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### **Women and Suburbia**

"Home Dreams: Women and the Suburban Experiment in Canada," an article by Veronica Strong-Boag, appears in *History of the Canadian Peoples*.

Varied and complex conditions between 1945 And 1960 saw the expeditious and continent-wide construction of and urban exodus to suburban estates. Paradoxically, the geographical discontiguity of suburbs to city centres effectively hindered women's outside employment opportunities during a period in which women and wives were an increasingly substantial measure of the labour-force. The move to suburbia was fuelled in part by a new socio-economic reality that featured elevated employment rates, continuous and increasing prosperity and the establishment of social securities. The resultant high expectations were combined with high rates of fertility-- couples during and subsequent to World War Two married at an ever younger age with progeny consequently more numerous-- together producing the desire and indeed need for modern and more spacious accommodation. Larger homes and larger families meant a larger workload for wives and mothers and demanded a greater commitment to the domestic domain. Increasing automobile ownership both made the suburb possible and ensured its isolating effect upon housewives: public transport was

seen as a non-essential, despite the fact that most households possessed only one vehicle which was monopolised by work-away husbands. The larger socio-political context, Strong-Boag suggests, further fostered the establishment of suburbia: the threat of the Cold War, the Korean War and general fear of the "Red Menace" encouraged private consumption "as a proof of capitalism's success";(479) the 165,000 "Displaced Persons" who entered Canada during the 40s and 50s heightened sensibilities and augmented the perceived value of a stable and comfortable family home; and 45,000 war brides demonstrated that future prosperity required the establishment of new households. Besides all this, experts such as Dr. Spock and Ashley Montagu stressed the unique nature of women, reinforcing their homemaking and child-bearing roles which were the very heart and soul of the suburb. Others, like Talcot Parsons, emphasised the different roles of men and women in society, a condition also fundamental to suburban existence. Magazine articles and advertising, newspapers, radio, film and television, all served to further reinforce and disseminate the conservative definition of the "good life"--a definition which held, in part, that female fulfilment centred around the domestic sphere and service to others. As well as the ideological imperative, income tax law, absence of day care, impediments to female employment and school schedules provided more material support for gender specific roles. Although the suburb was a novel addition to the urban landscape, it was essentially built upon traditional

conceptions which saw males and females respectively entrenched within the public and domestic domains.

Moving from the conditions that gave rise to post-war suburbs, Strong-Boag begins a brief analysis of housing initiatives. The post-war years were particularly characterised by large numbers of ageing and substandard housing, with urban communities lacking services and many rural communities still without electricity. High birth-rates, combined with an influx of immigrants during the 1940s, resulted in conditions that were both overcrowded and expensive, leading to mass demonstrations and the establishment of organisations such as the Veterans Housing League which demanded remedy to the situation. The result was the 1944 passage of the second National Housing Act and in the following year, creation of the Central Mortgage and Housing Corporation. A general aversion to public-housing rested the responsibility of construction upon the private sector, which displayed a distinct preference for the higher profits of suburban development rather than urban renewal. The neighbourhoods of poor working class families were to pay the cost for municipal governments non-participation and private contractors amour with the suburb: unable to afford the steadily rising down payments and interest rates, such families endured houses which were as much substandard as were those of suburbia standard. Eager to maximise profits during this construction boom, entire neighbourhoods were built according to single blueprints, producing three bedroom houses

of similar price, differing only in external paint colour and superficial embellishments. According to the blueprint utilised, different areas attracted people of similar financial backgrounds and occupations. In this manner, standardised housing encouraged standardised inhabitants. Although the earliest developments were in older suburbs that were contiguous to city centres, with some houses built by the owners themselves, high demand soon saw a move to more remote areas and large scale developments.

Finally, Strong-Boag turns to the more subjective nature and meaning of the suburban experience for the women who lived and laboured there. For many first time buyers--working class and first generation immigrants, amongst others--a new suburban house was a dream come true. The financial encumbrance of mortgage payments, the lack of cultural facilities, the gendered division of labour, the relative isolation: all were discommodities most were willing to endure for the sake of peace, property and a safe place for children to play. Although women were largely sequestered in comfortable isolation, assuming the primary role of mother and house maker, limited companies such as Avon profited from this predicament, providing opportunities for much needed second incomes. Besides this, many women worked as unpaid assistants for spouses, typing, translating and entertaining. Generally, women were dependent upon male wages and suffered most from the financial straits wrought by house ownership. Other labours were also expected of the suburban women: the uniformity of houses urged

uniqueness of interior decoration, with a host of magazines offering hints on individualising and personalising the homogeneous. Shopping excursions were often more of a labour than a love: plazas were usually distant, footpaths and public transport non-existent. Nevertheless, consumerism became an intrinsic aspect of suburban life: the inconvenience of shopping centres provided a niche for salesmen and women who themselves helped "knit new communities together." (492) Churches, parent-teacher associations and other local institutions further enhanced the sense of community and granted women an opportunity to participate in non-domestic realms, leading to involvement in matters of municipal politics. Most women, however, were occupied with daily toil and remained apolitical. Experts assess suburbia between 1945 and 1960 variously as a symbol of societies "moral bankruptcy" (494) and materialism; a betrayal of women's potential; a place that robbed children of their fathers, fathers of their children and women of their dignity; a shrine to gender specific labour; and a psychologically crippling phenomenon. Champions of suburbia praised its variety and vitality and quality of life. Strong-Boag herself concludes that the suburban experiment was reductionistic, seeking to accommodate a single ideal which left many women emotionally destitute.

