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To cite this article: Jonathan Tran (2009) The Otherness of Children as a Hint of an Outside: Michel Foucault, Richard Yates and Karl Barth on Suburban Life, *Theology & Sexuality*, 15:2, 189-209, DOI: [10.1558/tse.v15i2.189](https://doi.org/10.1558/tse.v15i2.189)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1558/tse.v15i2.189>



Published online: 21 Apr 2015.



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**The Otherness of Children as a Hint of an Outside:
Michel Foucault, Richard Yates and Karl Barth on Suburban Life**

Jonathan Tran

ABSTRACT

The essay shows how the ordinary life of children might save suburbia from itself. Disenchanted with contemporary existence, temptations of ideality tend to both vilify and verify suburban life as banal, yet to the extent that suburban life means life with children, profound possibilities subsist in that strange world. The argument unfolds in three parts. Beginning with Michel Foucault, the author shows how power courses through every form of life, colonizing depth such that desire reveals power's most fundamental expression. Secondly, Richard Yates's *Revolutionary Road* exemplifies power's machinations as Yates compassionately portrays the tragedy of belittling ordinary life. Finally, the author turns to Karl Barth in order to resituate Foucault's account of immanence within a larger horizon where children might be embraced as the aleatory play of difference of God's peace and patience.

Keywords: Barth, children, Foucault, Richard Yates, suburbia.

Introduction

In the near future, no one will have children. And whether people no longer have children because they do not *want* to due to the meaninglessness of their lives, or because they *cannot* because of the consequences of that meaninglessness, remains unclear. At least that is the apocalyptic future according to Alfonso Cuarón's intriguing film *Children of Men*, based on the P. D. James novel.¹ *Children of Men* pits two countervail-

1. P. D. James, *The Children of Men* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1993). In the film, *Children of Men* (Universal Pictures, 2006), people are *unable* to conceive yet the story does not tell us whether the infertility epidemic is figurative of an unwillingness to pass on the meaninglessness that besets late capitalist culture or literally expresses the consequences of that meaninglessness. The novel's narrator states, "We are outraged and demoralized less by the impending end of our species, less even by our inability to prevent it, than by our failure to discover the cause. Western science and Western medicine haven't prepared us for the magnitude and humiliation of this ultimate failure" (James, *The Children of Men*, p. 5). According to the novel, the

ing forces, faith and chance, in a global death grip, and in the soon-to-be world, chance wins out by way of an immanent cultural logic where the world's decadence runs its final course and humanity finds itself left to its own devices while staving off the inevitable. The not-too-distant future depicted in the movie, one short generation from now, signals the sad reality that we are already about the processes that will produce this nightmarish future and there remains little we can do about it, and so "chance" names more precisely damnation, or something like, we had our chance and we blew it. The way we run the planet, a strange combination of fear and pleasure, results in the world as is: environmental catastrophe, humiliating disparities between rich and poor, media saturation and manipulation, the unfolding terrors of an unfettered global capitalism, and abdication to governments who use violence to control the dying masses.

Into this world, a child is born. For at least a fragile moment, hope comes into the trapped dystopia as the child presages the miraculous possibility that the world may not finally be left on its own, that immanence and its violent play of forces may not be all there is. And so the film leaves us with the haunting presence of children as a hint of an outside, and begs us to consider how we hold that which is given, those created particularities that remind us some things cannot be made, but only bestowed by contingency, the synthesis of faith and chance: the earth, children, and one another. In this way, perhaps meaninglessness and its consequences are most powerfully articulated not in the mad conditions of the world's rotting urban centers or the wild rural beyond, both portrayed exquisitely by Cuarón, but in the corridors between: suburbia, commented upon in the film's documentary "The Possibility of Hope."² Suburbia happens to be that technological production where

future's greatest failure will not be the various historical eventualities but humanity's inability to anticipate, control, and understand them. In this way, infertility proves symbolic of the limits of humanity's ability to manipulate contingency and control its own destiny. At another level, infertility seems to point to a type of curse visited upon the world due to the hubris and hedonism of the West. As the world begins to recognize the epidemic, "Most of the concern was less about a falling population than about the wish of nations to maintain their own people, their own culture, their own race, to breed sufficient young to maintain their economic structures" (James, *The Children of Men*, p. 8). Also, see Ralph Wood's "Rapidly Rises the Morning Tide: P. D. James' *The Children of Men*," *Theology Today* 51.2 (July 1994), pp. 277–88. Wood writes, "Among the mysteries James explores in this novel, perhaps the deepest is the mystery of conversion: How can we be transformed from self-regarding into self-surrendering people? How, more strangely still, can we find the faith to resist overwhelming evil, especially in a world without a future" (p. 286).

2. "The Possibility of Hope" conceived, written, and produced by Alfonso Cuarón. This insightful documentary includes Naomi Klein, Tzvetan Todorov,

those most often aware of the world's troubles go to hide from them, building barricades of existence that might perpetually hold at bay the realities of the world, all the while living lives that directly contribute to its decay. Here we encounter a people determined to live lives of self-deception, settled arrangements with pleasure and fear. And here is where we raise our children.

The important thing is to find ways to articulate our love for children without wearing out the tired clichés that have made suburbia culturally apropos. We live in a time when it has become, especially for academics, cliché to make fun of suburbia's clichéd existence.³ Not

Saskia Sassen, Slavoj Žižek, and others speaking on the frightening context of an insatiable globalization. See Todorov's comments on children, whose utter dependence, according to Todorov, distinguishes humanity as a species and charges each generation with a moral responsibility.

