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"It's so queer—in the next room": Docile/ Deviant Bodies and Spatiality in Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour*

Sarah A. Dyne

- 1 Lillian Hellman's play *The Children's Hour* (1934) reverberates with whispers of what lies just beneath the surface of polite conversation, echoing contemporary anxieties and sexual theories, including inversion, breeding, and eugenics. Despite its controversial subject matter and initial ban in several cities, *The Children's Hour* was largely a critical and commercial success that has been performed almost continuously since its first production in the 1930s (Spencer 45). The play was even adapted twice for film, most famously in 1961 with Audrey Hepburn, Shirley MacLaine, and James Garner in leading roles. The promotional poster for the 1961 film adaptation suggests that the story is about more than the fallout from a spiteful child's rumor. The simple purple poster features a pen and ink sketch of Shirley MacLaine's character, Martha, with her hand on Karen's shoulder (Audrey Hepburn), and centered between the women at the bottom of the image is a small sketch of Joe Cardin, played by James Garner. Beyond the names of the actors, production information, and the title *The Children's Hour*, the only word that appears on the poster is "Different..." Although this image was produced for a later film adaptation, its stark composition (Martha and Karen at the center with Joe standing erect below them) and selective wording suggests that normative difference is central to our understanding of the plot. It is this "difference" and its effects that I will examine, as *The Children's Hour* reveals contemporary suspicions surrounding female intimacy and power, and highlights the fragility of hetero-patriarchal imperialism while exploring the consequences that arise when an agent of that heteronormative system (that is, one meant to produce docile bodies and citizens) becomes—or is exposed as—deviant.

- 2 The play is set in a privately owned and operated boarding school for girls that becomes the space where public and private spheres collide and conflict. Karen Wright and Martha Dobie, as headmistresses of the Wright-Dobie School for Girls, are meant to serve as agents of discipline and instruction, reinforcing heteronormative ideals in their pupils. Once an angry student lashes out by spreading a rumor that the women are lesbians, Martha and Karen must face the professional and personal fallout—a failed business, the end of their careers as educators, and social stigmas that lead to a broken engagement and ultimately a suicide. Their institution is no longer deemed fit because the women can no longer function as proper voices of authority in reinforcing societal expectations.
- 3 By the end of the play, Martha reaches an epiphany that the rumors which ruined her career and made her a social outcast were actually her true feelings. Once Martha confesses her romantic feelings towards her longtime friend and business partner, Karen, Martha's body and mind are no longer "docile" (Foucault 1995, 136) participants in the heteronormative institution of the boarding school. I argue that when Martha ends her life offstage—whether out of desperation, as an act of defiance, as an act of erasure, or perhaps all three—she further subverts chrononormativity, ultimately "queering" the space that once served to reinforce norms she no longer embodies.
- 4 Many of the themes in *The Children's Hour* reflect real, lasting contemporary social anxieties surrounding women, sexuality, and power in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Hellman drew inspiration for *The Children's Hour* from William Roughead's *Bad Companions*, which was published in Scotland in 1930, in which Roughead discusses a scandalous court case from Edinburgh in 1809 that made international (and even transatlantic) news (Gilroy 3). In the court case, a "malicious child" falsely accused her headmistresses of having "'an inordinate affection' for each other" (Gilroy 3), and this subtly-worded accusation ruined the lives of both teachers. Hellman's adaptation of this story, in its original form, received mixed criticism, and the play was initially banned in New York, Chicago, and Boston. Hellman recalled that "It had been impossible to get any of Broadway's leading ladies to take roles in the original production" (qtd. in Gilroy 3), because they worried about their reputations and thought that the production might be shut down by police for obscenity. As the theater has historically been a space known for suspended reality, subversive topics, and performance, this real-world reaction to the play's content reflects contemporary anxieties about the "contagion" of homosexuality (Tuhkanen 1003). Despite concerns of obscenity, the play "scored a critical success" and "Hellman recalled there was talk it had a chance for a Pulitzer Prize" (Gilroy 3).
- 5 The play was adapted to film two years later, but because of production codes (specifically, the "Hays Code"¹), the title was changed to *These Three* (Spencer 45) and the controversial homosexual plot was replaced by a heterosexual love triangle, in which Karen and Martha both desire Joe. This change is ironic when we consider Eve Sedgwick's *Between Men* (1985), in which Sedgwick claims that homosexual panic between men is assuaged by triangulation through conflict over a woman (21-3). The heterosexual plot of *These Three* essentially replaces overt homosexual panic for coded homosexual panic by employing similar triangulation between two women and one man. Sedgwick sees male homosocial desire triangulated by the object of a woman as inexplicably tied to power dynamics (25). Furthermore, "in any male-dominated society, there is a special relationship between male homosocial (*including* homosexual)

desire and the structures for maintaining and transmitting patriarchal power: a relationship founded on an inherent and potentially active structural congruence" (Sedgwick 25). This triangulated relationship "may take the form of ideological homophobia, ideological homosexuality, or some highly conflicted but intensively structured combination of the two" (Sedgwick 25). The women's relationship always already hinges on patriarchal structures, as "(Lesbianism also must always be in a special relation to patriarchy, but on different [sometimes opposite] grounds and working through different mechanisms)" (Sedgwick 25). The revision to the plot in the *These Three* adaptation underscores the importance of its original thematic content. By inserting the man into the women's relationship to reify heteronormative order, we see the encroachment of patriarchal power in the space of the Wright-Dobie School for Girls, which was intended to be run by and for women. Even in this attempt to scrub out the lesbian elements of the plot in favor of a heterosexual love triangle, the act of opting for a female-female-male triangle rather than a male-male-female one still complicates heteronormative power dynamics.

