder (22). This close-up appears in the middle of shots of the bulky and featureless x-ray machine, which hangs suspended above the boy's delicate features. His father's casual administration of x-rays constructs the treatment as banal, but the vulnerability of David's body intensifies the form of *Stitches* as a risk narrative. As contemporary readers, we know x-rays are dangerous, but in the 1950s, doctors deny any possibility of it: David's treatments are experimental.

Small bitterly portrays the horizon of risk perception developed by postwar medical discourse in a mock advertisement from *Life* magazine. Medical scanning technology is understood in the early 50s as "miraculous wonder rays" of science. Small contextualizes the condescending attitude of radiology technology in the mass of radiologists "PIERCING THE UNKNOWN" in the fine-print font that characterizes the magazine. Hundreds of white-coated white men march forward together, their bodies set at an angle to the corners of the page. Their whiteness makes them homogenous, living copies of one another, an advancing simulacrum of medical discourse propelled by white privilege. Small narrates above the panel that his father and his father's colleagues impressed David with their heroic ethos: "They were soldiers of science and their weapon was the x-ray. X-rays could see through clothes, skin, even metal."

By deploying the midcentury aesthetic featured in *Life* magazine, Small conveys his father's implicit denial of any environmental risk in the technology as a collective white problem. *Life* uncritically championed advancements in Western science as inevitably and unfailingly benevolent projects. An intricate column of a futuristic rocket engine rises behind the proud scientists, stamped with a trademark image of orbiting

electrons, suggesting the reverent branding of nuclear technology in the period. The proud assumptions made by White radiologists parallel the assumptions made by postwar American military and industry at this time: science is in control of radioactive material, and any risks it poses are insubstantial, because strong White men are in charge of it.

The father's denial of the risk of x-ray exposure turns to crisis when David is fourteen: the teen is diagnosed with throat cancer that potentially threatens his life. Yet his parents withhold this information from him. Rather than discuss the risk of surgery or the potential causes of the cancerous growth, his parents pretend the surgery is routine. David awakens to find his throat crusted-black and stitched up like a bloody boot (191). The whiteness of David's skin is striking against the dark slashes of his stitches; his paleness emphasizes the brutality of the incision and the blood-dark evidence of disease. Surgery removes the tumor in addition to one vocal cord and David's thyroid; the teen can no longer speak above a whisper. Yet his parents never discuss his subsequent disability with him. David only discovers that he has cancer by reading his mother's mail to relatives. In this way, David begins to develop a horizon of risk perception of medical discourse that differs from the denial his parents insist upon.

David's body becomes a visual manifestation of the medical risk his family denies. His muteness represents the consequences of rejecting the relationship between the health of the body and the health of its environment. Just as Detroit's industries pollute its waters, toxic rays poisoned David's body. The concept of an embodied interrelation between environment and body suggests a state of co-creation; the human being and the natural world depend upon and support one another. Early ecocritics laud the interdependence of the body and the environment as a relationship that transcends

traditional Western dualisms of mind and body; while distinguishable from the mind, the body offers intelligence and experience from which the mind is inseparable. In the toxic discourse of the 20th century, bodies become liabilities. Illness and disability are significant consequences of neglected or poisoned environments; the health of the body clearly depends on the health of the environment. Buell argues that toxic discourse suggests the "necessary, like-it-or-not interdependence" between the body and its environment (665). *Stitches* exposes the life-threatening consequences of denying this interdependency in arresting images of David's postsurgical scar, and in lingering atomic imagery regarding his cancer.

The parallel between the risks posed by x-rays and nuclear weaponry is made explicit after David's father admits that his horizon of risk perception has shifted more than six months after his son's surgery. David and his father walk along a paved river path at night on the outskirts of Detroit. Curling bodies of smoke fill the gray sky from factories sitting out in the water, signaling the presence of pollution surrounding the two men. Along the polluted river, the father admits his part in David's illness: "It was standard practice when you were born…In those days we gave any kid born with breathing difficulty x-rays. Two-to-four-hundred rads….That was therapy back then…[in larger font] **Two to four hundred rads.** [beat] **I gave you cancer**." (285). The father codes his altered understanding of the carcinogenicy of medical scanning as "standard practice" of a corporate "we," but closes with the confessional "I" as the agent of illness in David's cancer. He emerges from the mass of white-coated scientists to admit his own culpability and lack of foresight, rather than indicting the assumptions of the medical discourse itself.

This shift away from collective to personal guilt elides any ethical claim against the father's profession. Immediately following this confession, Small cuts to a full-page close-up of fifteen-year-old David's face (fig. 3). The young man stares out from the page, his shoulders square with the panel's corners, the dark cancer scar visible on his white neck. Behind him, river water reflects the columns of Detroit's smokestacks. The most striking feature of this panel is Small's use of atomic imagery: the long smudge of a mushroom cloud spreads over the center of David's white face, rising from the base of his scarred throat to the forehead. It suggests an atomic bomb several moments after detonation, when the cloud begins to thin and lengthen. As David looks through the hazy crown of the mushroom cloud, his pupils marked by twin points of light, his vision fills with the deadly consequences of radioactive technology: delayed risk perception. The sides of his face and his ears remain bright and unclouded, analogous to ringing silence following an admission of guilt. Yet the absence of color on David's face also highlights the concentrated shape and area of the cloud: it appears as a crucifix. In this symbol, David's body bears the marks of his particular crucifixion by his father's denial of medical x-ray's potential toxicity. The thick scar on David's throat attests to the cost of his sacrifice. The smoke of the cloud centers on the core of David's face: the same area where the x-rays were directed. David sees through the cloud of his father's long-denied culpability and comprehends the sacrifice science has made of him.

In the two pages following the image of the atomic mushroom cloud, framed by Detroit's smokestacks, *Stitches* deploys an innovative flashback to signal the shift in David's horizon of risk perception. A triptych appears on the top of the verso page to the right of David's face is overlaid with an atomic cloud. This triptych initiates David's

emerging awareness of the carcinogenicy of his exposure following the shockwaves of the father's confessional bomb. A set of three close-ups detail sections of David's face, and hover above a remembered scene of the father's radiology lab. The triptych mirrors the line of the atomic cloud by dividing along David's nose and repeating the left side of his face, as though he were being transfigured piece by piece, a whole divided into parts, in the aftermath of his realization. The recto page deploys a mirroring triptych of sections of David's face beneath an image of a toddler strapped to a medical table. This series shows the fine features of David as a young boy, divided into pieces along the same lines as his older face, and redeploys the original close-up of the body looking up into the mouth of the x-ray machine (22).

This division of the body across time shifts the reader through three different horizons of risk perception. Older David realizes what David the child couldn't know. Yet the memoir foregrounds this realization in a third horizon through the white innocence of the younger boy's body: his vulnerability clearly indicts his father's experiments. The child is heavily strapped to the doctor's table, his eyes dewy, his mouth open. The minimal characteristics of the young child's face use the whiteness of the page to emphasize his childlike purity. Here, the fragility of David's childhood body implicates readers in the teenage David's transition from unknown to known risk. Yet David's Whiteness echoes the problematic figure of young Jamie Fuller in *Torchy in Heartbeats*. Only when a White child becomes endangered will existing industrial authority take responsibility for environmental harm. Small's graphic narrative exemplifies the problem of examining privileged white risk as universal risk.

In the final chapters of *Stitches*, the heteronormative environmental imagination of the narrative seals itself off from the mother's pain. David discovers that his artistic sensitivity is immensely appealing to women in art school; his heterosexuality is constructed as a saving grace at the close of the narrative. When David visits his mother for the last time as she lies dying in the hospital, he doesn't feel anger. Rather, he feels safe from both her queerness and her medical suffering. Their roles have reversed: the mother is now a patient in the hospital and David stands over her. She lacks physical and medical agency while he is free to go. The troubling hetero-gender norms of the text don't resolve with its closing dream sequence. In his dream, David imagines himself rejecting his mother's invitation to join her and her own mother at a midcentury insane asylum. David's refusal is constructed as a rejection of his mother's self-denial and furious silence. But in rejecting his mother, David also rejects coalition with people with mental disabilities who also suffer under midcentury medical regimes in institutions. As a straight man, David isn't subject to the same normative language of medical discourse that disciplines his mother and grandmother as hysterical and dangerous. Their struggles as women are beyond his knowing, a recognition that the postscript admits. Thus, the environmental imagination of *Stitches* uneasily recognizes the narrow scope of its coalitional strength.

The discourse of elder care in *Special Exits* illustrates the complexity of mobilizing coalition in a heteronormative environmental imagination. This text maps divergent perceptions of environmental harm in the recurring image of uranium ore in the LA home of an elder White couple in 1990s LA. The narrative depicts three conceptual horizons in three different characters: in Lars, who steadily refuses to admit the danger of

his uranium rock collection, in his grandson Pete, who fears uranium for its carcinogenic affect in Navajo mine workers, and in the institutional authority represented by medical and sanitation professionals, who ultimately verify the rock's carcinogenicy with state sanctioned authority. Farmer delays revealing the presence of uranium ore in Lars and Rachel's garage until a third of the way through the narrative, and postpones a clear confirmation of its carcinogenicy until Lars receives a terminal diagnosis of lung cancer at the narrative's close.