3. The suspicion with which academics cast weary eyes on suburban life tends to ignore the real complexities that ensue there. One need simply consider the alarming suburban divorce rate as couples attempt to negotiate family, career, religion and community, the increasingly complex social realities in which most need to raise children, or the inability for citizens to enter into productive and joyful civic life; surely, some of this can be laid at the feet of suburban culture—certainly the architectonics of the single-family home or the rugged individualism of modern parenting do not invite alternatives—yet one would also want to acknowledge that suburbia itself falls victim to forces larger than itself, forces like market consumerism or an ever-widening secularity and all that these mean for moral communities. These, after all, are much bigger than suburbia and though suburbia may inculcate individuals in the rituals of consumerism or secularism, blaming suburbia does little to come to terms with the world in which we find ourselves. Regardless where one lives in America, race, class, gender, sexuality, religion, etc. play roles in raising the specter of “the world's” influence on children and however one's habitat conceals or does not conceal these issues, they are certainly real for kids whether we like it or not. For example, when most people say a local elementary school is “one of the best,” what they generally mean is that it tends to be populated by upper-middle-class, white, “normal” children of open-minded, educated, well-to-do parents. Now whoever thinks that these communities are actually any “safer” for the moral formation of children has fallen prey to the lies of suburban allure. Complicated dynamics comprise suburbia, which is anything but boring, no matter how much suburbanites attempt to dress it up as such. The façade of placidity is usually just that. Listening to academics, one gets the sense that suburbia alone endures certain realities: rumors, deception, betrayal, confusion, banality, depression, boredom, and so on. Yet we can be sure that suburbanites are not the only ones lying, committing adultery, getting depressed or bored just because we know suburbia is not the only place where terrible things threaten the surfacial order of things. Things are hard there, like they are everywhere else. They may be hard in uniquely suburban ways of being hard, but nevertheless, suburbanites like all others face the very real challenges of contemporary existence. To the extent that academics have long looked upon suburbia with cynical eyes, it has often done little to either help the situation or at least diagnose the pathos that grips so many lives there. And to the extent that most Americans live in suburbia, the cynicism with which academics speak of that life does little work other than articulate the arrogance of classicism. No doubt suburbia often does

only do we hold certain suspicions of that life, we have come, or at least should have by now, to grow suspicious of the suspicions, and the old complaints of suburbia's banal homogeneity, forced uniformity, and masked tranquility have raised suspicion about the mythical beyond from whence said critique emanates. Once upon a time, having grown disenchanted with Kant's critiques, Hegel admonished a "suspicion of the suspicion" as he answered Kant's transcendental valuation bifurcating existence between the Real and its various unsatisfying semblances. (No wonder that, in his turn, Nietzsche referred to the lineage from Plato to Kant as "the longest lie.") Hegel attempted to ameliorate this divide by historicizing *Geist* but in a way that sublated the eternal and temporal; whereas at least Kant's critique delimited certain presumptions, Hegel could not help but ground them in certain, and sometimes monstrous, manifestations. Hegel's misgivings about Kant, if not his attempted solutions, remind us that the presumption of suburbia being some kind of thinned-out version of a better life both occludes the possibility for authentic existence there but more critically tends to presume too much about those other places, presumably urban or rural settings. This is neither to ignore the possibilities of urban or rural life, both of which have their own blessings and temptations, nor to prioritize intention over act. Actually, it is to go in the other direction and to make clear that every place is saturated with forces that seek to colonize desire; every locale, whether two-dimensional suburbia, the most cosmopolitan urban environs, or the "close-to-the-ground" life of rural America, takes place among the powers. Indeed, to imagine some other *place*, a place not as fully replete with the powers, is to presuppose an "outside" that cannot help but proliferate haughty dreams of cosmopolitan existence, a myth that only replicates Kant's traveling universality which alone braves the majesty of the sublime.

What gets lost in all this posturing is children. Vulnerable as they are, we tend to hold children as adornments of an idealized life. Instead, we might see children hinting at the possibility of a genuine outside, sheer gratuity that makes children not *for* anything. The disdain cosmopolitans feel toward provinciality cannot help but resent or idealize the dogged realness of children, their arbitrary "thereness." Yet, at its best, life with children has the possibility of opening up fissures at the very core of our

ensue in the most prosaic embodiments of modern life, especially to the extent that it exemplifies and inculcates individuals into nefarious forms of consumerism, racism, classicism, patriotism, and so on. However, if we academics remain just cynical, all the while ourselves living in suburbs, then we abdicate any possibility of fruitful critique, analysis that actually might help people better imagine the world, which after all is the point of suspicion.

worlds, availing resources of charity and patience as it abates our need for order. In an unending interplay between familiarity and strangeness, children call us to intimacy only to reveal critical differences, and then reveal critical differences only to remind us they are ours; in this way, children delimit the possibility of closure and mastery by stubbornly remaining other while availing the intimacy we desperately long for. Attempts to make children fund some vaunted dream, not unlike Hegel's phenomenological project, will end in a world without children. This is not to ignore that many, many parents succeed in "making" children into what they want. Rather, living in such a way, though "successful," forecloses the aleatory nature of kids. Suburbia has specialized in exactly this type of production, itself having become a carefully coordinated performance, making safe not children, but a certain reproduction of adult selves. When not careful, we take the very same pretense that occurs superficially in suburbia and deposit it at the level of depth. Rather than dreaming of an "outside," a place where power does not seek to "normalize" desire—whether this outside be the suburbs as a shelter from the city or the city as a shelter from the suburbs or the countryside as a "real alternative" to both, and so on—we are better off seeking modes of resistance resplendent in every form of life, a sacramentalization of the ordinary, some might say.

How do we love our children without domesticating them to our agendas? How do we inculcate them into the habits and discourses necessary for happiness without at the same time fashioning them as projects? How do we receive the fragile otherness that children bring without sapping those energies by our propensity for greed and control? How do we see children as God's without idolizing them as little gods?⁴ In some sense, we might understand our strange life with children as similar to Peter Berger's rendition of Robert Musil: "ordinary reality is 'abolished' and something terrifyingly *other* shines through."⁵ How might this otherness which so often terrifies not simply terrify, how might we learn to embrace, through embracing children, this oth-

4. For Martin E. Marty the category of "mystery" alleviates tensions between formation and control by analogically gesturing to God: "treating the theme of mystery effectively can lessen the temptation of adults to seek and sustain dominance and control over the child... At the heart of the mystery of the child, when it is interpreted religiously, are two claims: first, that the child is a child of God; and second, that the child is made in the image of God. Being 'of God' or being 'imaged' as God is far from being seen as Godlike." Martin E. Marty, *The Mystery of the Child* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), pp. 60, 61.

