

Breeding (and) reading: Lesbian knowledge,
eugenic discipline, and The Children's Hour.

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Breeding (and) Reading: Lesbian Knowledge, Eugenic Discipline, and The Children's Hour

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Lesbian Knowledge, Eugenic Discipline, and *The Children's Hour*

What lesbians see is what makes them lesbians [...].

—Marilyn Frye, "To Be and Be Seen"

Self-identity is a bad visual system.

—Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges"

In *Homosexual Desire*—a work of queer theory before queer theory was known as such—Guy Hocquenghem writes of the anxieties elicited by homosexuality: "Homosexual desire is the ungenerating-ungenerated terror of the family, because it produces itself without reproducing. Every homosexual must thus see himself as the end of the species, the termination of a process for which he is not responsible and which must stop at himself. [...] The homosexual can only be a degenerate, for he does not generate" (107). Three paragraphs later, he suggests that "[h]omosexual production takes place according to a mode of non-limitative horizontal relations, heterosexual reproduction according to one of hierarchical succession" (109). Within the space of these passages, **[End Page 1001]** Hocquenghem points to a strange contradiction at the heart of homophobia: homosexuality is at once completely barren *and* intensely fecund; it signals the dying out of the race *and* a generation of unforeseen hybridities. If we allow them a wide historical application,¹ Hocquenghem's remarks seem to contradict Robert Young's suggestion in *Colonial Desire* that, for eugenicists and race theorists of the nineteenth century, "same-sex sex [...] posed no threat because it produced no children; its advantage was that it remained silent, covert and unmarked" (25-26). Contrary to what Young calls hybridity's "implicit politics of heterosexuality" (25)—which, for him, is an additional reason to resist the deployment of the concept in more contemporary, subversive forms of politics—Hocquenghem implies that biologically nonprocreative, same-sex couplings may register in a significant way in discussions of race and lineage, purity and hybridity. He suggests that homosexuality does not only represent the eugenic fear/hope of extinction, but also the eugenic nightmare of uncontrolled breeding, asexual parturition, contagion, and infection. He writes that "the transmission of homosexuality has something faintly mysterious about it, like the production of desire" (109) and quotes a member of the Parisian police force who, in Gustave Macé's late-nineteenth-century study, refers to homosexuals as "people who, though not procreating, have a marked tendency to multiply" (qtd. in Hocquenghem 109). For Hocquenghem's homophobes, queers breed uncontrollably, like people of "lower races" for eugenicists. Moreover, in homosexuality, the avenues of generation are always, to borrow Young's words, "silent, covert and unmarked": the routes of proliferation are unpredictable, concealed, ghostly, telepathic.

Having given the above warning about the politics of hybridity, Young himself goes on to point out that, in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century discussions of racial mixture, miscegenation was thought to produce not only racial half-breeds but also sexual aberrations (5, 26, 136). Here the eugenic wish to end the line of hybridity with the non-procreative perverts that it produces carries within itself the fear of the uncontainably proliferating otherness that is the result of hybridity. One of the exemplary twentieth-century texts that maps out the interimplication of racial and sexual categories and suggests the uncontainability of both by movements of social hygiene is Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour*. Predictably, Hellman's play has become a staple in **[End Page 1002]** discussions of twentieth-century lesbian and gay texts; what has been neglected is its colonial and racial subtext, which, I suggest, is inseparable from the questions of sexuality it engages. As I attempt to show below, these two discourses of knowledge are produced interdependently, not only in the play but also in cultural discourses such as eugenics and sexology.

To argue this, I trace the circulation of lesbian knowledge in the early-nineteenth-century Scottish court case on which Hellman based her drama—via William Roughead's *Bad Companions*²—and the convolutions of this knowledge in *The Children's Hour* and its 1962 film adaptation, directed by William Wyler...

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Murdering the Lesbian: Lillian Hellman's The Children's Hour, it is interesting to note that the tightening Gothic brakes the bearing of the movable object.

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