This retroactive acknowledgment of danger shifts not only Lars' recognition of environmental harm but the legitimacy of risk perception deployed by the text as a whole. After Pete warns Lars about the ore, and later when the radiologist confirms it as a cause of Lars' lung cancer, all images of uranium pictured over the four-year span of the narrative become suddenly, and yet always already, haunted by the damage they could be doing. Farmer achieves this sudden yet preemptive haunting by concealing the ore in nondescript bags and regularly featuring them as background objects in the first third of the text. In the hidden agency of these bags, Farmer effectively embeds carcinogenic risk in plain sight. Her comics thus simultaneously conceal and reveal sites of risk, sliding readers back and forth between unstable horizons of risk perception in the unruly traffic between environments and bodies.

Before Lars' offhand disclosure of their contents to his curious grandson, the small bags in his garage appear uninteresting. They're featured frequently among heaps of miscellaneous clutter (8, 9, 19, 66, 67). The couple's wrecked car, their boxes stacked ceiling-high, and dusty baby doll collection obscure any special significance. Lars only mentions the bags to Pete after the younger man poses a general query about the garage's

overflowing paraphernalia (fig. 4). Lars then explains that the bags contain unrefined uranium ore from a mineral deposit on railroad land in New Mexico. Apparently mistaking his grandson's apprehensive "What?!" for interest and not concern, a smiling Lars elaborates on the ore's history while untying a bag for an impromptu show and tell.

This exchange between grandfather and grandson is a familiar pattern. Lars loves narrating the history of his many possessions. He delights in his fossil and stamp collections, and views his collection of uranium ore as he would any other hobby. Lars tells Pete that he collected the samples himself while surveying a uranium deposit for the Santa Fe Railroad. He reflects that this happened just after his first wife died, a reference which timestamps his initial exposure to the ore to the early 1950s. In the next panel, Pete reluctantly handles the rock Lars presents to him, but his shoulders are tensed and his elbows bent, indicating that his reaction is one of resistance, not cheerful fascination. Farmer whites out the printed stripes on Pete's shirt where the fabric meets the ore, causing it to appear to glow in Pete's palm. From the bag in Lars's hands, the rest of the collection emits an eerie luminosity. The ore's aura emphasizes its latent, but as yet unverified hazard to human health. When Pete asks, "Isn't it dangerous?", Lars replies with the calm authority of a mineral surveyor: "Wash your hands. It's not refined so its radioactivity is low" (73). Lars's suggestion that Pete wash up to reduce any danger shows both his faith in his own capacity to assess and manage risk, as well as his ambivalence about the nature of the risk itself. He doesn't specify, for example, the kind of dangers that Pete will avoid by washing his hands, but assumes that a good washing should take care of them. This illogical assurance parallels the postwar arrogance of David's father in *Stitches*. This arrogance assumes that x-rays are "therapy" for

respiratory problems, though the precise benefit isn't specified. Though cleaning the skin after contact with uranium might indeed reduce any excess traces of the mineral from one's body, the radioactivity that worries Pete doesn't just wash off: as Pete's reluctant body language indicates, any extended proximity with uranium might pose a threat. Even its momentary proximity is too dangerous from Pete's standpoint in the text's horizon of risk perception.

In the next panel, it's evident from Pete's animated body language that Lars' confident estimation of the danger hasn't satisfied the younger man. Pete's response to Lars indicates that his grandfather has outdated information; Pete rejects the elder man's authority to evaluate environmental harm. Placing the ore sample back in the bag, Pete looks earnestly into his grandfather's eyes. In a speech balloon that heads the panel and sets the tone of their dialogue, Pete asserts: "But Grandpa, the Navajo mine workers got lung cancer! I read about it." By referencing an ambiguous source of print media that details the hazard of uranium to indigenous laborers, Pete references a discourse of toxicity that lingers in the edges of popular awareness. Pete's reference of this discourse is brief, but by specifying the illness of Navajo mine workers, rather than mine workers in general, Pete reveals an awareness of the environmental racism in the American southwest. He doesn't mention the unethical treatment of Navajo by the US government, which was the sole purchaser of uranium ore mined in the United States from WWII to 1971 (Brugge 1410). However, Pete uses his awareness of environmental racism to contradict his grandfather's assumption of the ore's carcinogenicy. By asserting that cancer suffered by Navajo mine workers is also a risk to Lars, Pete introduces the

potential for a critical environmental consciousness that recognizes the shared but unequal risk of pollution that threatens all peoples.

While he accepts Pete's account of lung cancer among Navajo mine workers, Lars dismisses any connection between their health and his. Lars argues that the different working conditions of the mine and those of his capacity as surveyor for the Santa Fe Railroad exempt him from risk. Lars explains that during the two years he spent surveying the deposit, he lived in the railroad car that served as the surveyor's assay office and "[has] never had any problem" (73). Ironically, assay offices evaluate the nature of mineral deposits ostensibly to protect the public from possible harm. Since Lars has at this point in the memoir suffered no known effects from sleeping next to uranium samples for two years fifty years ago, Lars concludes that cause of lung cancer in the Navajo workers must be the magnitude of their exposure rather than the fact of exposure itself. Yet though he intends to refute the grandson's concern, Lars actually justifies Pete's anxiety in his reply.

Lars doesn't outright reject the claim that uranium exposure causes cancer. He concludes that because the Navajos' experience in the mines is unequal to his in the assay office, or because "They had a lot of exposure" (73) compared to him, Lars himself faces no risk. Lars' logic exemplifies the problem of denying the reality of shared risk because that risk is also unequally distributed among marginalized populations. Lars tries to protect himself by refusing to acknowledge that the cancer in the lungs of the Navajo might also threaten his own. Because he seems to have a different outcome after exposure to uranium ore, he feels justified in claiming that the ore that gave cancer to the Navajo is not dangerous to him. His capacity as a surveyor also differentiates his sensibility from

those of the miners; his labor is professional rather than physical, and thus grants him a different socioeconomic status. Though Pete tries to bend his grandfather's horizon of risk perception to include environmental justice, and thus potentially ally himself in coalition with other victims of environmental carcinogenicy, the older man refuses to admit he shares the danger posed to indigenous peoples.

Ironically, though he refuses to admit shared environmental harm with Navajo mine workers, Lars is loosely aware of sanitation regulations that prohibit the disposal of uranium in residential waste removal services. Clicking on a remote control to close his garage door, he tries to end the debate over the safety of his rock collection: "Anyway, I can't just throw these rocks away. There's a fine if you put anything radioactive in the garbage" (74). The closing of the door visually forecloses any possibility of revising the meaning of the rock collection for either man. Lars is content to keep what he sees as an innocent rock collection in his garage as he has done for forty years. Pete is visibly agitated over their shared exposure to a dangerous radioactive mineral. Lars tries to end the discussion, his "anyway" indicating his apparent turn away from the subject, rather than understanding Pete's anxiety. However, Pete teases his grandfather for claiming selective expertise about laws that are meant to protect the city from radioactive hazards: "How would you know [about the fine]?" (74). The younger man's smile seems to indicate his bemusement that Lars would care about fines but not the environmental hazards that such fines are meant to contain. Lars can't be explicit about how he knows that throwing out his rock collection is illegal: "I don't know. But it's the law." Lars has internalized an amorphous illegality of radioactivity in the same way that Pete has absorbed indefinite knowledge about lung cancer rates in Navajo mine workers.

In the gaps between definitive evidence and verifiable knowledge, or in the insinuation of risk rather than proof of harm, the conversation between Lars and Pete shows that horizons of risk perception are expressions of predetermined and yet selective consciousness, be they a readiness to admit the perspective of alternative subject positions, or to remain compliant with a rule of law but to reject the reasoning that prompts the law. Neither man has changed the other's mind in this quick exchange. In his next speech balloon, Lars switches the subject to what Pete takes with his coffee, while Pete unhappily washes his hands at the kitchen sink, a radioactivity warning sign hovering above his head identical to the one deployed in Small's 1950s recreation of *Life Magazine*. Their divergent horizons of risk perception indicate that the men can't rest at a single conclusion about managing this heretofore concealed source of carcinogenic risk.

Pete is so motivated by his fear over the unsafe conditions of the home that he declines to bring his newborn baby to visit his grandparents, as seen on the recto page. Pete justifies his and his wife's reluctance to Lars by citing discomfort about the home's violent neighborhood: "The news programs make this area sound awful. Besides…" (75). Through this ineffable "Besides," Pete signifies the gap between competing horizons of risk perception operating in the text. Two young boys joyfully play basketball next door, contradicting the claims of the news programs and coding Pete's spoken worry as racially motivated. Lars doesn't believe any stereotypes about violence in his neighborhood; his neighbors represent the few nonfamily members who still visit (26, 109). When Lars presses, "Besides what?" Pete doesn't answer.

Here, the two men show different perceptions of risk: Pete is vaguely familiar with discourses of environmental racism, but is willing to accept stereotypes of violence

in his grandparents' predominantly African-American South LA neighborhood. Lars uniformly rejects racist assumptions about his neighbors as violent, but refuses to admit that the railroad might have put him in danger while he worked as a surveyor. In this tangle of acceptance and denial of risk, the two men fail to understand the disparate values that determine their viewpoints.