5. Peter Berger, *A Far Glory: The Quest for Faith in an Age of Credulity* (New York: The Free Press, 1992), pp. 128–29. Berger continues, "All such experiences explode, if only for an instant, the security we experience in living normally," p. 129.

erness as it breaks through our “ordinary reality.” Many eschew suburban life—universally understood as life *with* children—as boring. Doing so fails to realize the drama and wonder that countenances suburbia through children, such that children do not simply “abolish” ordinary life but rather render it more than boring. Children do not make life more or less exciting, either of which view cannot help but curse children to our expectations; rather children, an unending interplay of familiarity and strangeness, have the possibility, not always realized, to ruin our sustained, self-imposed attempts to make life boring. How do we get to *those* possibilities?

Attempting to reflect on these questions, this essay unfolds in three parts. I begin with Michel Foucault and his analysis of power’s ubiquity, which offers both a theoretical explication of the dangers of suburbia, its capillary normalizations, as well as resources for resisting those processes. Second, I exemplify not only the flatness of suburbia but its mythologizing of an outside that seeks escape from suburbia’s mediocrity, by turning to Richard Yates’s twentieth-century classic *Revolutionary Road* and its depiction of the tragedy of pretense, of attempting to *make* children fit our dreams. Finally, I turn to the theologian Karl Barth and his view of children *post Christum natum*, and what God’s patience might mean for having children. Throughout I argue that rather than coddling sentimental abstractions as modes of escaping our given worlds, we might find in the ordinary, most directly in children, possibilities for resisting suburbia’s normalizing powers, those eventualities we often consider most dull which have the power to overturn our accommodations.

Michel Foucault on Power’s Ubiquity

Michel Foucault offers a perspicacious lens through which we can examine suburban life, by first describing power’s ubiquity and then showing how power “finds an anchor” in the family. According to Foucault, when dissatisfied with ordinary life we long for abstractions, dreams of escape to worlds not held captive by the complexities of life situated with others, telling ourselves little stories in order to cope with existence amidst the incessant presence of power within all relations and their production of what he calls bio-power. Foucault writes, “power is tolerable only on condition that it mask a substantial part of itself. Its success is proportional to its ability to hide its own mechanisms.”⁶

6. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction* (trans. Robert Hurley; New York: Vintage, 1990), p. 86. References to *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1* will hereafter be noted as *HS* in the text.

Foucault here claims more than the clandestine nature of power's operations, though that is critical. According to Foucault, power's significance lies in its totality, its capillary form that inundates all of life, making existence and its various emanations possible.⁷ However, power's ineluctability also hides a more sinister quality and its stealthy presentation—you can't see it because you see it everywhere—blinds you to its more potent manipulations. Power reveals itself just enough to further exert its putative mechanisms. By allowing the possibility of its unmasking, by allowing the subject the *pleasure* of knowing and through knowing finally fulfilling subjectivity, power further controls. Knowing satiates the will-to-truth as we voyeuristically gratify ourselves as "children of protracted solitude," finally in the know. This masturbatory affair with untold secrets sexualizes the unspoken, the oppressed, and the hidden, heralding the goodness of subversion: the truth shall set you free! However, at this point, power most fully masters immanence, for in the very promise of revolution/transcendence has power finally achieved total control: now it colonizes dreams—the in-breaking of God, the intimation of an outside, "the coming freedom," the hope of the Eschaton—in order to simultaneously energize and pacify its inhabitants (*HS*, 6). The voyeuristic gratification of knowledge gives hope for life after power but only within the given vestiges granted by power itself. And it is the ruse of freedom—"to speak out against the powers that be, to utter truths and promise bliss, to link together enlightenment, liberation, and manifold pleasures" (*HS*, 7)—that makes power "tolerable," the condition *sine qua non* that renders life amongst the powers at least palatable, while disguising power's true genius, that it has confessed only enough to further control "down to their slenderest ramifications" (*HS*, 19). By itself creating the myth of escape, the possibility of an after-power, power disguises its own workings; by the myth of freedom, the truth of power remains hidden in its "loquacious tactics" (*HS*, 97). Or, more precisely, within the myth of freedom, power conceals its most intolerable reality, that there is no outside, no escaping power.

In the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault demystifies the standard modern view of sexuality, "the repression hypothesis." In his other major works, Foucault had challenged modern myths like rational-

7. By emanations, I mean those specific discourses which inculcate and perpetrate certain forms of life. In his essay, "Foucault Revolutionizes History," Paul Veyne shows how Foucault means by discourse more than "what is said" and reads Foucault like the later Wittgenstein, rejecting "dualist muddles" in favor of the interrelation of language and practice. Paul Veyne, "Foucault Revolutionizes History," in Arnold I. Davidson (ed.), *Foucault and his Interlocutors* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), pp. 146–82.

ity, scientific objectivity, prison reform and other discourses that propagate, for the sovereign self, “a well-accepted argument” (*HS*, 9). Here, he reveals how commendations of sexual freedom arise by first setting repression in the past, an unmasking that exposes all such metanarratives as “a thing of this world” rather than “the reward of free spirits, the child of protracted solitude.”⁸ Rather than suffer these machinations, Foucault admonishes we “locate the forms of power, the channels it takes, and the discourses it permeates in order to reach the most tenuous and individual modes of behavior, the paths that give it access to the rare and scarcely perceivable forms of desire, how it penetrates and controls everyday pleasure...in short, the ‘polymorphous techniques of power’ ” (*PK*, 11). Through an analytics of power one exposes the myth of sexual repression as an anodyne that allows us to esteem our liberation from oppression; seeing behind the myth, or under it, reveals that though sexual repression is real, *we* repress ourselves. Mapping power illumines the self-policing features of “normalization” and a more frightening discovery: “you are always already trapped” (*PK*, 83). The allure of the repression hypothesis was its ability to disguise these intolerable verities, in their stead propping up myths of freedom and revolution—“*Aufklärung!*”—that cloaked the truth that through *self*-deception, we find ourselves most captive to the powers “always already present, constituting the very thing which one attempts to counter it with” (*PK*, 82). The repression hypothesis assumed power so diaphanous and flimsy that one could, if one so chose, see through and shake off power as easily as leaving behind self-incurred tutelage.

