The Parlour and the Suburb: Domestic identities, class, femininity, and modernity
Judy Giles, 2004
Oxford & New York, Berg, 197 pp., £50.00, $95.00 hb, ISBN 1-85973-796-X hb

The image of women at home is an enduring symbol of twentieth-century culture. Happy mothers in decorator kitchens or cozy family rooms, surrounded by healthy children whose father is busy at work in the distant city, is a way we think about mid-century, middle-class womanhood and suburbia. Judy Giles' *The Parlour and the Suburb* explores these intersections of femininity, modernity, and social class through a wide range of twentieth-century sources, especially English literature. She begins the book in a particularly compelling way by juxtaposing a mysterious 1951 photograph of her own highly educated, middle-class mother dressed as an apron- and slipper-clad housewife (smoking!), with an excerpt from Marilyn French's popular 1978 book, *The Women's Room*. Why would Giles' class-conscious mother pose for this photograph as a working-class housewife? Did French's critique of suburbia as stifling for women, illustrated mostly through her main character Mira, derive from an outmoded Victorian paradigm? What follows is a fascinating narrative that takes readers through fictional accounts, sociological interviews, houses, department stores, and women's magazines in an attempt to answer these questions.

The book's four chapters are quite distinct in their subject matter and sources. Chapter 1 looks at how marriage, suburbia, and self-improvement interacted/intersected in the early to mid-twentieth century. Using George Orwell's novel *Coming Up For Air* (1939) as a window on domestic life and values, Giles argues that the working-class 'invasion' of suburbia disturbed a rigid middle-class social order, inspiring a fiery critique of suburban life and especially women. Chapter 2

looks at social class from another perspective, through the lives of domestic servants and their mistresses. Beginning with Virginia Woolf's tempestuous yet intimate relationship with her live-in servant Nelly Boxall, Giles shows how middle-class women relied on domestic servants to keep their households tidy and to free up time for public-sphere activities such as writing. The decline of domestic service in England by the 1950s, Giles insists, was a critical aspect of women's experience of what she calls 'domestic modernity' (p. 101).

Chapter 3, 'Getting and Spending, Identity and Consumption', looks at goods and magazines as markers of a consumer-oriented economy. Shopping for domestic goods and arranging them in an ideal home, Giles suggests, replaced the management of servants as a central preoccupation of the housewife. She disputes 'the dystopian perspective of feminist theorists who have, until recently, tended to adopt the Frankfurt School tradition of seeing consumers as passive victims of ideologies that serve only the interests of capitalism' (p. 102). She looks at places where goods were displayed, such as the Daily Mail Home Exhibition of 1908, and magazines like *Good Housekeeping*, as arenas in which women were agents of modernity with their homes as the primary vehicle of self-expression. The fourth and final chapter discusses Betty Friedan's blockbuster book *The Feminine Mystique*, first published in 1963. Mostly through Friedan's own life experiences, Giles says that the American feminist misunderstood issues of identity and individuality that were crucial to the actual experience of postwar suburbia for women.

The sweeping range of issues and sources explored in the book is both its strength and its downfall. *The Parlour and the Suburb* is almost too diffuse; it reads more like a series of lectures than an academic book. This is not to say that the arguments are not tight or are unconvincing. Rather any of the chapters could make a compelling book on its own. For me a more serious flaw in the book is a trans-Atlantic gap. Giles has either chosen to ignore or is unaware of the importance of much relevant secondary literature in North America that has reconsidered the middle-class home, groundbreaking books like Dolores Hayden's *The Grand Domestic Revolution* (1981) and Gwendolyn Wright's *Moralism and the Model Home* (1981). Hayden's recent publication, *Building Suburbia (2003)*, considers the suburban home as an object of mass consumption. A new generation of scholars too, such as Dianne Harris, is exploring the ways ordinary postwar US houses and gardens served as frameworks for assimilation and the reinforcement of racial identities and class assignment. These authors, like Giles, are interested in restoring the domestic arena to the narrative of twentieth-century modernity. Although Giles' focus is on Britain, rather than America, these authors may have inspired her to look beyond textual evidence to support her claims. How did the changing design of the suburban home figure in the dynamics of femininity, modernism, domesticity, and consumption? Why did suburbia's traditional architecture and picturesque streets look so un-modern?

Still, what is particularly refreshing about Giles' book structure is that she consistently contrasts normative or idealized narratives with stories from real life. For example, following Orwell's account in Chapter 1 of suburbia as a place for dull and reckless women, Giles presents intriguing first-person accounts from working-class women showing how suburbia was for them a hitherto unknown place of stability, happiness and progress. Similarly, in Chapter 2, Giles counters claims that domestic service was a dead-end for

working-class women by showing it as a step towards employment outside the home in hospitals and shops. This discrepancy between the fictional image of suburbia as negative and the actual picture of it as reforming and pleasurable is a strength of the study.

Finally, it is a quibble but where does the book's title come from? There are no parlours in *The Parlour and the Suburb*. Parlours are not a focus of any of the chapters, nor does 'parlour' appear in the index. Is it used in the title to indicate the book's focus on social class? If so, the association is far too subtle for such a pointed and provocative study.

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