The image of uranium ore surfaces again in *Special Exits* in the form of a flashback that parallels David's atomic mushroom cloud: Lars at last realizes his status as a victim of military-industrial carcinogenicy in the hospital (fig. 5). Following a terminal lung cancer diagnosis, Lars reclines in his hospital bed while an attending radiologist asks questions and makes notes on a clipboard. Their conversation takes place over an eight-panel sequence that comprises the memoir's typical page format; this format delivers a steady pace to the radical exchange. The radiologist initially assumes that smoking must be the cause of Lars' lung cancer: "How many years did you smoke?" This incorrect assumption reveals the problematic cognitive map through which mainstream medical discourse tends to hold victims responsible for their cancer, emphasizing preventative care and early detection in place of research into environmental causes.

The radiologist's assumption that Lars' cancer is caused by his own actions is also evident in the map of carcinogenicy developed in *Cancer Vixen* in the "Cancer Guessing Game" which I will attend to in a moment. There, Marchetto equalizes martini consumption with pesticide exposure. Recreational drug use is equated with exposure to environmental carcinogens; all responsibility for illness ultimately lies on the victim rather than on the sources that contributed to his or her illness. Lars explains to the radiologist that he rarely smoked, but did have some uranium exposure. The camera is

tight on his face, catching the loops of cords that fasten beneath the older man's nose and reach up to his oxygen tube. A three-faced electric socket parallels Lars' eye-level, suggesting that his body is also an outlet in which to plug wires and cords. The thick 1960s-style black frames of his glasses draw attention to the dynamic line of his facial expressions. His face is drawn with tender care, wrinkles and dimples evenly and fluidly composed; his appearance is detailed and emotive.

Lars' emotional affect in response to his doctor is a compelling performance of coalitional consciousness in his hospital room. In his flashback to sleeping in the railroad car with the ore, the single panel is split between the present and the past. Lars looks into the thought balloon of his past from his hospital bed in a medium close-up. The memory shows piles of glowing rocks of uranium above and below a desk, with a fragment of the phrase "Assay Office Keep Out" above the table. In a berth pushed against the edge of the table, a younger Lars sleeps with the heavy sleep curtain still tied to the post. The tied curtain indicates that no protective boundary exists between the man and the rock; he is utterly exposed. In the next panel, Lars appears back in his hospital bed, and asks the doctor, "Could that cause lung cancer?" The dark silhouettes of airplanes move outside the hospital window. A tiny American flag waves beneath them. Together, these dark planes above the American flag recall the events of 9/11 and pitch an undercurrent of terrorism into the revelation of Lars' environmental exposure. The radiologist's assent to the question of uranium's carcinogenicy, "Most certainly!", affirms the ore's danger all along. Lars adds, "I also worked in downtown Los Angeles for forty-five years." The radiologist again confirms that such urban environmental pollution poses a serious health risk: "Those two factors alone could have caused your illness."

In sudden epiphany, Lars realizes the risk his environment posed to him. In the next panel, he beseeches the radiologist, "My God! What's happened to all my co-workers, then?" (171). His mouth is agape. His eyes are wide and his head is slightly tilted back. The oxygen label on the cord attached to his nose is suddenly visible above his head, signaling the presence of medicinal air that now flows into his cancerous lungs. Yet his response to the radiologist's assessment of environmental risk is not to concentrate on his own cancer, but to ask what this revelation means to those he cares about. He extends the realization of his own exposure to his concern for others. In his moment of responding to individual crisis, Lars deploys a coalitional environmental consciousness that is invested in the safety of his community.

Negotiating individual experiences of cancer as they relate to collective issues is a problem that runs through *Cancer Made Me a Shallower Person.* The memoir deflates the bouncy optimism of a cancer discourse that frames breast cancer as personal enlightenment rather than an issue of environmental health. In the discourse of breast cancer, scholars distinguish cancer narratives as texts that differ by political investment, though as Thomas Couser notes, these political stakes are points on a continuum rather than discrete or absolute positions (38). Couser outlines specific generic conventions of the personal breast narrative: the plot follows a trajectory of cancer diagnosis, treatment, and subsequent medical therapy, and over the course of adjuvant therapy the hero/ine transcends the social or spiritual limits of her former self, and either survives the cancer or bravely faces her decline (42).

By examining the breast cancer narrative against these categories, scholars identify a particular text's elisions and account for the mode of coalitional consciousness

it activates. Mary K. DeShazer gathers women's cancer narratives into personal, multicultural, or environmental genres (241). Each genre exerts its own traps and limitations on readers. Yet texts can also do all three. A text needn't include the environmental manifesto that DeShazer locates in *Refuge* or *Living Downstream* to bend horizons of risk perception and to visualize environmental carcinogenicy.

In her wry and scathing humor, Engelberg highlights experiences of breast cancer as radically embodied, depressing, and painful, and in so doing mocks the breast cancer movement's dominant representation of breast cancer as an opportunity for growth or renewal. In its gallows humor and sarcastic assessment of positivity, *Cancer Made Me a Shallower Person* questions the legitimacy of blaming cancer patients for their disease. Two sequences in particular highlight the unknowability of specific causes and carcinogenic risks, and as a result of this unknowability, trouble cancer discourse's tendency to hold women accountable for preventing or failing to prevent their own cancer. Popular organizations that fundraise for breast cancer research urge women and their loved ones to "race for the cure." Yet as Audre Lorde attests, "there is no profit in the prevention of cancer; there is only profit in the treatment of cancer" (71). Racing toward a cure, rather than also racing toward eliminating cancer's environmental causes, creates a cancer discourse that fails to mobilize against environmental carcinogenicy.

Engelberg maps the problem of determining environmental carcinogenicy in a single full-page panel that parallels the verbal-visual maps of risk in *Stitches* and *Special Exits.* In an episode titled "Everything is My Enemy," Engelberg collages three images of Miriam in a floating riskscape of consumer products in domestic and public environments (fig. 6). Twelve seemingly banal items captured in image or in text wield dubious levels

of environmental risk: a block of cheese, a hole in ozone, extra trans-fat in a foodstuff spread, radiation from a desktop computer, pesticides radiating from a rose bush at the park, nitrates in two slabs of bacon, coated cookware that Miriam is loath to part with because "then I'd have to scrub," a plastic water filter exposed to sunlight, foul elements in tap water, an electric blanket used for a year in 1986, cheap pressboard furniture off-gassing, and diesel fumes. The random items coalesce around the borders of the panel, and float randomly within its boundaries, following no clear organization or pattern. The three Miriams assert or question the safety of sources of exposure, at one moment, seemingly decided, and the next moment questioning her own ability to make such a decision.

The bewildering effect of this map of risk delivers a political statement on the nature of environmental carcinogenicy: such risk is difficult to assess, and consistent information isn't widely available. In part, the humor of the panel rests on the absurdity of suspecting apparently benign objects of deadly capacities. It is typical of Engelberg's dark humor to personify a block of cheese or an electric blanket as an enemy with an apparent motive for murder. Yet the intonation "Everything Is My Enemy" at the center of the page labels each item as an equal hazard. Labeling bacon, butter, and hotdogs as "enemies" equal to the threat of a hole in the ozone layer or exposure to pesticide affects exaggeration. And yet Miriam is caught within the illogical riskscape in which such seemingly banal items are linked to cancer, and the medical discourse of cancer puts pressure on consumers to police their own exposure to carcinogens. The multiplicity of environmental risks is indeed absurd; the assumption that even three Miriams could negotiate them is unrealistic and unethical.

Despite the absurdity of expecting individuals to regulate their own environmental exposure, breast cancer discourse heavily emphasizes an individual's responsibility for her own prevention and detection of the disease. Engelberg critiques this unfair pressure in a vignette titled "Judgment." Here, Engelberg "moves out," to use Diane Herndl's phrase, to consider the collective problems facing women with breast cancer (fig. 7). "Judgment" echoes the sentiments of the earlier vignette "Diagnosis" in which women in the support group confess their anxiety about their own role in causing the cancer. A friend outside the support group encourages Miriam to "stop blaming [her]self" because "it probably has nothing to do with [her] diet": "I mean, the Bay Area has one of the highest cancer rates in the world." Miriam responds not with relief at her friend's focus on the collective carcinogenicy reported in their environment, but by reasserting her own guilt in causing the cancer: "You're right. I never should have moved here. It's all my fault!!" In the circle of the support group, three women confide in one another variations on the same theme: "I worried I'd caused it by holding anger in"; "I was sure it was from taking the pill"; "I thought it might be from oil painting." By affirming the collective sense of guilt in each "I," *Cancer Made Me A Shallower Person* asserts a new constituency of "survivor": those who endure a medical discourse that shifts corporate responsibility for environmental toxicity in cities and products onto the scarved heads of chemo patients. "Judgment" catalogues the unfair causal assumptions of personal failure that cancer patients must negotiate.

"Judgment" critiques the problem of affording organic food and the unreasonable assumption that patient victims are always responsible for their cancers, or that their responsibility is consistent and uniform. "Women with breast cancer are known for their

risky life styles," Engelberg asserts. Her tongue-in-cheek tone codes the panels that follow her assertion: Samantha buys non-organic raspberries, lured by berries twice the size for half the price, while Aimee "admits" to a glass of wine with dinner every night. These consumer habits are hardly the "live hard, die young" breast cancer manifesto Miriam claims. These panels critique the systemic problem of blaming cancer patients for their cancer because of what they choose to buy or drink, rather than the systemic problems of the carcinogenicy of non-organic produce or the larger environmental factors that condition Aimee's workplace and home.