Instead, power courses everywhere as it “produces effects at the level of desire” (*PK*, 59). Here Foucault speaks of “power at its extremities, in its ultimate destinations” (*PK*, 96), directing our “our bodies, our day-to-day existence” (*PK*, 187). Power deploys itself in these “material instances” and determines every moment of life in an incessant drive toward “normalization,” the status quo which in turn “create[s] a systemic blindness” to power’s most potent forms, perpetuating myths of enlightenment (*HS*, 56). Power represses but does more and ensues as “a network or circuit of bio-power or somato-power, which acts as the formative matrix of sexuality itself as the historical and cultural phenomenon within which we seem at once to recognize and lose ourselves” (*PK*, 186). The panoptic nature of power disqualifies from the start the presumption of a purity to which one might return.⁹ Power is no *thing*,

8. Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews & Other Writings 1972–1977* (ed. Colin Gordon; New York: Pantheon, 1980), pp. 73, 131. References to *Power/Knowledge* will hereafter be noted as *PK* in the text.

9. Describing “panopticism,” Foucault writes, “It is polyvalent in its applica-

nor is it *someone*; it exists only as its deployments in, through, and within every relationship through which selves get constituted.¹⁰ Power is “everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere” (*HS*, 93). Exactly because power is not someone or something acting upon us but exists within the interstices between and within persons, places, and things, there is no escaping power, no overthrowing or dismissing it. Rather than someone “out there” controlling power, power acts within us, on us, *as* us, in minute form, everywhere present, “the dissemination of micro-powers, a dispersed network of apparatuses without a single organizing system, centre or focus, a transverse coordination of disparate institutions and technologies” (*PK*, 71).

According to Foucault’s genealogy, modernity might be understood as a sentiment in which everyday life—embodied in suburbia—matters, where everything is at stake. The coronation of the ordinary, however, became “a place of maximum saturation” (*HS*, 47). Ordinary life became an “unrelenting system of confession” as everything now demanded disclosure and uniformity (*HS*, 61). Every facet of life now became everyone’s concerns and the “putative mechanisms of power” (*HS*, 85) justified war “waged on behalf of the existence of everyone” (*HS*, 137). Power and life became synonymous in their “mobile relations.” Just as there is no exteriority, nowhere beyond power, so there is no genuine interiority as selfhood is rendered a two-dimensional field for the smooth deployment of power, which comes to full flower only after colonizing our most intimate relations, those essential structures that bridge the ordinary to the universal: the family unit.¹¹

tions; it serves to reform prisoners, but also to treat patients, to instruct schoolchildren, to confine the insane, to supervise workers, to put beggars and idlers to work. It is a type of location of bodies in space, of distribution of individuals in relation to one another, of hierarchical organization, of disposition of centres and channels of power, of definition of the instruments and modes of intervention of power, which can be implemented in hospitals, workshops, schools, prisons.” Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (trans. Alan Sheridan; New York: Vintage, 1995), p. 205.

10. See Thomas Flynn’s “Foucault’s Mapping of History,” in Gary Gutting (ed.), *Cambridge Companion to Foucault* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 28–46.

11. Consider Foucault’s “The Thought of the Outside” in which Foucault argues interiority/exteriority dichotomies emanate from ontological prioritizations of the subject. Foucault here speaks about a subject-less textuality that brings forth a type of “infinite outside” by way of desire: “reflexive patience, always directed outside itself, and a fiction that cancels itself out in the void where it undoes its forms intersect to form a discourse appearing with no conclusion and no image, with no truth and no theatre, with no proof, no mask, no affirmation, free of any center, unfettered to any native soil; a discourse that constitutes its own space as the outside toward which, and outside of which, it speaks. This discourse, as speech of the outside whose words

The family cell, in the form in which it came to be valued in the course of the eighteenth century, made it possible for the main elements of the development of sexuality (the feminine body, infantile precocity, the regulation of births, and to a lesser extent no doubt, the specification of the perverted) to develop its two primary dimensions: the husband-wife axis and the parents-children axis (HS, 108).

Power comes home as family “provide[s] it with permanent support,” developed webs of relations to exercise its surveillance and control in order to “anchor sexuality” (HS, 108). Family as “an obligatory locus of affects, feelings, love” has become power’s staging area from whence it dispenses throughout the entire social matrix. Amidst these relations, and their coordinated patterns in suburbia, pleasure circulates with power, always its alter-ego, a cycle of knowledge and pleasure, depth and confession, hiddenness and disclosure, a quiet war between individuals and the gaze—“Guess what I heard, but promise you won’t tell anyone”—erupts just below the surface of quaintness.¹² Rather than interiority being the placeholder for selves, all gets pulled to the surface in “games of truth” and individuals *want* to lay bare their cherished secrets just as they *desire* their neighbors’ confessions.¹³

Foucault advances Nietzsche’s agonistic ontology toward a positive politics of immanence, “the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitutes their own organization” (HS, 92). On the one hand, Foucault occludes disavowal, that somehow we might gainsay the “perpetual relationship of force,” that resistance to *power* actually means resistance *to* power. On the other hand, power’s ubiquity means *anyone* can colonize power; in the same way that the State or capital usurp power “always already there” so others can redirect the flows of power. For Foucault, resistance does not speak of fleeing power; since there is no outside, the only resistance to be had takes place by inhabiting it: “resistance to power does not have to come from elsewhere to be real... It exists all the more by being in the same place as power” (HS, 142). Only by first ensconcing ourselves within power’s expansive grid, by becoming comfortable

welcome the outside it addresses, has the openness of a commentary: the repetition of what continually murmurs outside. But this discourse, as a speech that is always outside what it says, is an incessant advance toward that whose absolutely fine-spun light has never received language.” Michel Foucault, “The Thought of the Outside,” in James D. Faubion (ed.), *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology: Essential Works of Foucault 1954–84* (New York: The New Press, 1998), pp. 153–54.