- 6 *The Children's Hour* was later revived on stage in 1952 and adapted again in 1961, with its original lesbian theme intact, for a film starring Audrey Hepburn and Shirley MacLaine. Even at its worst, when critics view the play and its film adaptations as melodramatic or exploitative of the queer community (Chaing), Hellman's text continues to retain its cultural currency. The longevity of the play endures, and its 2011 revival in London's West End starred Keira Knightley and Elizabeth Moss, two of Hollywood's most critically acclaimed actresses. Although some recent reviews laud the performances given by Knightley and Moss but dismiss the script itself as "well-intentioned melodrama" (Billington), I suggest that the play's long production history and lasting popularity stem not only from its revealing treatment of power dynamics and social stigmas associated with homosexuality, but also its complex treatment of embodied normative difference and its relationship to the temporal and spatial elements of the boarding school.
- 7 As part of its enduring legacy, *The Children's Hour* has garnered much critical attention. Scholars tend to historicize *The Children's Hour* based on Hellman's use of the Edinburgh court case, images of the New Woman and flappers, the Great Depression, and McCarthyism. Other readings of *The Children's Hour* focus on the morality of the play, the figure of the "evil" or "monstrous child" (such as those by T. Nagamani, Alice Griffen and Geraldine Thorsten, and Tanfer Emin Tunc), reflections of shifting contemporary views of sexuality and sensationalism, and the multiple adaptations of the text from stage to film (Westbrook). Although Hellman insisted that the play was "not about lesbianism" but rather the power of lies (Gilroy 4), the versions of the text that include the homosexual plotline are arguably the most effective when it comes to revealing contemporary cultural anxieties and challenging hegemonic systems of power.
- 8 Those scholars (including Brett Elizabeth Westbrook, Jenny S. Spencer, Mikko Tuhkanen, Benjamin Kahan, and others) who focus on homosexual aspects of the play typically do so within the context of censorship, the pathologization of homosexuality, and a social and political climate that fostered anxiety about women in positions of power. Largely overlooked, however, is the significance of the boarding school space as an extension of hetero-patriarchal imperialism, the connections between sexuality and time within the text, and the dramatic effect Martha's suicide has on both the spatial

and temporal elements at play in *The Children's Hour*. I suggest that the efficacy of Hellman's text hinges on her manipulation of spatial and temporal elements within the play; she ultimately subverts a number of heteronormative expectations associated with boarding schools in order to explore questions of power, female intimacy, morality, and social anxiety. I frame this reading of *The Children's Hour* by drawing on the works of Michel Foucault and Elizabeth Freeman, and their theories of discipline and queer time, respectively, in order to explore the play's underlying spatial and temporal elements as mechanisms of hegemonic systems for producing normative citizens.

Agents of empire

- 9 Mikko Tuhkanen provides one of the few examinations of how the Wright-Dobie School functions as a colonial space by identifying colonial subtexts of eugenic discourse within *The Children's Hour* in its many references to "breeding," as literal references to livestock or the social graces that mark members of high society. Tuhkanen explains that the Edinburgh court case from which Hellman drew her inspiration "anticipated the logics of racial sciences and sexology of the mid- to late-nineteenth century," as the testimony of the child at the center of the court case was undermined based on her ethnic background² (Tuhkanen 1003). Rather than engage typical elements of colonialism, however, Hellman's text "ostensibly replaces the colonial discourse of race by a focus on the almost telepathic communicability of lesbian knowledge" (1003). *The Children's Hour*, Tuhkanen suggests, "shifts from a discussion of 'breeding'—where racial otherness infects white femininity with illicit sexual knowledge—to 'reading,' the danger of which is its contamination of the adolescent female mind" (1003). In other words, while *The Children's Hour* represses elements of colonialism, it inadvertently brings them to light by revealing social anxieties about female sexuality rather than explicit discussion of race. The Wright-Dobie School, then, is meant to serve not only as an agent of empire, but more specifically as an agent of the *hetero-patriarchal* empire.
- 10 Boarding schools are unique spaces and pedagogical systems that function within modernist literature, to varying degrees, as extensions of an imperialist model that exists to reinforce hierarchical and heteronormative ideals and expectations in order to produce nationalized, gendered, and racialized citizens through the use of discipline. The Wright-Dobie School represents such a mechanism, but a number of factors (including a subverted distribution of power, sexual difference, and a fractured heteronormative timeline) ultimately prevent the school from succeeding as an instrument of the empire. That said, the textual portrayal of the school is mediated through the space of the theater. While I'm analyzing the published script, it is important to acknowledge that this text was envisioned for the stage and its multiple adaptations, whether on stage or screen, all provide additional layers of performative and heterotopic context, as Michel Foucault has defined both theatres and boarding schools as heterotopias. In his essay, "Of Other Spaces," Foucault explains that "heterotopias" are real spaces that assume a symbolic purpose. They operate outside of but in conjunction with the rest of society. He identifies two primary types of heterotopias—heterotopias of "crisis" and of "deviation." The first consists of "privileged or sacred or forbidden places, reserved for individuals who are, in relation to society and to the human environment in which they live, in a state of crisis:

adolescents, menstruating women, pregnant women, the elderly, etc.," and Foucault identifies boarding schools as such a space, a place where "the first manifestations of sexual virility were in fact supposed to take place 'elsewhere' than at home" (Foucault 1986, 24). Thus, boarding schools work outside of but to the benefit of society at large, especially in regard to the management of adolescent sexuality. Paradoxically, these spaces, feared to be 'hot-beds of vice' (qtd. in Tuhkanen 1010) because of the "dangerous proximity of pupils," are the same spaces meant to foster normative citizens (Tuhkanen 1010). One way to address the concerns of proximity leading to homosexuality was through the careful management of space and time within the boarding school in order to establish discipline among students. To examine the spatial elements at play within the text, I turn to Foucault's discussion of schools and docile bodies.