In the same spirit of critiquing normative discourses that hold patients responsible for their own cancers, *Cancer Vixen* documents Marisa Acocella Marchetto's transformation from a self-proclaimed New York City fashionista to an author-artist who concentrates on breast cancer. Her memoir is atypical of the genre of the personal cancer narrative in that it constructs a collective, political self rather than a detached, privileged self-in-crisis (DeShazer 232). While *Cancer Vixen* complies with tropes of heteronormativity, a move that breast cancer narratives often make to compensate for the destabilizing gender norms of illness, it breaks with convention by holding institutions accountable for women's access to health care. Marisa remains obsessed with maintaining an ideal weight for fear of losing her fashionable reputation and her prestigious husband's favor, yet Marchetto underscores comprehensive health care as essential to Marisa's survival.

Marchetto's argument for widespread access to care signals a radical turn toward collective environmental consciousness in a genre traditionally satisfied by less principled plot devices. However, while the narrative represents access to health care as

an issue of social inequity, it doesn't also represent environmental carcinogenicy as correspondingly asymmetrical.

The problem with the coalitional consciousness developed in *Cancer Vixen* is not a failure to acknowledge the reality of cancer clusters or the risks of exposure to pesticides or industrial pollution. In fact, visual-verbal maps of carcinogenicy accentuate Marchetto's investment in identifying the potential environmental factors in cancer. The problem with *Cancer Vixen*'s coalitional consciousness is that it fails to recognize that environmental factors that contribute to cancer rates vary according to race. In this failure, *Cancer Vixen* reiterates a central problem of the breast cancer movement: the overwhelming rhetoric on the "race for a cure" too often takes the place of the rhetoric of prevention, rhetoric which would hold institutions accountable for releasing carcinogens into the environment in the first place. Marisa's response to processing her cancer diagnosis is to hold "a moment of silence" and "light a candle" for those that have died of cancer instead of fashioning an organized response to the environmentally related deaths she tallies (38, 39). This move to memorialize is emotionally profound but limited by the apparent invisibility of race as a factor in distributing environmental harm.

The narrative's potential for coalitional consciousness emerges early in the memoir following the events of 9/11. This sequence demonstrates the unique capability of comics to deploy multiple risk perceptions. In this sequence, a pale green-gray color fills every gutter. Tiny irregular flecks float randomly between and across panel boundaries. This movement replicates the omnipresent clouds of ash generated by incinerated buildings and bodies just after the Towers fell. Yet knowledge of the dust's carcinogenic risk is delayed in Marisa's horizon of perception. In the first row of three

panels, Marisa wakes up in her apartment just as the towers are hit. The dust lingers in the gutters around these panels, but keeps clear of the interior space. It is only in the long thin panel formed by the borders of the first and third rows the text admits the possible carcinogenic risk of the "dust": "Immediately after the first plane hit, I saw people covered with dust running up the streets from downtown./ I rushed home, worried about [the dog] Precious's little lungs" (28). A miniature-sized Marisa runs with her leashed dog down the street in the tunnel of the panel. Marisa's concern for her dog's lungs is ironic given the shared risk the dust poses to her own lungs and the lungs of the "people covered with dust running up the streets." Marisa displaces anxiety about human health onto her pampered pet. On the right page, set against the nightscape of the city lit up in squares of light, the caption reads "I didn't wear a mask, although the acrid smell and the amount of particles in the air was staggering" (29). Marisa's unmasked exposure to 9/11 dust prompts a visit to the respiratory doctor on the recto page. Here, Marchetto deploys a cross-section of Marisa's lungs that effectively graphs carcinogenic risk (fig. 8). A text box superimposed over the dust flowing into Marisa's lungs clarifies "that there was asbestos, benzene and God knows what else in the air back then." The dust that lingered in the gutter space throughout the 9/11 sequence is now sucked directly into Marisa's body. The silhouette of her breasts in the cross section of her lungs is an eerie foreshadowing of the cancer to follow.

Marchetto's affluence during cancer treatment parallels the actual privilege of the treatments themselves. As Elisabeth El Refaie notes, "all these characters are white, middle-class professionals who clearly invest a lot of time, money, and energy on maintaining their bodies to fit the dominant cultural ideal" (87). *Cancer Vixen* showcases

Marisa's commitment to haute excess in detailing her fine accessories, her obsession with her weight, and her concern for proper hair styling even as she undergoes surgery and post-op treatment. As others have noted, the total expense of Marchetto's radiation and chemotherapy treatment, $193,729.04 (*Cancer Vixen* 209), marks her harrowing experience as one set apart by her income. Marchetto can afford the expensive tests and treatments recommended by her eight doctors because her husband can afford to buy her comprehensive health insurance. Marisa's social status, and, as Tensuan points out, the financial support of her parents and husband, enable her to tell her tale (188). Marchetto is haunted by her privilege, devoting a full page to illustrating the National Breast Cancer's statistic that "women without insurance have a 49% greater risk of dying from breast cancer" (94). In the dedication at the end of the memoir, Marchetto acknowledges "those who battle, who are battling, and who have battled not just breast cancer, but all cancers" (n.p.). The narrative thus moves out beyond the limits of Marchetto's own illness to include those who might be affiliated with her experience, but don't have the leisure to create a graphic cancer narrative or access to health care to insure they could make one.

Marisa's awareness of the economic and racial privilege of her experience of cancer remains uneven in the text. The text deploys compelling maps to chart Marisa's growing awareness of cancer risk, but these maps present a troubling ambivalence toward environmental inequity. The most innovative feature of *Cancer Vixen*'s verbal-visual maps of risk perception is "Cancer Guessing Game" motif. This board game occupies a two-page spread just after a biopsy confirms that a tumor in Marisa's breast contains cancerous cells. The background color at the center of the board is also used to color the

skin of all White people in the memoir. The use of the White skin color in the board reinforces the narrative's preoccupation with cancer as an illness that disproportionately affects White bodies.

The page prior to the "Cancer Guessing Game" sets the stage for the chaos of researching environmental carcinogenicy (33). In a crisp white screenshot, a cursor hovers on the Google Search button. The sound effect "Click!" is a crisp punctuation to the quiet visual coolness of the Marisa's blue studio. With the turn of the page readers seem to release the button and complete the search. Beneath the screenshot, the blue of Marisa's studio background the minimal objects pictured in her studio make the action of her online search for breast cancer causes the central interest of the strip.

The innovative verbal-visual map of carcinogenicy in Marchetto's "Cancer Guessing Game" is a formal achievement only possible in comics. The double-page spread explodes with noisy colors, fonts, and panels (34-5). It assumes the iconicity of a rectangular game board in which 24 red and green panels serves as game spaces. The name of the game deploys the memoir's familiar color code of toxicity[1]: fire-engine red and lime-green provide the threatening signs of alarm and toxicity. In the center of the game board, a bright red mass of thread-like tissues, what Marchetto later calls "fuzzy cancer tentacles" (119), push out from the word "Cancer" and dig into the pale pink

[1] The logic of the color code begins with the first close-up of Marisa's cancer cells (4). The cells are stylized as Mr. Yuk icons, with green, scowling faces, protruding red tongues, and rude hand gestures. Mr. Yuk is the internationally recognized symbol of a poison prevention program designed by the Pittsburgh Poison Center (McCarrick 25). A cross between the skull and crossbones Jolly Roger and the 1970's Smiley Face, Mr. Yuk's sour expression is meant to warn children against ingesting household products that bear a Mr. Yuk sticker (ibid). By deploying this pop culture icon to represent cancer cells, Marchetto visually links a popular trope of chemical exposure to the diseased cells growing in her breast. The move marks her cancer as a potential consequence of human industry rather than a genetic outcome or otherwise spontaneous illness.

background. As the players move through the game spaces, disembodied research heads and white-coated doctors state contradictory facts about the risk factors of cancer. Out of the seventeen images of people featured in the guessing game, only two are phenotypically non-White.

The potential causes of cancer as listed in the game are not distinguished by racial factors. According to the logic of the board, wearing underwire bras potentially poses as great a risk as living near a nuclear reactor, and exposure to pesticide is as dangerous as being overweight. While the board succeeds in mapping the synergistic reality of potential cancer causes, the conflation of the degree of risk from environmental triggers like pesticide exposure with the recreation of alcohol consumption and smoking supposes that institutions are no more to blame than individual lifestyle choices or genetics. However, environmental triggers of cancer are neither absolutely individual nor inevitable. To suggest that all risks are the same is to ignore that many women are at a greater risk than others not by virtue of their bra but by virtue of their race ("Disparities"). Many of the featured potential causes—eating from take-out containers, drinking three drinks a night, taking anti-depressants, birth control pills, or hormone replacement therapy—are also factors to which few can afford access.

The game's point is that the origin of anyone's cancer can't be traced with certainty to a specific lifestyle choice, genetic disposition, or environmental condition. Although the following two pages examine evidence for environmental triggers of illnesses, the "Guessing Game" spread doesn't linger on the reality of disproportionate exposure based on race or proximity to a cancer cluster. This game supposes that all risks are equal and that all exposure is immeasurable. It's a meaningful way of articulating the

problem of interpreting public information available about the complex forces that may or may not produce cancer. Yet this map is far from asserting an aesthetics of environmental equity.