12. For an account of the self’s constitution through the modern dialectic of depth and confession, see Romand Coles, *Self/Power/Other: Political Theory and Dialogical Ethics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), pp. 55–64.

13. Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure: The History of Sexuality, Volume 2* (trans. Robert Hurley; New York: Vintage, 1990), p. 6.

with its ubiquity, only by learning to stop worrying and love power, can we then mine power for our own uses. Abstractions like *Aufklärung* or “the repression hypothesis” pretend “a binary structure with ‘dominators’ on one side and ‘dominated’ on the other” rather than recovering modes of resistance within power’s many varied capillary expressions and material instances (*HS*, 142).

Richard Yates’s Suburbia

Foucault writes, “What’s effectively needed is a ramified, penetrative perception of the present, one that makes it possible to locate lines of weakness, strong points, positions where the instances of power have secured and implanted themselves by a system of organization... In other words, a topographical and geological survey of the battlefield” (*HS*, 62). Surveying suburbia means first recognizing it as a battlefield, replete with possibilities of assertions and counter-assertions of power. Situated (supposedly) between America’s urban ghettos and its rural badlands, suburbia promises escape from the battlefields. Yet power lives here too and perhaps more violently, established at the level of desire. Pleasant images of American suburban life with its preoccupations with homogeneity and order, its staging of control through manicured lawns and conscripted behavior, and its subtle forms of manipulation masks the silent dangers hidden in “the best neighborhoods.” Quietly here an absolute war unfolds as homogeneity orders behavior and spatial and temporal modes of socialization mobilize bodies under the battle cry of quaintness, “the great operations of discipline...transform[ing] the confused, useless or dangerous multitudes into ordered multiplicities,” as Foucault puts it in *Discipline and Punish*.¹⁴ A “topological and geological survey of the battlefield” reveals normalization materializing at the level of desire, and the very notion of repression—those making us do it—becomes a favored myth-making suburban life palatable. After all, the same preoccupations with homogeneity and order that conscript life in this world presuppose depth as the most sacred and invulnerable zone of personhood. People who live in the suburbs often fancy themselves better than suburbia, having themselves transcendently adjudicated the emptiness of suburbia’s false promises. These folks see what is going on and the very recognition of its deceptions satiates pleasures of knowing, as they alone “get it” and understand all that is promised can never be delivered there, that such desire needs be met elsewhere. But it is exactly here, at the level of desire and dream, that we find our-

14. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 148.

selves most captured by the capillary powers of suburban existence. As Foucault says: “power is tolerable only on condition that it mask a substantial part of itself. Its success is proportional to its ability to hide its own mechanisms” (HS, 86). The very illusion of recognition, the placing of one’s hopes in the pretensions of an “outside” —another world that actually can meet our deepest desires deeply—demonstrates not genuine rebellion but the totality of this world. This belief in externality, and internality as the animating drive toward externality, marks the site at which power most potently grounds itself, for over against the repression hypothesis, power is most power-like when it asserts not from some unnamed intentionality —“they won’t let us do it” —but rather at the level where desire is affirmed as depth. In order to see this, we turn to Richard Yates’s novel *Revolutionary Road* and the tragic consequences of an abstract life.

Revolutionary Road allows no pretension to go unchecked.¹⁵ In the story of Frank and April Wheeler, Yates relentlessly sniffs out every notion that we are better than we live and that some type of externality/internality justifies our accommodations with the world. On the surface, Frank and April Wheeler look the part of suburban America. However, unlike other suburbanites the Wheelers get it —“its bad enough having to *live* among all these damn little suburban types” —and suburbia is simply a way station on the way to a better place, so much materiality to be discarded (24). Unlike others who live humdrum lives, the Wheelers refuse to submit to the powers here: “What the hell kind of life was this? What in God’s name was the point or the meaning or the purpose of a life like this?” (57). And so they conspire “breaking out” to Europe (130), “the only part of the world worth living in” (22). The Wheelers long for life beyond the parochial niceness of suburbia, planning instead for the day when they will leave particularity behind *en route* to the cosmopolitanism of Europe, finally joining those sophisticates with whom they truly belong. And even though they may *look* like the others —upstanding career, requisite education, polite manners, two kids, the daily commute to work —they distinguish themselves by seeking otherwise: “Economic circumstances might force you to live in this environment, but the important thing is to keep from being contaminated” (20). Unlike others who have acquiesced to “the dreariest suburban time filler” they do not want this life, fashioning themselves strangers in a strange land, pilgrims on their way to the eternal city (64). Their struggle finds company in Shep and Millie Campbell who

15. Richard Yates, *Revolutionary Road* (New York: Vintage, 2000). References to *Revolutionary Road* will hereafter be noted in the text.

listen “like pupils” as they wax eloquently about “Conformity, or The Suburbs, or Madison Avenue, or American Society Today,” about lawnmowers, “the rat race,” barbeque pits and “the extreme suburban smugness” (68, 60).

And Frank would develop the theme. “The point is it wouldn’t be so bad if it weren’t so typical. It isn’t only the Donaldsons—it’s the Cramers too, and the whaddyacallits, the Wingates, and a million others. It’s all the idiots I ride with on the train every day. It’s a disease. Nobody thinks or feels or cares any more; nobody gets excited or believes in anything except their own comfortable little God damn mediocrity.”