- 11 In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault explores how discipline is used to produce docile bodies—that is, bodies that have been groomed for maximum productivity upon entry into a given society. This concept sheds light on how the Wright-Dobie School is expected to function in relation to society at large. For Foucault, "discipline produces subjected and practiced bodies, 'docile' bodies. Discipline increases the forces of the body (in economic terms of utility) and diminishes these same forces (in political terms of obedience)" (Foucault 1995, 138). Foucault identifies a number of controlled environments, like barracks, religious institutions, or schools, that employ various means of discipline—compartmentalization, time, action, and exercise—"for controlling or correcting the operations of the body" (Foucault 1995, 136). In other words, in addition to being a heterotopic space for adolescents in a state of "crisis" (that is, at a point of their lives where they are not yet prepared to participate in society at large) (Foucault 1986, 24), the boarding school (and subsequently the teachers who run it) becomes an agent of the empire, charged with the task of molding students into "proper" citizens. If this system is to effectively produce bodies that are groomed for their intended purpose (here, entry into society), there must be discipline (especially in regards to policing "appropriate" sexual behavior), regimen, and a clear distribution of power. However, in *The Children's Hour*, we see a space that is no longer able to produce conforming citizens once the power dynamic has shifted from teacher to student and the "docility" of the teachers in charge of the school has been questioned; here, the Wright-Dobie School challenges the effectiveness of this system at large.
- 12 It is important to note that although the boarding school model was designed to function as a system for grooming students for productive citizenship through discipline, the approach and ultimate goal of education varied greatly according to gendered expectations. While boarding schools largely employed the philosophies and methods described by Foucault, and the number of such models "dramatically increased in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries," the Edinburgh court case, and Hellman's treatment of it in *The Children's Hour*, "belies some cultural anxieties about same-sex institutions," as contemporary sexology warned that same-sex institutions could foster homosexual encounters (Tuhkanen 1010).
- 13 Counterintuitive to these anxieties about same-sex institutions, especially those run by women, it was widely (though not definitively) seen as a cultural norm for women teachers to remain single during their time in the profession. Although when "teachers were self-employed, their marital status was a private concern," there nevertheless

were a number of public and private institutions that “refused to employ women, trying also to limit their teachers’ social contacts with single men” (Clifford 128). That said, “Official response to married teachers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries,” according to Geraldine Clifford, “was neither uniform nor inevitable” (Clifford 129). Despite the introduction of bills “to make a marriage bar the general rule” (Clifford 132) in 26 states during the 1930s, none were passed. In fact, a contradictory trend emerged, as “The presence of openly married women teachers rose during both the 1920s and 1930s” (Clifford 132). However, marriage bans for women teachers had become a popularized, mainstream myth by the time Hellman wrote *The Children’s Hour*, which complicates the fact that Karen intended to continue her work after marrying Joe. On the one hand, Karen’s intentions of teaching after marriage could have been viewed by contemporary audiences as *already* deviant behavior, but Karen and Martha’s position as sole proprietors and instructors of the Wright-Dobie School, allowed for some measure of flexibility. That is, Karen would be able to maintain her position as a professional educator despite social norms because the school was privately owned and because the marriage would be a reification of heteronormativity. On the other hand, while Karen’s engagement to Joe *should* have reinforced her status as a representative of heteronormative authority and protected her from suspicion, it nevertheless went against certain expectations for teachers and failed to shield her from rumors of lesbianism. Clifford explains some of these expectations, observing that “In a ‘homosocial [not homosexual] environment, the spectrum of legitimate female-female behavior was broad,’” and it was common for “generations of single women teachers” to live “with other women: perhaps a sister or widowed mother but often an unrelated single woman, frequently another teacher” (164). However, “Around the turn of the twentieth century, the term ‘homosexuality’ appeared, and Freudianism subsequently embellished earlier suspicions of ‘sex inversion’” (Clifford 164). This “popularized sexology” in mass culture led to “an abiding anxiety of close female friendships, especially in the context where male supervision is lacking,” which adds plausibility to the scandalous nature of the lie Mary Tilford tells in *The Children’s Hour* (Tuhkanen 1012). Thus, even though boarding schools were designed for the purpose of serving the hetero-patriarchal empire, boarding schools for girls “were seen as artificial environments” where the spread of uncontrolled reading and knowledge had the potential to injure girls’ “normal growth, inflicting them with physical and mental diseases” (Tuhkanen 1021).