Cancer Vixen can thus "move out" toward a coalitional consciousness only to a certain extent. In "Up from Surgery," Theresa Tensuan argues that *Cancer Vixen* revises the conventions of a cancer narrative's triumph over breast cancer through its affiliation with a constituency of victims. Tensuan argues that Marchetto intervenes in the discourse of cancer by illuminating the disease's environmental factors at all. To support her elegant reading, Tensuan analyzes the splash-page (fig. 9) depicting a cloud of cancer patients who've died in cancer clusters in Nevada, New York, Massachusetts, California, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey (Tensuan 191). This frame is the culmination in a three-page sequence in which victims of cancer clusters appear on fluffy clouds above Marisa's cartoonist drawing table. From their cloudy-perches, patients speculate about the institutional neglect that led to their deaths. Tensuan rightly contends that this culminating image develops a national urgency in regard to environmental causes of cancer through spoken testimony: "[the cancer patients'] tales of jet-fuel-polluted water, radioactive dust from a nuclear plant accident, pesticide-laced landscapes, and homes built on toxic waste dumps create a vision of a carcinogenic nation" (Tensuan 191). Indeed, the image gives national scope and specificity to a diverse range of sources of toxic exposure, and names military-industrial and commercial forces as interrelated agents of environment risk. In creating a national vision of carcinogenicy, the image also questions the meaning of what counts as "enough" proof of harm. By showing the bodies of those who have died, literally re-membering them on the page, the image allows

avatars of the victims to assert their deaths as proof of egregious government and corporate malfeasance. As one victim declares, "Aren't we [residents of cancer clusters] *enough* evidence???" (37). By deploying the bodies of victims to signal a nationwide environmental problem, this page aims to not only mobilize government regulatory forces against the slow violence of toxic exposure, but also to mobilize the unwitting survivors who still live in relative ignorance of the complex systemic risks. Certainly, everyone in Marchetto's readership is a survivor to some extent. Each of us is potentially at risk for illness as carcinogens and toxic agents imperceptibly exist in all environments. Yet shared experiences of risk do not make them equal.

In making evidence of environmental harm visible, in literally giving bodies and voices to the dead, Marchetto obscures the difference between shared and yet unequal environmental risk. Clouds of deceased cancer patients offer a call for national unity and yet disregard the unique challenges that distinct groups within the nation face in reducing environmentally related illness. By disregarding the meaning of different experiences of harm, Marchetto reiterates Ulrich Beck's assumption that "smog is democratic" (36). That is, environmental risk ultimately threatens all dimensions of society. While the deceased in this image suffer from particular, contextualized sources of environmental risk, the cohesive shape and testimony of the crowd implies a common experience: all patients share one fatal outcome, therefore the risks they face are equal.

However, in its vision of a carcinogenic nation, the image of the crowd obscures unequal risk. According to the logic of this imagined nation, cancer clusters are primarily a White phenomenon. The crowd is multi-generational, as well as male and female, which shows Marchetto's affiliations extend outward from breast cancer patients alone,

but less than a tenth of those pictured are discernibly non-White. Racial shorthand in comics is deeply problematic; caricature often substitutes for real characters, and thus may be why Marchetto avoids depicting non-White characters through cultural markers. However, only 4 out of 49 bodies appear to be people of color in the cloud of witnesses. The previous three pages of victims who testify to Marisa about the reality of cancer clusters, beseeching her to "remember us," are also all White (36). By overrepresenting White victims of environmentally-related illness, *Cancer Vixen* loses contact with the coalitional work it seeks to achieve. It rightly emphasizes parallels between cancer clusters around the United States, highlighting a history of shared oppression by chemical and military industries. Yet it overlooks disproportionate rates of cancer and environmentally-related illness in communities of color. By whitewashing the problem of environmental harm, the image misrepresents the complexity of achieving a political and practical solution for all people, not simply those who are White.

By representing environmental toxicity as a problem that predominantly affects White people, *Cancer Vixen* elides race as a factor of slow violence. In effect, the bodies of people of color won't ever be "enough evidence" of environmental harm because, according to the memory represented in this image, these bodies don't exist. Children suffering pollution-related asthma attacks in the Bronx, Chicana/o laborers exposed to deadly pesticide in the American Southwest, Navajo uranium mine workers, the postwar indigenous communities of the nuclear Marshall Islands, or Vietnamese civilians sprayed with Agent Orange: none of these communities finds purchase in the constituency of cancer victims that Marchetto assembles. The absence of multiethnic community indicates that minority groups apparently bear less harm from environmental

carcinogenicy. According to the sociological logic of these clouds, environmental pollution can be understood as technically *un*democratic, as White populations stand a greater risk of getting cancer than peoples of color.

Cancer Vixen meaningfully disrupts the traditional breast cancer narrative through its realization of environmentally-related cancer fatalities, yet when it obscures the racial realities of these deaths, it limits its coalitional consciousness. Poisoned environments are not a universal phenomenon but determined by interlocking systems of inequity. Discourses of environmental justice and disability studies productively overlap in unpacking these systems. However, such discourses must take into account how intersecting oppressions nonetheless produce distinctive experiences. Tensuan's reading of *Cancer Vixen*'s collective consciousness does not recognize the memoir's reliance on Marisa's Whiteness as an essentializing experience of breast cancer.

As Tensuan's chapter title, "Up from Surgery," implies, the realities of race are inextricable from discourses of disability studies and environmental health. Tensuan's title signifies on Booker T. Washington's *Up From Slavery*, and thus emphasizes that the structural violence suffered by breast cancer victims and African Americans is an instance of congruent oppression. But the racial register of Washington's title does not run through Tensuan's otherwise striking argument. Without accounting for race in these parallel discourses, their interrelated concerns remain a primarily White problem. Tensuan's analysis of how *Cancer Vixen* depicts cancer as a systemic environmental problem is a useful example through which to critique the limits of whiteness in environmental justice discourse and disability studies.

Graphic cancer narratives complicate normative discourses of environmental health in the postwar period. *Stitches, Special Exits, Cancer Made Me a Shallower Person*, and *Cancer Vixen* bend horizons of postwar risk perception by graphing, collaging, and mapping differing interpretations of risk. They represent bodies as flow rather than as discrete entities by positioning points of contact between bodies and places in background, foreground, and setting. Yet these texts also register problematic elisions of intersecting minority discourses in characterization, gesture, color, text, and tone. Ultimately, these four texts demonstrate varying engagements with an aesthetics of environmental equity: they question who has access to clean environments, safe medical care, and safe workplace conditions. Images of the body serve as evidence of the drift between skin and environment. At the same time, experiences of illness and disease engage carcinogenicy beyond the body as determined by multiple and simultaneous social inequities. These graphic cancer narratives stop short of interrogating the implications of environmental racism or the complicity of government and industrial neglect in cancer discourse. However, environmental carcinogenicy as a register of cancer discourse finds traction in these verbal-visual texts. They create cognitive maps that transfigure material conceptions of bodies as environmental beings with coalitional potential.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

The medium of comics moves in surprising and unexpected ways. It goes where it's not supposed to, surreptitiously concealed beneath a classroom textbook or rubbing ink against more respectable newspaper columns. It exceeds the supposed limits of its cultural work by eliciting more than gasps of surprise or laughter; the comics examined in this dissertation deploy a lesbian humor that critiques mainstream environmentalism, release inspiring icons of African-American woman as environmental justice activists, and produce verbal-visual codes that reconceptualize the flow between humans and the natural world. Yet while comics are ubiquitous in popular culture, they remain critically underresearched in the academy, especially in the environmental humanities.

The environmental humanities would do well to take a closer look at comics. The medium generates a unique poetics of environmental representation and aesthetic engagement in the postwar United States. These art forms mobilize unmatched environmental inquiry through their complex forms and dynamic production histories. The verbal-visual codes of comics—sequence, iconicity, lineart, and color—demand a flexible, creative literacy particularly well suited to the interdisciplinary study of environmental justice. Just as environmental justice discourse expands the dimensions of mainstream environmentalism, teaching activists and scholars to look for complex environmental realities produced by privilege and power, comics teach readers to intuit new connections between panels and page layouts, implicating readers in interpreting sequences of action and affect. Comics provide the environmental humanities new points of purchase from which to understand and analyze environmental expression.

Comic art forms map contrasting perceptions of and approaches to the natural environment as the places where people live, work, play, and worship. The form itself replicates the problem of defining the environment and the social conditions that determine the relationship between human communities and the natural world. Readers engage in the process of detecting environmental risk by completing the logic of a sequence. The movement across panels draws attention to specific icons and markers of environmental ideology. Backgrounds and settings become fundamental to the narrative even when these elements aren't referenced by character dialogue or exposition. Environmental devastation takes on new dimensions in comics, even when environmental concerns might not characterize a given project. The dynamism of environmental risk in comic from proves that environmental readings are especially vital where they are unanticipated. Texts that don't necessarily foreground environmental investments mobilize latent and unconscious environmental ideologies.

Comics can further reveal marginalized environmental discourses usually overlooked by mainstream environmentalisms. Independent distribution streams engage controversial projects that push back against mainstream elisions of race and class in imagining the environment. *DTWOF* chronicles the evolving environmental imagination of a lesbian community in one of the most pivotal periods in United States environmental history. *Torchy in Heartbeats* imagines environmental racism as embedded in a host of social conditions critical to African American experience, including sexism. Contemporary graphic cancer narratives map transcoporeal exchange between environments and bodies, chronicling a growing awareness of disparate environmental risk.