Milly Campell would writhe in pleasure. “Oh, that’s so true. Isn’t that true darling?”

They would all agree, and the happy implication was that they alone, the four of them, were painfully alive in a drugged and dying culture (60).

Like Foucault’s “repression hypothesis,” the myth of “Europe” implies freedom from the powers. They “in a John-Paul-Sartre sort of way” alone have awakened from the “mediocrity” of the “dying culture” (23); they alone see beyond the mowers and barbeques and “the rat race” and brave a “genuine” existence (97).¹⁶ Just as modernity assumes it has freed itself from “the repression hypothesis” the Wheelers believe they have escaped: “my God, when you think how close *we* came to settling into that kind of existence” (129).

Yet in the same way that Foucault deconstructs the “repression hypothesis,” Yates reveals how bourgeoisie rejection of suburban existence has itself become clichéd, itself scripted as April and Frank take on caricatures of themselves as “decent but disillusioned young family [people], sadly and bravely at war with [their] environment.” The Wheelers manage their middle-class angst by copping “a quality of play-acting, of slightly false intensity, a way of seeming to speak... to some romantic abstraction” (103). The Wheeler’s pretensions move from one abstraction to the next, scripted performances “for the sake of appearances” that require constant maintenance: how a man should hold a cigarette—“When he lit a cigarette in the dark he was careful to arrange his features in a virile form before striking and cupping the flame (he knew, from having practiced this in a the mirror of a blacked-out bathroom years ago, that it made a swift, intensely dramatic portrait)” (219)—the perfect office affair—“Did a lion apologize? Hell, no” (103)—a man’s relationship to his wife—“He had taken command of the universe because he was a man, and because the mar-

16. Frank’s pretensions of living Sartre’s existential life in Paris, as superficial a reading as it is, reminds us that Foucault spent a lifetime attempting to overcome Sartre’s philosophy.

velous creature who opened and moved for him, tender and strong, was a woman" (115). Even the psychotherapist brought in to deal with "the weight and shock of reality" gets into character, speaking with the requisite Venetian accent (226). April in her turn hatches an escape plan: "She had it all figured out; she had read an article in a magazine" (108). The Europe of their dreams floats noumenally above everyday life, an idealization borne from "reading of *The Sun Also Rises* in high school" (131). Their *actual* experiences with Europe include an inability to learn French, even from a book, and Frank's European friend telling him, "the whole European scheme did sound a bit—a tiny bit unrealistic, sort of" (237).

One knows this story will end badly, and Yates carefully plots his novel to foreshadow the coming disaster. As the Wheelers attempt to assuage the boredom of their lives, their marriage undulates between ideality and reality, hope and despair, fantasy and real life. Hidden behind their cosmopolitan self-presentation creeps self-hatred in the extreme as both refuse to come to terms with who they are by indulging abstractions of who they are supposed to be, a dangerous deception precariously maintained. The novel ends tragically with April's abortion and suicide following the realization that Frank is simply "a wonderful talker" (290) and their marriage "working at life the way [second-rate actors] worked at [a script]...earnest and sloppy and full of pretension and all wrong" (304).

Children pay the greatest price in Yates's novel. The same pretense that seeks to escape suburbia's doldrums renders children encumbrances to be avoided: "He felt as if he were sinking helplessly into the cushions and the papers and the bodies of his children like a man in quick sand" (56). Children ruin the Wheeler's every plan, ending a "first-rate affair" between two first-rate people, forcing marriage and work, reducing their lives to the daily grind of caring for others, finally ending their hopes of escape when April unexpectedly gets pregnant. No wonder both come to loathe their kids: "Get *outa* here now! Get *outa* here!... I kept telling you and telling you...I *told* you there'd be trouble if you got too close. Didn't I? Didn't I? All right now, take off. Both of you" (52–53). Europe, a world seemingly devoid of children, represents anti-suburbia: "Yes, darling, but don't talk *quite* so much, okay? Give Mommy a break" (127).

Still, children play an odd role in Yates's novel, embodying genuine otherness that refuses to abdicate to well-laid plans. They represent the only real alterity in Yates's novel. Rather than remaining abstract, they leave crayon marks on walls and arrive unexpected and even unwanted. Yates gives voice to the otherness of children through his

strange character John Givings, one “given” into the world, a grownup child of a suburban upbringing. Yates introduces John Givings as the story’s only true gift, its dark hope, one who authentically refuses the world’s terms and, unlike Frank’s feigned rebellion, pays the consequences for that refusal: he is deemed insane, institutionalized, and “treated” through electric shock. As a child/adult, John transgresses both worlds. Like a child, he depends on adults; however, as an adult, his rage exposes their lies; as such, he speaks truthfully and cuts through the world’s pretension. Life around John, as a child, is unexpected; he refuses control as his insanity reminds us. As an adult, he is rude, brash, arrogantly unaware of himself; his presence exudes suburbia’s greatest fear, “Being Tackless, Dear,” [sic.] and unlike his painfully polite mother, he *likes* to make people uncomfortable and refuses to hide from them the truth about themselves (187). Unlike Frank, he does not pontificate self-importance, understanding himself to be genuinely mad, and by refusing to pretend, he is truly “given” into the novel. Trapped between worlds, on the edge between children and adults, reality and fantasy, madness and sanity, John reveals freedom to be an illusion, power everywhere, and institutionalization the ineluctable condition of being. As John says to Frank, “it does take a certain amount of guts to see the emptiness, but it takes a whole lot more to see the hopelessness. And I guess when you do see the hopelessness, that’s when there’s nothing to do but take off. If you can” (189). Like Foucault, John reminds us that this world will inevitably brand us, that there is no escape from power, and there is no other world to which one might escape. Against abstraction and sentimentalities, John—give-in to the world—speaks truthfully; of the Wheeler’s unborn child, he says, “You know what I’m glad of? I’m glad I’m not going to be that kid” (288).