- 14 In order to uphold institutional ideals and avoid such potential “injury” of uncontrolled (sexual) knowledge, we see a number of efforts to police sexuality and reinforce heteronormativity throughout *The Children’s Hour*: girls within the school are reminded during a sewing and elocution lesson that “courtesy is breeding and breeding is most to be desired in a woman. It is what every man wants in a woman” (Hellman 11); Martha is told she needs to “get a beau” of her own because “Every woman, no matter what she says, is jealous when another woman gets a husband” (Hellman 21); and Karen is told to “go back to Joe” because things are “too much” for her otherwise (Hellman 65). The discussion of “breeding” and on desirable qualities of “well-bred” women in the only pedagogical scene portrayed in the text highlights the gendered norms reinforced through the education the girls received at school; the school was essentially preparing the girls for entry into their expected positions within society as wives and mothers. These gendered expectations are reinforced through a system of institutionalized policing of sexuality, at all levels of the Wright-Dobie School. Hellman creates a system

of women policing the sexuality of other women: Mrs. Mortar polices the students, Karen and Martha's friendship is policed by the community at large, and Martha effectively polices herself through confession, expression of shame, and ultimate suicide. While these numerous references to "breeding" within *The Children's Hour* do reinforce "the eugenic ideal of controlled reproduction [...] subsumed under what is rather like its nightmare counterpart: the rapid, rabid procreation of unwanted elements," they also point to the policing efforts within the institution of the boarding school in relation to sexuality (Tuhkanen 1022). Although this policing of sexuality implies a discourse of eugenic imperialism, I suggest that it also points to Foucault's theory of docility and raises the question of controlled reproduction within the context of Freeman's theory of chrononormativity. That is, these passages not only reveal cultural anxieties about having the "right kind" of citizens reproduce, but also *how* and *when* they do so.

"It isn't natural until it's proper": chrononormative expectations

- 15 Foucault links the implementation of discipline for the purpose of producing docile bodies (as well as heterotopic spaces³) to the deliberate control and use of time: "Temporal dispersal is brought together to produce a profit, thus mastering a duration that would otherwise elude one's grasp. Power is articulated directly onto time; it assures its control and guarantees its use" (Foucault 1995, 160). Bearing in mind this connection between spatiality, docility, and time, we are better able to understand how *The Children's Hour* establishes and then subverts expectations of the hetero-patriarchal imperialist system. If Foucault's discussion of the regimentation of time within imperialist institutions speaks to the discipline and control of behavior on a *micro* level (i.e., according to yearly, daily, and hourly schedules), then Elizabeth Freeman, Judith Halberstam, and Rebecca Fine Romanow's concepts of "chrononormativity" and "queer time" speak to heteronormative expectations on the *macro* level (i.e., the regimentation of time over the span of an entire life toward the goal of (re)productive citizenship).
- 16 Freeman explains that "*Chrononormativity*," is "the use of time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity" (Freeman 3). Given the context of the boarding school's role in preparing girls for gendered, heteronormative citizenship, I don't think we would be out of line to read "productivity" here as reference to both career work *and* motherhood, especially given Mrs. Mortar's constant reminders that the girls and women at the school are all expected to marry someday. Much like Foucault's observation that schools control pupils through the use of compartmentalization and regimen, Freeman further explains that people are "bound to one another, engrouped, made to feel coherently collective, through particular orchestrations of time" (3). This orchestration of time is the "normative timeline," which includes "paradigmatic markers of life experience—namely, birth, marriage, reproduction, and death" (Halberstam 2). When this timeline is disrupted in a text, as it is with queer exchanges or homosexual/homosocial desire, we often see compressions or expansions of time which Freeman refers to as "queer temporalities [...] points of resistance to this temporal order that, in turn, propose other possibilities for living in relation to indeterminately past, present, and future others: that is, of living historically" (xxii). Furthermore, Romanow explains that:

Those who inhabit queer time upset or disengage themselves from the normative progression of a life which is lived in order to fulfill the 'logics of labor and production. [...] If the notion of reproduction is removed from the timeline of life, if the present no longer pivots around the past and future, then the subject lives in 'queer time,' both freed and excluded from the normative societal expectations. (Romanow 6)

- 17 Queer temporalities can emerge from "textual moments of asynchrony, anachronism, anastrophe, belatedness, compression, delay, ellipsis, flashback, hysteron-proteron, pause, prolepsis, repetition, reversal, surprise, and other ways of breaking apart what Walter Benjamin calls 'homogenous empty time'" (Freeman xxii). We see some of these moments—specifically belatedness and compression—throughout *The Children's Hour*. Indeed, Mary Tilford's late arrival to her sewing and elocution class (and her resulting lie to cover for her belatedness) is the catalyst that sets the action of the play into motion. As we shall see, the opening scene, and the only pedagogical instruction in the play, is interrupted because Mary comes in late, telling a lie to avoid punishment for disrupting the regimentation of time during the school day. She is caught in her lie and subsequently punished, and her retaliation against authority undermines the entire system. This seemingly insignificant disruption of discipline and regimen ultimately leads to the dissolution of temporal cohesion (as we see toward the end of the play when Karen and Martha find themselves obsessing over the time of day and empty regimens), the institution of the boarding school itself, Karen's personal participation within the heteronormative timeline, and Martha's suicide. I suggest that the catastrophic result of Mary's seemingly small disruption of time within the text points to the fact that temporality within the school was already skewed.
- 18 While Hellman constructs a conceptual representation of a boarding school mediated through the stage and literary plot, boarding schools already have a complicated relationship to larger hegemonic structures by existing as an agent of society while operating separately from it, both in *and* outside of imperial measurements of time. That is, if we think of time as an imperial construct,⁴ then the anxiety over concepts of time so often expressed in Modernist literature evidence alternate temporalities at play. This temporal alterity manifests in *The Children's Hour* in the way schools measure the year and impose artificial measurements of growth onto a child's academic career (academic vs. calendar year), which points to concerns over maintaining chrononormativity. One could argue, then, that Karen and Martha already inhabit a queer temporality because they are permanent residents within a transitory space that operates outside of, but in conjunction with, the heteronormative imperial timeline. While the Wright-Dobie school is meant to function as an imperial mechanism that reinforces heteronormative ideals in its students within a controlled, heterotopic space, the school itself would have *already* been a queered space to a certain extent, in the sense that it operates on an alternative schedule from the rest of society. While this alternative schedule is typical of most schools, Hellman's portrayal of the Wright-Dobie school exaggerates its placement outside of normative time and space.
- 19 Romanow builds on Elizabeth Freeman's (as well as Judith Halberstam's) work, arguing that within these contexts, "the body, itself... becomes defined as the queerest space of all, working against the normative temporalities of the global, as the local sphere is also asked to shift to the normality of global time and space" (7). In a way, we can view Martha as an already queered character *before* her "epiphany" and subsequent confession, due to her status as a deviant body who operates outside of the

heteronormative timeline and subverts imperial and societal expectations. Mrs. Mortar traces Martha's possessive and "unnatural" (i.e., queer) attachment to Karen back to childhood while telling her how to reenter the heteronormative timeline:

You've always had a jealous and possessive nature. Even as a child. If you had a friend, you always go mad if she liked anybody else. That's what's happening now. And it's unnatural. Just as unnatural as it can be. I say you need a man of your own, and—(Hellman 21)

- 20 Mortar's coded language links Martha's close attachments to friends with homosexual desire while her use of the word "mad" suggests the presence of a sort of mental illness that could only be remedied by a relationship with a man. This scene not only echoes contemporary Freudian ideas about female sexuality but also functions as identification and policing of queer desire in an effort to force Martha into the heteronormative timeline she had so far avoided by purchasing a schoolhouse on a rural farm and focusing on her career rather than on finding a suitable mate. While Martha's participation in chrononormativity is always questionable within the text, Karen is firmly set in her path on the heteronormative timeline for much of the play, thanks to her engagement to Joe Cardin, the town doctor and the only major male character in the play. Not only is Karen engaged to a man, she is engaged to *the* man. One might assume that Joe's presence would secure Karen's status as an authoritative voice of heteronormativity, yet the weight of Mary's accusation, paired with all of the existing queer spatial and temporal elements in the play (and her eventual separation from Joe) leaves her with outsider status. That said, Karen's relationship with Joe was always filtered through her relationship with Martha. For instance, before Joe enters Act I, Martha and Karen discuss the engagement and Karen's plans for maintaining her position at the school once she becomes a wife:

MARTHA: (Slowly.) You haven't talked about marriage for a long time – I mean, have you and Joe decided on – ?

KAREN: Yes. We'll get married as soon as the term is over. We'll be out of debt by then and the school will be paying for itself. And Joe's found a house. We'll all go and look at it tomorrow.

MARTHA. So soon ? Then we won't be taking our vacation together ?

KAREN. Of course we will. The three of us.

MARTHA: I had taken for granted, I guess, that we were going to the lake, like we always do, just you and I.

KAREN. Now there'll be three of us. That'll be fun, too. (Hellman 17)

- 21 Major life decisions that expected to be made between the two people in the heterosexual relationship (here, purchasing a home) are here interjected by the inclusion of Karen's friend. If we recall Sedgwick's concept of homosocial desire being triangulated and thereby legitimized by a member of the opposite sex, here we see the failure of that triangulation. The discussion between Martha and Karen continues, as Karen attempts to reassure her friend that the marriage will not interfere with the school they established together, but this conversation, like most conversations throughout the text that involve discussions of relationships, is punctuated by references to time—"You haven't talked about marriage for a long time"; "We agreed a long time ago that my marriage wasn't going to make any difference to the school" (Hellman 17). These reminders of time and, by extension, the larger heteronormative timeline in question, continue between Joe and his aunt, Mrs. Tilford, whose misinformed accusation leads to the failure of the Wright-Dobie School and Martha's eventual suicide:

MRS. TILFORD: When did you last see Karen ?

CARDIN: This afternoon.

MRS.TILFORD: Oh. Not since seven o'clock ?

CARDIN: What's happened since seven o'clock ?

MRS.TILFORD: Joseph, you've been engaged to Karen for a long time. Are your plans any more definite than they were a year ago ? (Hellman 44)

- 22 The relationship between Karen and Joe is always referenced in tandem with time—the long time between their engagement allows Martha to become complacent in assuming that the marriage won't affect her relationship with Karen (even though she accepts that the marriage *will* happen), while the same length of time causes Mrs. Tilford to question whether the marriage will or should happen, especially in light of the rumors that call Karen's heterosexuality (and thus her viability as a spouse and mother) into question. These subtle links between time and sexuality, along with more overt discussions of the repetition and dissolution of time once regimen and discipline within the space of the school falls apart, work themes and complications of chrononormativity throughout the play. On a larger scale, similar temporal disruptions appear in the scene descriptions and actions of characters.
- 23 *The Children's Hour* opens on an "afternoon in April"⁵ (Hellman 6) and ends in November; the play begins after the start of the calendar year, in the middle of the day, in the middle of the school year, and ends before the calendar year is finished. We see not only an alternative arrangement of calendar time according to school semesters (Fall-Spring), but also a further manipulation of time—starting in the middle and ending prematurely. Additionally, we see the reversal of the marriage comedy plot—Karen is engaged at the beginning of the play, with the promise of a marriage and children; the anticipated chrononormative trajectory from maidenhood, to motherhood, to old age is interrupted by the question of homosexuality and Martha's death. These temporal shifts and disrupted chrononormativity, paired with power reversals and normative sexual difference ultimately reveal Karen and Martha's failure as agents of the imperial institution, leading to the queering of the space itself.