By demanding that scholars respond to complex forms and production histories, comics compel an innovative and self-conscious ecocriticsm. The work that comics require readers to do clarifies the interdisciplinary aims of the environmental humanities. Aesthetics of equity in comics comprise the drawn body as a site of intense environmental expression. In comic genres that conventionally rely on performances of heightened affect, including romance, environmental engagement is charged with ethical valence. The emotional impact of environmental harm and destruction radiates from the page, embedded in page layouts and various transitions. By paying attention to bodies and emotions in comics, the environmental humanities deepens its capacity to analyze powerful and subordinated environmental discourses.

Comic studies would also benefit from the unique set of critical engagements mobilized by the environmental humanities. This interdisciplinary field opens comic studies to a range of disciplines that can teach it to recognize new significance in the interaction of verbal-visual languages. When approached from an interdisciplinary ecocritical perspective, comics compel unique and sensitive readings that activate new connections between structures of power and social mobility communicated through the play of word and image, page design and narrative impulse. The environmental humanities renews attention to environmental ideologies always already present in comic forms and directs comic studies toward new pedagogical applications.

APPENDIX A

IMAGES FOR CHAPTER I

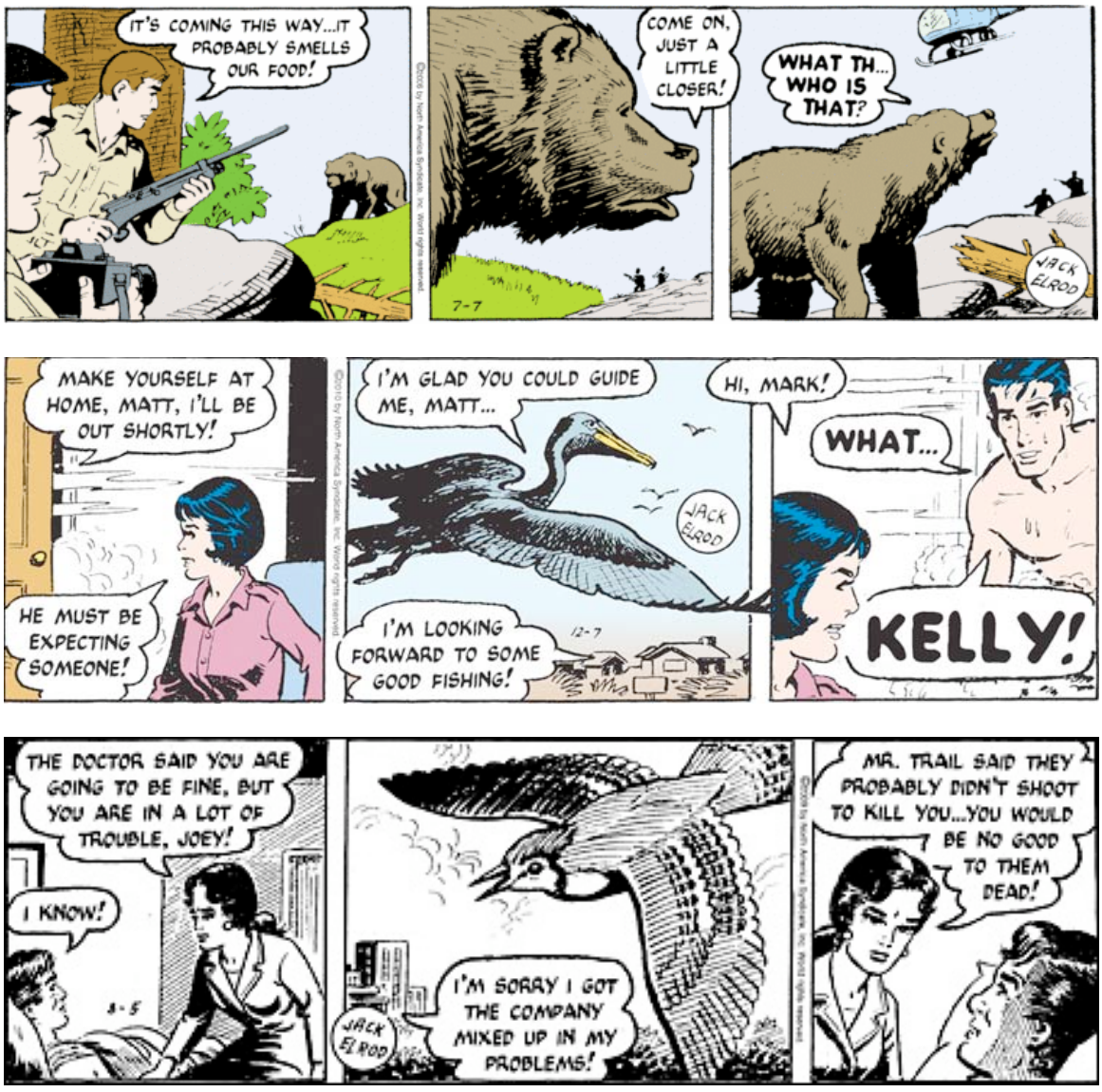

Figure 1. Typical ecocentric sequences in *Mark Trail* daily strips. Jack Elrod, *Mark Trail*; 7 July 2006; 5 Aug. 2009; 7 Dec. 2010; King Features Syndicate; Images available at xanga.com; joshreads.com; thecomicsection.blogspot.com; Web; 1 Sept. 2014.

Figure 2. Sunday strip demonstrating the post-*Silent Spring* environmental imagination of *Peanuts*. Charles Schulz, *Peanuts*; gocomics.com; 12 May 1963; Web; 1 Sept. 2014.

Figure 3. 1972 Johnny Horizon Environmental Program Posters featuring *Peanuts* animal icons designed by Charles Schulz. *Collect Peanuts*, collectpeanuts.com. Web. 1 Sept. 2014.

APPENDIX B

IMAGES FOR CHAPTER II

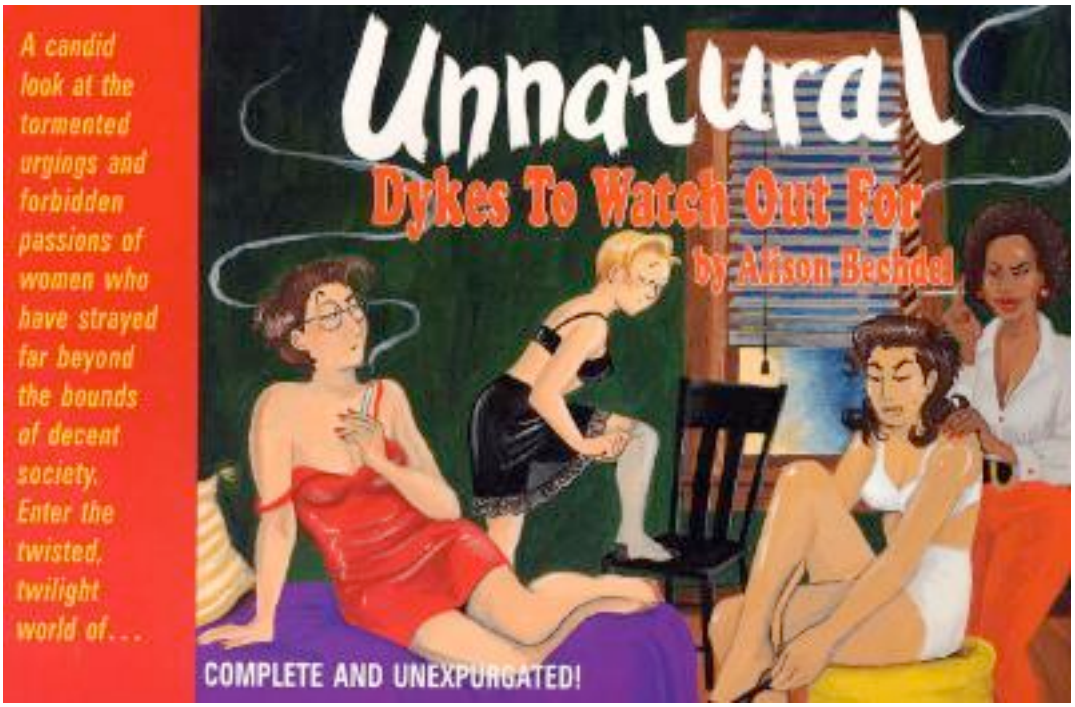

Figure 1. Alison Bechdel's original hand-painted cover for *Unnatural Dykes to Watch Out For*. Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books; 1995; Google Image; Web; 4 July 2014.

Figure 2. Screen shot of "Great Mo-Ments Contest" from Alison Bechdel's personal website (formatted to fit printer paper). *Alison Bechdel*, dykestowatchoutfor.com; 2007; Web; 4 July 2014.

Figure 3. Harriet cajoles Mo out of bed by reminding her of her privileged status. Alison Bechdel, Episode #46: "Civic Duty" (1988); *More Dykes To Watch Out For*; Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books; 1988; Print.

Figure 4. Milkweed Moonbeam's self-centered separatist lesbian environmentalism aggravates her hosts. Alison Bechdel, episode #59: "The Visitation" (1989); *New, Improved! Dykes to Watch Out For*; Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books; 1990; 80-1; Print.

Figure 5. Clarice lands a job as staff attorney for the Environmental Justice Fund and forgets to bring home dinner, foreshadowing the tension between her EJ advocacy and marriage. Alison Bechdel, episode #165: "Promises, Promises" (1993); *Essential Dykes to Watch Out For*; New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt; 2008; 108; Print.