Karl Barth and the Otherness of Children

Thus far I have utilized Foucault and Yates as an exemplification, without irony, which may be surprising since Christianity, unlike Foucault, presupposes something of an outside, yet does so within the immanently relational context of God’s condescension in the incarnate Word. Generally, Christianity can appropriate Foucault in order to envisage existence as spatial order. Foucault’s critique centers most powerfully on notions of depth. On the one hand, he shows how knowledge in the modern period has been overly concerned with transparency, pulling everything to the surface and depleting interiority. However, on the other hand, Foucault does not in turn proffer an alternative interiority

in order to create space somehow invulnerable to “the gaze.”¹⁷ His goal is to show how space has become our primary way of inhabiting the world. What Foucault does not attend to, and this is where I go beyond him, is how this peculiar spatiality came to be. Catherine Pickstock argues that Foucault proffers an archaeology of power by first omitting from his genealogies that:

spatialization came about primarily through the late-mediaeval and early-modern loss of the primacy of the doxological and liturgical within every realm of culture. It is not simply that space came to obliterate time; it is rather that this became necessary because space now had to substitute for eternity. Thus, spatialization constitutes a bizarre kind of immanentist ritual or “anti-ritual,” without any ultimate justification except its subordination... As soon as subjects and objects are located within an undying space, they are also paradoxically robbed of life, and any genuine bodily content.¹⁸

Pickstock does not take Foucault to task for his portrayal of disciplinary societies; indeed, one can see here that Foucault offers a conceptual grid through which to understand how space unfolds in disciplinarity, or what Pickstock calls “immanentist ritual” where life gets “robbed of life.” However, Pickstock faults Foucault’s genealogy for not going far enough and therefore misconstruing western history’s account of being. Foucault operates as if immanence is the totality of all worlds, and though Foucault does not on the surface operate at the level of ontology, clearly he presumes a certain horizon. Foucault fails to see that spatiality in which there is no outside begins within a deterioration endemic in secularized practices of temporality. Foucault’s view of the world is what you get when you have already abdicated a bunch of other things; though rightly depicting the world *qua* world it proves inadequate to the extent that it does not tell us how we got there. The disappearance of eternality relinquishes time of depth, emanating in a flat spatial imaginary, where immanence really does become about subordination and its

17. Foucault deals most directly with the gaze in *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception* (trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith; New York: Vintage, 1994).

18. Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), p. xiv. Pickstock goes on to show how the liturgical imagination proffers, in contrast to an ontology that pits space versus time, a participatory description of time within God’s eternal life. In significant measure, Pickstock differs from the Barth discussed below, but on the detriments of secularity’s presumptions of time without eternity, they follow a similar course. For a non-theological articulation of Christianity’s unique gift of time, see political theorist Sheldon S. Wolin’s *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), pp. 111–15. Wolin argues that within the vast Roman bureaucracy, Christian life offered a new way of being together, constituted by community and temporal purpose.

ecological display in suburbia's barricaded "green zones."¹⁹ Following Nietzsche's transvaluation of all values, once God is dead, then humanity, as Foucault rightly pointed out, is also dead, and space becomes the brutal jostling for territory where subjectivity must be perpetuated, produced again and again, by assertion and counter-assertion. Christian theology rescues space from itself by figuring it as participating within the eternal, or more precisely by imagining the eternal breaking in through the presence of a child, and conceptualizes an outside, but one that, as Foucault and Yates caution us, does not become a rejoinder to dissatisfaction, a type of transcendental therapy by way of modernity's "repression hypothesis" or the Wheelers' Europe. After all, Nietzsche rejected Christianity for its nihilist fantasies, yet Christianity itself has made war with gnosticism and can answer abstractions with its own realism implicit in its Chalcedonian affirmations, articulated now through Karl Barth's description of children *post Christum natum*.

As Yates's novel and Foucault's philosophy were gaining in prominence, Karl Barth was completing a fantastically productive theological career. Having already overturned the world of liberal protestant theology with the second edition of his *Römerbrief* and established himself as one of the preeminent theologians in the world, Barth went about writing his magisterial *Church Dogmatics*. In the sections on Creation, Barth turns to the question of "Parents and Children."²⁰ Barth explicates the implications of his ethics of command regarding the various "spheres" of honoring parents, contraception, abortion, and so on. He takes up the question of childlessness and from this makes his most encompassing statement about children, since, according to Barth, discussing issues like contraception or abortion first necessitates coherent speech about children. The issue of childlessness is relevant for this current paper because we saw that one reaction to suburbia's banal obsession with children might be, as it was for Frank and April Wheeler, anti-suburbia, a world without children; throughout the novel, children remain for the Wheelers problems to be "put down," "put to sleep" and otherwise controlled, handled, hidden, and if necessary discarded. After all,

19. In the aforementioned documentary "The Possibility of Hope," Naomi Klein characterizes suburbia as a "global green zone...an absolute apartheid system...an expensive, totally privatized infrastructure and then surrounded by this chaos," referencing the militarized strongholds of American citizens in Baghdad. Forecasting the future, Klein speaks of "a genocidal logic, I suppose a survival of the fittest, but more what it's going to be about is 'me and my friends are going to be fine, we have SUV's, we have generators, we have air conditioners, we have bottled water...'"

20. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics III.4: The Doctrine of Creation* (ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance; London: T&T Clark International, 2004), pp. 240–85. References to *Church Dogmatics III.4* will hereafter be noted in the text.

in the Wheeler's minds, having children only foments cycles of meaninglessness whereby generations pass on futility if for no other reasons than those of boredom, habit, and sheer lack of alternatives. Rather than get bogged down with children, they escape to another world and stow their children like so much cumbersome luggage.