Deviant Bodies, Disrupted Timelines, and Queered Space

- 24 Within the space of the boarding school in *The Children's Hour*, Karen and Martha are expected to regulate time and provide guidance, instruction, discipline, and structure for their students. According to the parameters set by Foucault and Freeman, however, the Wright-Dobie School is already a failed institution because rigor and discipline appear to be largely absent. Perhaps the only explicit example of discipline in action occurs in Act I, when Mrs. Mortar, failed actress and Martha Dobie's widowed aunt, is overseeing a study session for the resident girls at the school. She attempts to act as an authority figure within this space, but she is consistently interrupted and even corrected by students, a gesture that subverts the power dynamic between teacher and student :
- MRS. MORTAR: A cue is a line given to the actor or actress to remind them of their next speech.
- CATHERINE: To remind *him* or *her*. (Hellman 10)
- 25 Catherine then proceeds to correct Mrs. Mortar for skipping two lines in the play they are reciting, blatantly undermining Mrs. Mortar's position of authority despite her

classmates' disapproval. Similar disruptions and reversals of power continue throughout the scene and the rest of the play. The most explicit reversal of power, of course, occurs when Mary tells the lie that destroys the lives of Karen and Martha.

- 26 Mrs. Mortar unsuccessfully tries to regain the high ground toward the end of the scene when she actively polices the actions and sexuality of the girls in the room when she hears them gossiping about boys :

MRS. MORTAR: (*Becomes aware of noise and raps on the table again.*) I want this noise to cease. And I want that silly talk to stop. It is natural that young women should think of young men. But it is not natural until it is proper. (Hellman 11)

- 27 Propriety and social demands relegate "natural" behaviors and even negate them based on where the subject is in their progression through the heteronormative timeline. Such heterosexual pairings are expected of the girls, but only when the *time* is right, and only after they have finished their training in the disciplines, as we see in another of Mrs. Mortar's lines: "courtesy is breeding and breeding is most to be desired in a woman. It's what every man wants in a woman" (Hellman 11). Here, it is made clear that the girls are being groomed for their future roles as (re)productive citizens. Ironically, the only character who actively polices the girl's actions and participation in the heteronormative timeline is the widowed aunt who has failed to be the best example of a successful (re)productive citizen. That is, Mrs. Mortar does not have a "successful" career, and the only remaining evidence of her potentially (re)productive heterosexual relationship is her title of "Mrs."

- 28 As we have already seen, not long after her ineffectual lesson, Mrs. Mortar gets into an argument with her niece, Martha, in which she labels Martha's affection for Karen "unnatural." The argument leads Martha to send Mrs. Mortar away from the school to resume acting. Mrs. Mortar takes offense to the dismissal, a dismissal that signaled her removal from the hierarchy of the institution. Predictably, the official accusations of lesbianism which shut down the school and ostracize Karen and Martha happen after Mrs. Mortar, the only person who could completely exonerate the women, has left. Mrs. Mortar returns from her trip a few weeks after the trial, and her timing condemns Karen and Martha, as her testimony could have cleared them of all charges of homosexuality and impropriety. In any other text, this would play out as a tragic coincidence, but when Mrs. Mortar returns, Karen, Martha, and Joe make it clear that Mrs. Mortar's late return was intentional and that she had ignored multiple court summons. This is a temporal disruption *and* a reversal in power dynamics. Mrs. Mortar goes from being the broke, unsuccessful actress/widow aunt to being the lynchpin whose missing testimony condemns the school and her niece, Martha. Already, the authority of the adults within this space—and the ability for the Wright-Dobie School to perform its institutional goal—is on shaky ground.

- 29 While much of the criticism on this play focuses on the character of Mary as a 'monstrous' child, I suggest that what makes her 'monstrous' is not only the fact that she lies without hesitation or consideration of the repercussions, but also the way she manipulates adults by using her youth (and assumed "innocence") in order to subvert the accepted hierarchy and power structure within a pedagogical space. While Karen laments that "it isn't a new sin they tell us we've done. Other people aren't destroyed by it" (Hellman 65), Mary is not, so far as the audience is aware, punished for her wrongdoings. I suggest that although Mary is no longer a docile body, according to the expectations of a student's position in school, she goes without punishment because

although she temporarily disrupts the power structure, she is not a *representative* of that structure in the same way that Karen, Martha, and even Mrs. Mortar, are. In fact, I suggest that the heterotopic qualities of the school—that is, as a transitional space and controlled environment in which students are able to grow, learn, and experiment within certain limits (Foucault 1986)—allows for minor deviations from social norms and heteronormative expectations. Furthermore, because we can probably assume that Mary will continue her trajectory on the heteronormative timeline, her temporary disruption of discipline (time, space, and behavior) within the school does not make her a “queer” figure in the same way that Martha’s epiphany and ultimate suicide does. If Mary disrupts the student/teacher power dynamic and Mrs. Mortar polices the girls, Martha effectively polices herself through confession, expression of shame, and suicide. However, these efforts to restore discipline and chrononormativity are for naught, as we are left with no indication that Karen will return to the heteronormative timeline of marriage and reproduction, no indication that the girls who attended the school received or will receive the education, discipline, and regimen they need to enter into the timeline at the “proper” moment.