Figure 6. As Clarice rages against cancer research controlled by chemical, drug, and oil company executives on the boards of cancer organizations, Toni is preoccupied with the bookstore's financial state. Alison Bechdel, excerpt from episode #206: "The Nightly Grind" (1995); *Unnatural Dykes to Watch Out For*; Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1995; 79; Print.

Figure 7. Stuart freezes, starves, and preaches at Clarice, demonstrating the clear need for mainstream environmentalism to take up the values of an EJ paradigm. Alison Bechdel, episode #516: "Failed State" (2007); *Essential Dykes to Watch Out For*; New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt; 2008; 379; Print.

APPENDIX C

IMAGES FOR CHAPTER III

Figure 1. Paul anticipates new industry and prosperity but Torchy is troubled. Jackie Ormes, *Torchy in Heartbeats*; *Pittsburgh Courier*; 29 May 1954 [Color Comic Supplement]; Smith-Mann Syndicate; Image courtesy of Nancy Goldstein.

Figure 2. Colonel Fuller shows off the new disposal units for the plant and Paul's professional dreams are fulfilled, but Torchy glares. Jackie Ormes, *Torchy in Heartbeats*; *Pittsburgh Courier*; 5 June 1954 [Color Comic Supplement]; Smith-Mann Syndicate; image courtesy of Nancy Goldstein.

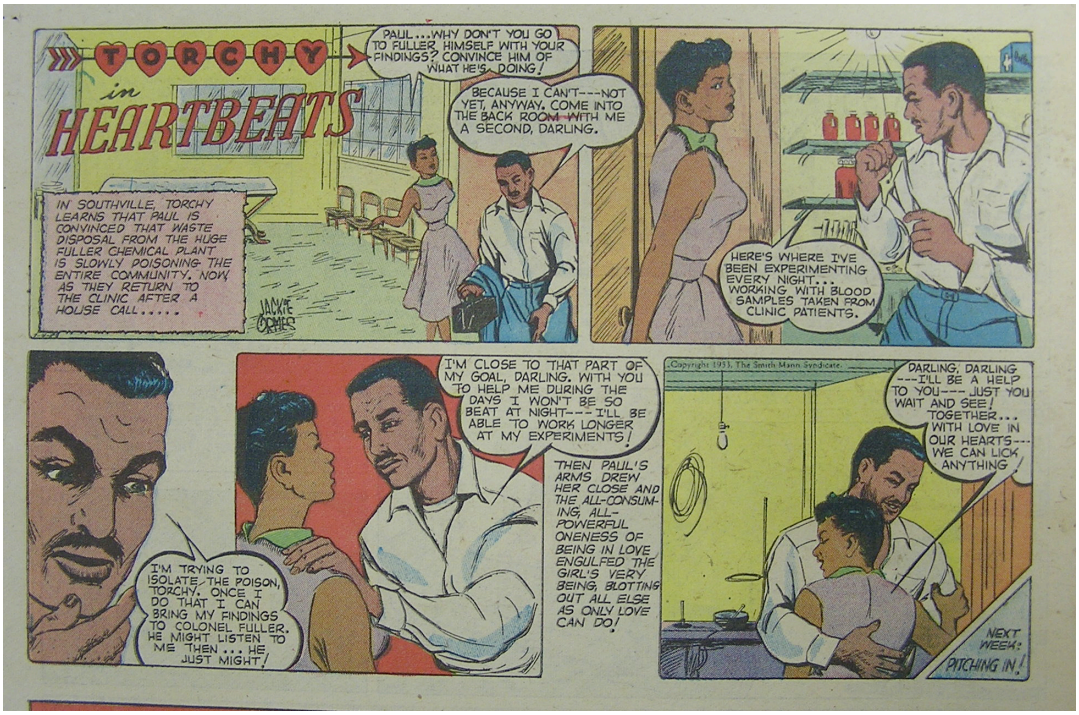

Figure 3. Torchy learns that Paul is experimenting with patient blood to isolate the poison leaking into the waterways from Fuller Chemical Company. Jackie Ormes, *Torchy in Heartbeats*; *Pittsburgh Courier*; 4 July 1953 [Color Comic Supplement]; Smith-Mann Syndicate; image courtesy of Nancy Goldstein.

Figure 4. After a troubling first encounter with a farm cart driver, Torchy trudges along the dusty road into Southville. Jackie Ormes, *Torchy in Heartbeats*; *Pittsburgh Courier*; 25 Apr. 1953 [Color Comic Supplement]; Smith-Mann Syndicate; image courtesy of Nancy Goldstein.

Figure 5. Torchy's close-ups feature kinetic lines as well as perfect hair and make-up. Jackie Ormes, *Torchy in Heartbeats*; *Pittsburgh Courier*; 20 Feb. 1954 [Color Comic Supplement]; Smith-Mann Syndicate; image courtesy of Nancy Goldstein.

Figure 6. *Torchy Togs* features Torchy holding an invisible cocktail. Jackie Ormes, *Torchy in Heartbeats*; *Pittsburgh Courier*; 30 May 1953 [Color Comic Supplement]; Smith-Mann Syndicate; image courtesy of Nancy Goldstein.

Figure 7. Colonel Fuller realizes his devastating mistake and *Torchy Togs* features Torchy's cold fury. Jackie Ormes, *Torchy in Heartbeats*; *Pittsburgh Courier*; 6 Mar. 1954 [Color Comic Supplement]; Smith-Mann Syndicate; image courtesy of Nancy Goldstein.

Figure 8. Mis-registration gives Jamie a red rash, signaling toxic race relations in Southville; Torchy befriends the child. Jackie Ormes, *Torchy in Heartbeats*; *Pittsburgh Courier*; 18 July 1953 [Color Comic Supplement]; Smith-Mann Syndicate; image courtesy of Nancy Goldstein.

Figure 9. Torchy confronts Colonel Fuller and passionately defends her secret friendship with Jamie. Jackie Ormes, *Torchy in Heartbeats*; *Pittsburgh Courier*; 17 Oct. 1953 [Color Comic Supplement]; Smith-Mann Syndicate; image courtesy of Nancy Goldstein.

Figure 10. Torchy's body language conflicts with the strip's narrative exposition. Jackie Ormes, *Torchy in Heartbeats*; *Pittsburgh Courier*; 2 Jan. 1954 [Color Comic Supplement]; Smith-Mann Syndicate; image courtesy of Nancy Goldstein.

Figure 11. "Bright stars of hope" appear in the bird's eye view of Southville. Jackie Ormes, *Torchy in Heartbeats*; *Pittsburgh Courier*; 6 Feb. 1954 [Color Comic Supplement]; Smith-Mann Syndicate; image courtesy of Nancy Goldstein.

Figure 12. Torchy urges Paul to bargain with Fuller. Jackie Ormes, *Torchy in Heartbeats*; *Pittsburgh Courier*; 3 Apr. 1954 [Color Comic Supplement]; Smith-Mann Syndicate; image courtesy of Nancy Goldstein.

Figure. 13. Paul seizes Torchy by the shoulders as he defends his moral standing. Jackie Ormes, *Torchy in Heartbeats*; *Pittsburgh Courier*; 10 Apr. 1954 [Color Comic Supplement]; Smith-Mann Syndicate; image courtesy of Nancy Goldstein.

APPENDIX D

IMAGES FOR CHAPTER IV

Figure 1. The "Survivor" vignette imagines bodies as flowing through time rather than chopping it up into finite periods. Miriam Engelberg, *Cancer Made Me a Shallower Person*; New York: Harper-Collins, 1995; n.p; Print.