In contrast to a world obsessed with children, Barth makes the odd claim that one need not have kids, and that having children has very little to do with meaning and purpose. For Barth *ante Christum natum*, people were right in their "anxiety about posterity" and *should* seek "heirs" in "blood and name and honour and wealth" (266). Prior to Christ's birth, God grounds God's covenant relationship with the Hebrews in the practical expression of children and land; for the Jews, having children and possessing promised land became articulations of God's faithfulness and blessing. One should not confuse this Old Testament understanding of children with our own cheap notions of blessedness (funded by late-capitalist logics of worth). For the Jews, hated by the world, children and land were no small measure to the extent that throughout history other nations have tried to wipe them out as they wandered homelessly in foreign lands. Amidst their diasporic existence, children became signs of God's goodness such that the "lament of childlessness" signaled a real threat to Israel's covenant life. In this world, not only were children meaningful, but indeed they carried the burden of ultimate meaning. In this world, children are a "necessity" since the literal continuation of the race *is* the continuation of God's presence (266).

However, *post Christum natum*, after Christ is born, the given son becomes the "effected fulfillment" of all of God's Messianic promises to Israel. Hitherto, faithfulness to God ordered Jewish desire toward its end; amidst their exilic existence, "lack" necessarily accompanied Jewish life until its culmination in God's promised one. As that one is given as Jesus Christ, the terms of the old world, where there is rightly "lament of childlessness," is now counted "expiring time" since "the kingdom of God comes and this world is passing away" (266). With the giving of God's son into the world, there is "no true or final lack" as temporal desire finds fulfillment in Christ (267).

If children no longer serve as signs of divine blessing and presence, since that burden has been shifted, carried, and lifted by another, what then is the role of children in this new world? Essentially, children no longer serve a purpose. Especially they do not express purpose and meaning in marriage as now "the fruitfulness of a marriage does not depend on whether it is fruitful in the physical sense" (266). *Post Christum natum* children no longer serve the purpose of granting meaning

nor are parents burdened with creating meaning through having children; most importantly, children are no longer burdened with bringing meaning to their parents. Christ has served all these purposes, having become the meaning of human existence. What then for Barth is the *purpose* of children? *Post Christum natum*, what does having and raising children do for us, especially since the gratuitous gift of God's son fulfills every creaturely lack and desire? After the goodness of God in Christ has overflowed the capacities of human reception, how are children to be received? Simply, gratuitously. Children serve no purpose, for all purpose has been served in Christ. Rather, "Parenthood is now only to be understood as a free and in some sense optional gift of the goodness of God" (266). Children serve no purpose, in that they of themselves do not offer meaning; they simply exist as God's goodness; God does not signify his blessings through children, since Christ sacramentally denotes the infinite endurance of God's presence and blessing as displayed in the church.

Though they serve no purpose, God still gives children into the world. If they signify anything, they indicate not the causal processes of this world, not the endless chain of supply meeting demand nor the incessant flow of production for the sake of consumption; rather they signify the hint of externality, the place whence children enter into the world as one indication among many that God's goodness has not left the world. *Post Christum natum*, the childless can become parents or not, they may have children or "seize and exploit" the freedom of not having children; either way, engrafted into the now fulfilled covenant of promise, they are "called to be elders, to fatherliness, motherliness, because they are not parents in the physical sense—elders who in regard to all young people have the same task as physical parents have towards their physical offspring" (267–68). The family is neither the locale of sociality as that has been passed onto the community gathered around God's fulfillment in Christ, nor the bearer of meaning and the progenitor of purpose.

Barth is not excusing us from caring for children, especially in the way Frank and April try to excuse themselves in favor of some abstract dream. He simply reminds us that children, since they do not serve a purpose, require the kind of time made possible by God's infinite patience. Burdening children with meaning, purpose, and joy curses them to demands they cannot possibly fulfill, resulting in an exhausting tug of war between parents and children; no wonder in this flat space, love becomes control and inheritance resentment. Rather than pulled into the urgency of granting meaning, parents and children along with the whole community are pulled into the space of worship, where time participates in the eternal. By taking time, Christ saves time from itself

and draws all creation, all parents and all children, into unending time, enough time for the having of children. That children do not serve a purpose—"the propagation of the race" or any other—and yet still God gives children into the world, Barth says, witnesses to God's "patience" (268). Barth's notion of divine patience speaks to the Christian reworking of spatial order toward a genuinely temporal understanding of existence. The otherness of children as God's patience gestures beyond a flat spatiality, which one finds in Foucault, toward space as creaturely participation in God's eternity. Divine incarnation, whereby the eternal becomes temporal and fashions history beyond spatiality, means that creaturely space is never "boxed in"—as John Howard Yoder would say—but is always open to God's indwelling.²¹ Thus "outside" speaks less to infinite deferral and more to divine freedom having determined itself for creation. The "otherness of children" then denotes this outside, because children remind the world that in the seemingly incessant play of forces of a forlorn immanence, God has not abandoned us to our pretensions and has given us all the time in the world to enjoy children. Interrupting the Wheelers' Europe or modernity's "repression hypothesis" or other modes of substituting the temporal for the eternal, children instantiate the time made possible by God's peace and patience.²²

Commenting on James's *The Children of Men*, Ralph Wood writes, "To live without eschatological expectancy, to live entirely for empirical existence, to live without hope for the invisible world to come is, as James shows, to live damnably."²³ Perhaps in this sense, as "hope for the invisible world to come," children remind us we are God's and thus will not be abandoned.

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21. John Howard Yoder, "Christian Attitudes toward War, Peace, and Revolution" (Goshen Biblical Seminary, unpublished manuscript). "The present meaning of Resurrection for ethics is that we are never boxed in...resurrection is a Christian model for reading world history."

22. I am indebted to Stanley Hauerwas whose Christian Ethics course first directed me to Barth's claims about children. By his encouragement, I develop Barth's argument accordingly.

23. Wood, "Rapidly Rises the Morning Tide," p. 288.

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