- 30 After the heightened frenzy of Mary’s rumor, the curtain of Act III rises to reveal the same space as Act I, but the effects of disciplinary and temporal disruptions are evident: “The room has changed. It is not actually dirty, but it is dull and dark and uncared for. The windows are tightly shut, curtains tightly drawn” (Hellman 54). To this end, Jenny S. Spencer has observed that :

The third act is crucial [...] not only because of Martha’s suicide,” but also “because of the changed reality that Mary’s lie forces all the characters to face. As Act Three opens, the audience slowly comes to realize that the trial is over and Martha and Karen are living in a state of suspended animation. Time itself seems to have stopped (‘MARTHA: Haven’t you heard ? There isn’t any time any more’). (49)

- 31 Although Spencer does not say as much, this scene illustrates a shift from normative time to queer time. That is, the action of the play has been compressed into a mere seven months and the characters’ experience of time has been so fractured that time itself almost ceases to exist. While the school was never a vibrant machine of heteronormativity (indeed, it is portrayed as chaotic from the opening scene onward), we are ultimately left with a school that is spatially and temporally altered beyond recognition. Sari Biklen has observed that “school rules regulate both students and teachers. Teacher’s bodies are regulated by the very restrictions they establish for the children... adult’s days [are] controlled by needing to be placed in a supervisory position in relation to children” (Biklen 179). Once Karen and Martha are deemed unsuitable representatives of the heteronormative system they were meant to reinforce, the teachers are left without students to supervise and without the discipline and daily regimen that governed their own lives by extension. Without this structure in place, the women are left adrift. Martha unsuccessfully attempts to restore discipline and regimen with the mundane, repetitive task of bathing: “Six o’clock take a bath, like you’ve always done. You know yesterday, I took a six o’clock bath and I took another at four this morning [...] I’m going to have a four o’clock bath and watch the light come up” (Hellman 54). Repetitive washing becomes the only daily activity Martha has to occupy her time and energy, a task that is at once mundane and possibly significant—an unspoken act of ritual cleansing. Even the act of eating—or not eating—and forced nostalgia becomes the only activities Karen and Martha have to focus on: “I’d like to be hungry again. Remember how much we used to eat at college ?” (Hellman 54). Here,

and throughout the scene, the characters' thoughts predominantly turn backwards in time. When they do look forward, it is only as far ahead as dinner, or at best, the next day. The only discipline and regimentation of time and space we see in the play is self-imposed by and on the teachers. Once their students are gone, all shreds of the already flimsy daily regimentation that fueled the mechanism of the school have disappeared, leaving the women adrift and without a clear function as agents within the heteronormative system.

- 32 At the climax of the play, after Karen and Martha come to the realization that their reputations and business is ruined and they have no place left to go, Martha realizes that the rumors, while originally fabricated, reflected her true feelings for Karen. Through the act of confession and by actively identifying as lesbian, Martha becomes the queer body referenced by Romanow and others. The scene in which Martha reveals her feelings to Karen reads more like a confession than a declaration of love :

MARTHA: But maybe I loved you *that way*. The way they said I loved you. I don't know—listen to me.

KAREN: What ?

MARTHA: (*Kneels down next to Karen*) *I have loved you the way they said.* (Hellman 66)

- 33 Martha's stage directions have her kneel beside her friend, a posture loaded with both religious and social significance, at once evoking images of prayer, confession, or marriage proposal. Martha continues: "You're afraid of hearing it; I'm more afraid than you... You've got to know it. I can't keep it to myself any longer. I've got to tell you that I am guilty" (Hellman 66). Instead of providing a sense of redemption or relief, Martha's confession and Karen's subsequent refusal to accept it as truth, leaves Martha with little hope of restoring order to her life or her institution. After an emotional final conversation with Karen, Martha exits the stage. Moments later, the audience hears a shot.⁶ Karen remains still for a few seconds and springs to her feet just as Martha's aunt runs downstairs. When Karen confirms that her friend is indeed dead in the next room, Mrs. Mortar panics. She pleads with Karen to call a doctor, but Karen assures her that there is nothing left to do.

- 34 The two sit quietly for a few moments, until Mrs. Mortar breaks the silence to express her discomfort: "MRS. MORTAR: We must do something. I'm afraid. It seems so queer—in the next room. (*Shivers*)" (Hellman 68). While this scene could be read as a reification of heteronormative ideology in its narrative punishment/erasure of the lesbian, I argue that Martha's suicide ultimately shatters these expectations by altering the space of the boarding school and prematurely stepping out of the heteronormative timeline. Rebecca Romanow argues that within a colonial context, "the body, itself [...] becomes defined as the queerest space of all, working against the normative temporalities of the global, as the local sphere is also asked to shift to the normality of global time and space," and she sees the 'postcolonial' "as inhabiting queer space and time" (7). The Wright-Dobie School, no longer able to operate as an agent of hetero-patriarchal imperialism, becomes a "postcolonial" space for all intents and purposes. Within this framework—and once she assumes the label of queer—Martha's body becomes the "queerest space of all" and ultimately alters the physical space of the schoolhouse.

- 35 Karen tells Mrs. Mortar not to be afraid, to which Mrs. Mortar replies: "It's different for you. You're young" (Hellman 68). Mrs. Mortar's words suggest both the fact that she is essentially *out of time* (that is, near the end of her life AND removed from the heteronormative timeline) and the possibility of Karen returning to

chrononormativity. Their conversation is then disrupted, of course, by Mary's grandmother, who has news that the lie has been uncovered and that Karen and Martha's names have been cleared—predictably moments too late. The exchange between Mrs. Mortar and Karen, however, implies a few important things. First, Mrs. Mortar unwittingly acknowledges that the formerly heteronormative space has been queered by the dead queer body of her niece in the next room. Secondly, the fact that her grief and fear are tied to her age implies that she realizes her potential for fulfilling her role as a participant in the heteronormative system—at least vicariously through her niece—is essentially gone. It is also implied that Karen, by contrast and by virtue of her youth, could potentially step back into the timeline and again become an agent of discipline and (re)productive citizen.