Strong-Boag makes use of both primary and secondary sources. Most interesting of the former are perhaps the direct quotations: the words of women who actually lived the suburban

experiment--a detailed examination of which appears in the analysis below. For the moment we might simply say that they provide a refreshingly intimate account that brings a certain immediacy to the period, though the problem remains as to the universality of their comments, for the experience of one individual in one suburb is not necessarily that of another in another. Particular magazines are also offered as primary sources. In this case it is not their singularity that we might question but their ubiquitous homogeneousness: we can hardly be surprised by the anti-feminist nature of articles cited in such publications as *Chatelaine* and *Brides Book*. Secondary sources are multitudinous with a considerable number offering relatively recent analysis.

It is in terms of structure that Strong-Boag most excels. Her statement of intent is clear and the essay precisely and effectively divided into examinations of preconditions, the character of housing and the nature and meaning of the suburban experience. Her only foible in this respect is the occasional inclusion of irrelevant information. Statements such as:

"An increase in the production of oil, gas, and hydroelectric power was available to power both new cars and central heating characteristic of new homes"(479)

offer information entirely immaterial to the topic at hand and appear from nowhere. Strong-Boag's writing style suffers from occasional awkwardness: ". . . women's, particularly wives',

rising labour force participation . . .”(477) providing one characteristic example. Despite such occasional anomalies, however, she writes with decided clarity and control using language, as we shall see, not simply as a tool of communication but as an artist applying rhetoric to paper much like paint to a canvas.

The first and most apparent example of this involves loaded language, often taking the form of combat imagery: “A *veteran* of suburbs . . .”(my italics)(480) is one frequent refrain. “One *refugee* from a clerical office explained that she. . .”(my italics)(483) It quickly becomes apparent that Strong-Boag’s aim is not so much to shed light upon the subject or period, but the fulfilment of an agenda. That agenda is the expression of feminist philosophy. Accordingly, such conflict imagery achieved through the manipulation of diction creates a subtext which describes women as victims of suburbia whether or not they themselves are in accord. In a similar vein: “. . . modern suburban wives were *tethered* to their communities . . .”(488) As we see then, Strong-Boag’s diction strongly suggests her intent is to form our opinion, rather than to simply inform. An effort to point the finger of blame at society in general also causes occasional absurdities, such as the political analysis which suggests Cold War, Korean War and communist fears nurtured the growth of suburbs by upholding the conviction of capitalism’s superiority! We might now return to the question of first hand accounts of suburban housewives. A clear disjunction of appraisal provides two

distinct categories: the first offering a generally positive assessment of the experience, the second largely negative. Although this seems almost predictable and certainly innocuous, close reading reveals suspect qualities. Positive verdicts are expressed in standard English and are occasionally quite lengthy:

Those were good years for us. My husband was getting ahead and I saw myself as a help mate . . .  
(498)

Negative verdicts, alternately, are not only brief but transcribed in strangely disconnected words and *unconversational* English.

I had helped my mother in bazaars, tag days, processions, etc. etc. . . .However, once married, I was apolitical, I guess, basically because I was so very busy [with nine children].(194)

Suspect here is the use of "etc."--a particularly uncommon and unlikely word in the vernacular--and also the editorial brackets which are a common feature of these negative accounts, though almost entirely absent from others.

Not much [leadership from women] in my age group at the time. Too busy at home . . . it was a mans world.(194)

Again the use of square brackets and incoherent phraseology.

There was no energy or time to do anything about it [feminism].(194)

I didn't participate in politics when my



children were small, I was too too too busy . .

.(194)

Like the use of loaded language--diction--the above quotations seem to offer replies to loaded questions: the issue no longer seems to be the suburban experience but feminism and women's political participation. The overall impression provided is one of "leading the witness" and of editorial liberties. When we incorporate this with the feminist subtext, the effect is not merely to question the degree of objectivity, but to undermine the very veraciousness of the entire text.

Strong-Boag, despite her feminist agenda, does shed a good deal of light upon the suburban experiment of 1945-60. Unfortunately, her hidden agenda is often a disconcerting distraction, leaving such basic questions as the class and racial composition of suburbs viscous in contradiction. Furthermore, Strong-Boag's negative conclusion is largely at variance both with the facts and much of the personal testimony. But this seeming contradiction is indeed no contradiction at all, for it is only the indicative value of facts in so much as they express the feminist position that truly concern Strong-Boag; and it is, of course, in the expression of the feminist view that she achieves her greatest success.