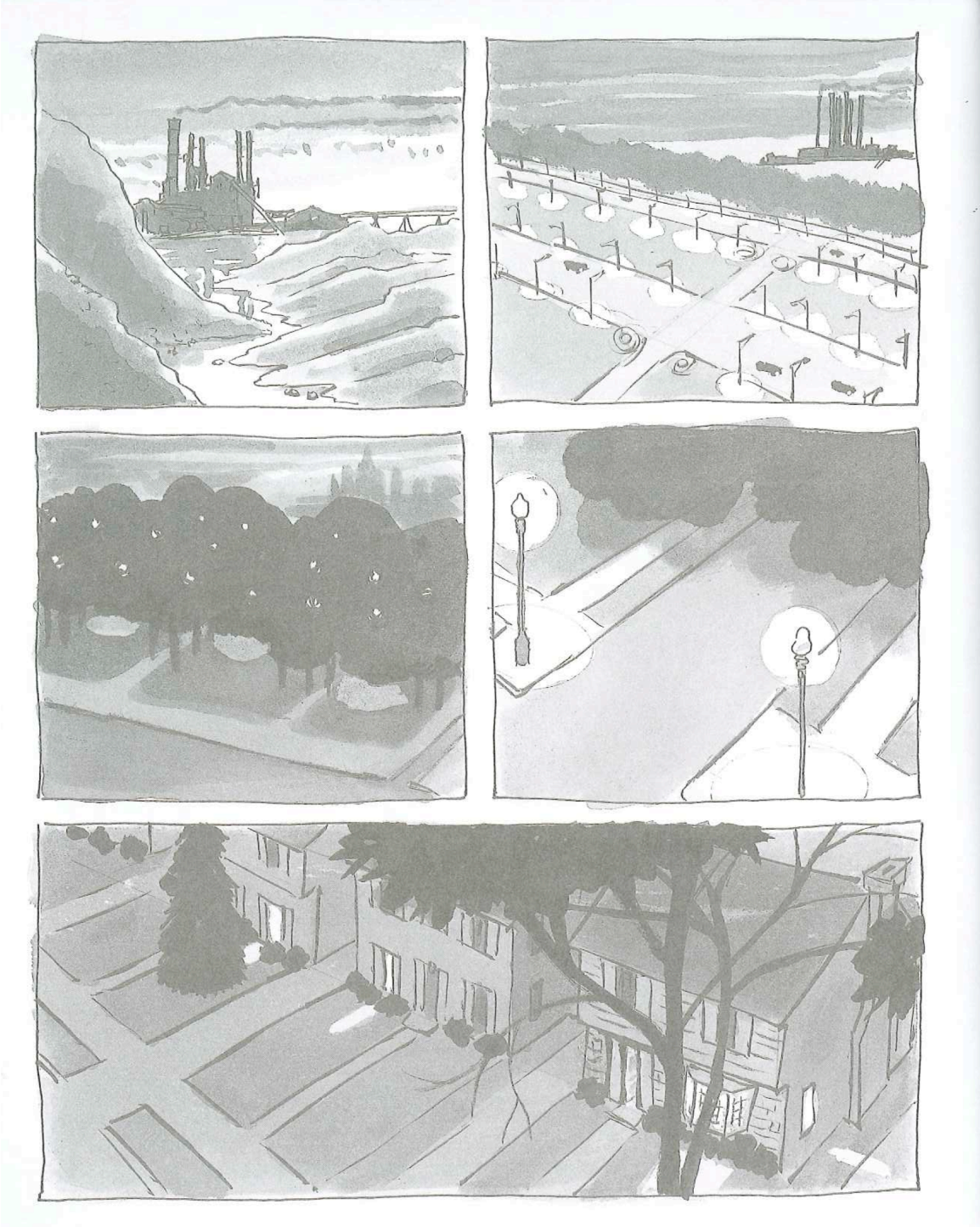

Figure 2. The orderly space of the domestic denies the pollution concealed at its edges. David Small, *Stitches*; New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2009; 12; Print.

Figure. 3. The long smudge of a mushroom cloud spreads over the center of David's white face, rising from the base of his scarred throat to the forehead. It suggests an atomic bomb several moments after detonation. David Small, *Stitches*; New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2009; 288. Print.

Figure 4. Farmer achieves a sudden yet preemptive haunting by concealing uranium ore in nondescript bags and regularly featuring them as background objects in the first third of the text. Joyce Farmer, *Special Exits*; Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2010; 73; Print.

Figure 5. In responding to individual crisis, Lars deploys a coalitional environmental consciousness invested in the safety of his community. Joyce Farmer *Special Exits*, Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2010; 171; Print.

Figure 6. Three Miriams are caught within an illogical riskscape: the medical discourse of cancer puts pressure on consumers to police their own exposure to carcinogens. Miriam Engelberg, *Cancer Made Me a Shallower Person*; New York: Harper-Collins, 1995; n.p; Print.

Figure 7. "Judgment" critiques the problem of affording organic food and the unreasonable assumption that patient victims are always responsible for their cancers, or that their responsibility is consistent and uniform. Miriam Engelberg, *Cancer Made Me a Shallower Person*; New York: Harper-Collins, 1995; n.p; Print.

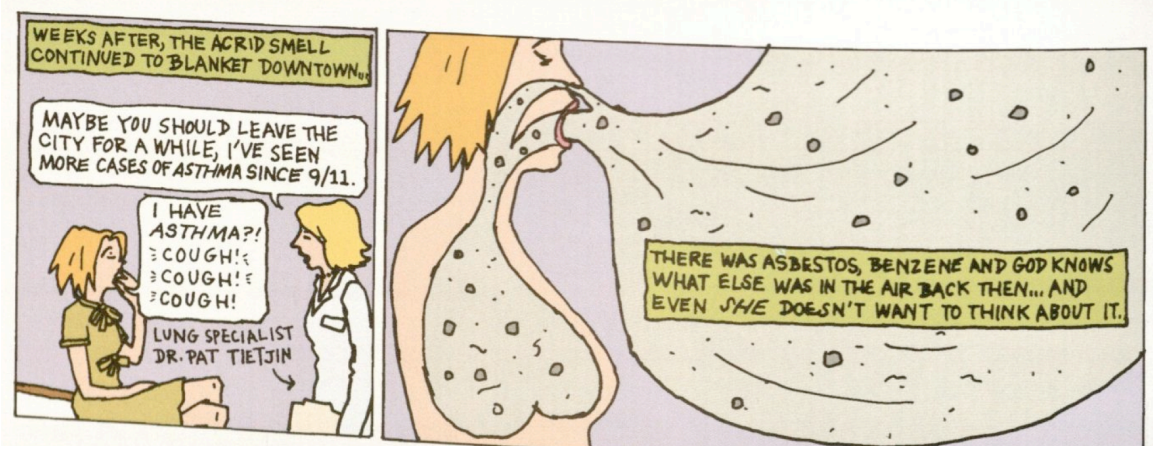

Figure 8. The silhouette of Marisa's breasts in the cross section of her lungs eerily foreshadows of the cancer to follow. Marisa Acocella Marchetto, excerpt from *Cancer Vixen*; New York: Knopf, 2006; 32; Print.

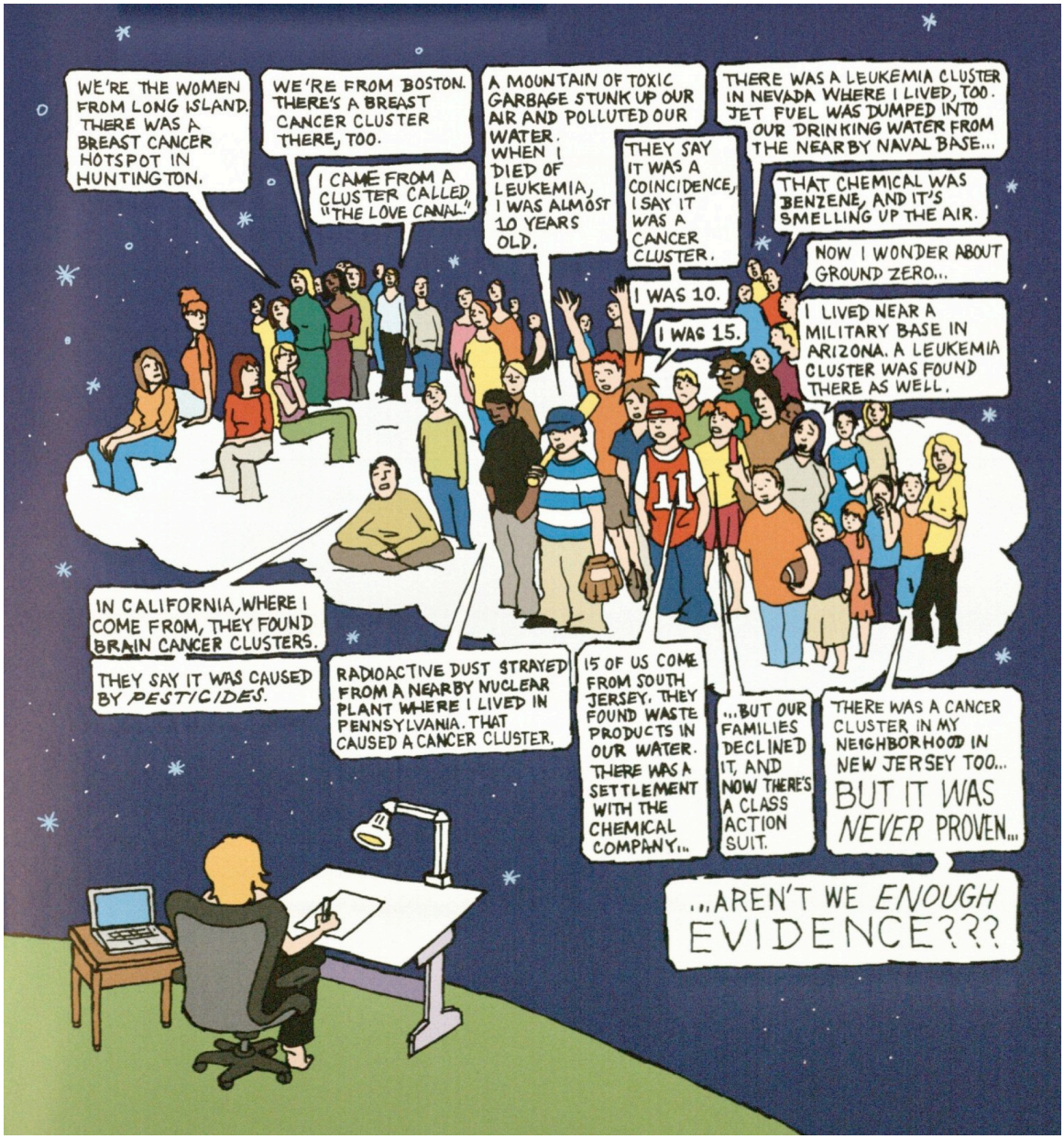

Figure 9. Clouds of deceased cancer patients offer a call for national unity and yet disregard the unique challenges that distinct groups within the nation face in reducing environmentally related illness. Marisa Acocella Marchetto, *Cancer Vixen*; New York: Knopf, 2006; 37; Print.

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