- 36 While Martha attempts to erase or censor herself, she disrupts chrononormativity and alters the space permanently. Once Martha alters the space, we are left with no tidy ending, no indication that Karen will recover, no idea of what will become of the "monstrous" child or other subjects left without the structure and discipline of the school. The space and characters appear irrevocably changed. *The Children's Hour* ultimately highlights the fragility of the hetero-patriarchal imperialist model, as it reveals how the entire system can collapse under the weight of a malicious whisper from a child. Mary whispers the lie/truth to her grandmother—this unspoken truth is what causes the entire collapse of the system. The discursive system that produces the hierarchy has material, organic, physical, mortal consequences. In the end, Hellman leaves us with the uncertainty of a broken heteronormative timeline and a broken institution, and the moment of deviation is punctuated by an offstage shot.

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NOTES

1. "The Motion Picture Production Code of 1930," was "dubbed the 'Hays Code' after Will H. Hays, the head of the organization that wrote the code. The Hays Code declares that movies are 'entertainment' but of a very peculiar kind which produces strange effects never encountered before as part of any entertainment, effects which threaten to compromise the morality of movie viewers so powerfully that moviemakers must censor themselves" (Tratner 54). The Hays Code, largely influenced by Freud's *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, was especially concerned with censoring and regulating "the morality represented in movies, particularly sexual and

criminal morality" (Tratner 58). The Code applied eerily eugenic logic as it sought to counter what was perceived as "inherent in the structure of Hollywood movie production and distribution, namely, that movies tend to reduce people to herd-like followers. [...] The Code even suggest[ed] that by keeping movies moral, they will 'improve the race'" (Tratner 58).

2. The child in question, Jane Cumming, was born in India from a white British colonist and an Indian mother. The court decided that the source of Jane's forbidden sexual knowledge and proclivity for lying stemmed from the fact that, "having spent her early years in India with her maternal family and 'unfortunately wanting in the advantages of legitimacy, and of a European complexion'—that is, lacking in white skin and (hence) civilized character—had been exposed to a knowledge of women being able 'to kindle each others' lewd appetites'. It was also assumed that she had initiated the allegations because, being from a country of lesser morals, she hadn't realized the criminality of tribadism" (Tuhkanen 1006).

3. In "Of Other Spaces," Foucault explains that "Heterotopias are most often linked to slices in time—which is to say that they open onto what might be termed, for the sake of symmetry, heterochronies. The heterotopia begins to function at full capacity when men arrive at a sort of absolute break with their traditional time" (Foucault 1986, 26). With heterotopias of crisis, such as the boarding school, "there are those [spaces] linked [...] to time in its most fleeting, transitory, precarious aspect" (Foucault 1986, 26).

4. Greenwich Mean Time *literally* places London (the seat of the British empire) at the longitudinal center of the Earth.

5. Hellman's decision to begin the play in April could be a nod to the famous line from T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*: "April is the cruellest month" (Eliot 53). In the same way that the hopeful and fecund symbols of spring and renewal are subverted in *The Waste Land* (1922), *The Children's Hour* subverts symbols of innocence and the promise of futurity (children, schools, engagement).

6. The method of Martha's suicide is one of the few changes between the published 1934 script and the 1961 film adaptation. In the script, Martha shoots herself offstage. Hellman's stage directions indicate that "The sound of the shot should not be too loud or too strong, as the act has not been sensational" (67). Karen pauses for a few seconds and then runs offstage toward the noise before returning moments later to explain to Mrs. Mortar what just happened. In the film adaptation, Martha hangs herself as Karen dramatically breaks down the locked door with a notably phallic candlestick. According to the World Health Organization, "Violent and highly lethal methods such as firearm suicide and hanging are more frequent among men, whereas women often choose poisoning or drowning, which are less violent and less lethal" (Ajdacic-Gross *et al.*). It is significant that both versions of Martha's suicide are masculinized, as it further situates her as a queered character.

ABSTRACTS

This paper explores the spatial and temporal elements in Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour* by examining connections between bodies and spaces, and the ways in which a body, once it moves beyond expectations or confines of docility into deviance, effectively "queers" a space that is intended to reify and continue the heteronormative timeline. Drawing upon Foucault's theories of docile bodies as described in *Discipline and Punish* and theories of chrononormativity as explained by Elizabeth Freeman, Judith Halberstam, and others, this paper examines how the Wright-Dobie School functions as a failed agent of hetero-patriarchal imperialism, arguing that

the breakdown of discipline, the fracturing of chrononormativity, and Martha Dobie's offstage suicide ultimately work to queer the space of the boarding school altogether.

Cet article explore les éléments spatiaux et temporels dans *Les Innocentes* de Lillian Hellman en examinant les connexions entre corps et espaces, et les manières dont un corps, ayant atteint la déviance par-delà les attentes ou les limites de la docilité, « altère » efficacement un espace censé réifier et prolonger la chronologie hétéronormative. En s'appuyant sur les théories des corps dociles de Foucault telles que décrites dans *Surveiller et punir* et sur les théories de la chrononormativité telles qu'expliquées par Elizabeth Freeman, Judith Halberstam, et d'autres, cet article étudie comment l'école Wright-Dobie joue le rôle d'un agent défaillant de l'impérialisme hétéro-patriarcal, en soutenant que l'échec de la discipline, la décomposition de la chrononormativité, et le suicide hors scène de Martha Dobie servent finalement à altérer l'espace de l'internat dans son entier.

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Mots-clés: internats, théorie queer, discipline, corps dociles, chrononormativité

Keywords: The Children's Hour, boarding schools, queer theory, discipline, docile bodies, chrononormativity

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